



MEDIA RELEASE

The Hon Peter Garrett MP

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts

PG/343

24 September 2009

CONVICT CELLS DISCOVERED ON COCKATOO ISLAND

The Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts, Peter Garrett, today announced the discovery of convict solitary confinement cells used for punishment in the mid-nineteenth century on Cockatoo Island.

Buried and forgotten for over 100 years, the two intact solitary cells were discovered during an archaeological dig on Sydney's largest island.

"This is a truly remarkable discovery. The cells are rare physical evidence from Australia's convict past and will help us to understand what it was like to be imprisoned on Cockatoo Island, the only place in the convict system established specifically for hard labour," Mr Garrett said.

The two cells were built in 1840 beneath the original convict cookhouse located on the top of the island. The cramped cells were each designed to hold a single convict and would have been used as a form of punishment for the hardened secondary offenders who were sent to Cockatoo Island from 1839.

Since being filled in and covered over in the late-1890s the solitary cells and storage areas under the cookhouse were largely forgotten. Rumours of their existence persisted up to and beyond the closure of the dockyard.

"This is an extremely rare find from Australia's convict past. Only two other intact examples of punishment cells have survived, both located in Tasmania," Mr Garrett said.

"Cockatoo was an island of hard labour in the middle of the colony's largest town and punishment for serious offenders was severe and soul-destroying."

Cockatoo Island was first used as a convict gaol in the late 1830s, when prisoners were put to work building the island's gaol, a dry dock and a large stone workshop. It became a government shipyard in 1913 and remained a major dockyard until 1992.

The convict precinct, where the cells have been discovered, has been nominated for World Heritage listing as one of 11 Australian sites telling the story of forced migration of convicts to penal colonies. Cockatoo Island was listed on the National Heritage List in 2007.

Media contact: Jack Smith (Minister Garrett) 0408 116 423
Patrick Fletcher (Sydney Harbour Federation Trust) 0413 021 079