

'Notoriously abandoned characters':

searching for the women in the Western Gaol 1854–58

“Notoriously abandoned characters”: searching for the women in the Western Gaol 1854–58, *Provenance: the Journal of Public Record Office Victoria*, issue no. 22, 2025. ISSN 1832-2522. Copyright © Dr Sarah Mirams.

This is a peer reviewed article

Dr Sarah Mirams is an independent historian who specialises in environmental history, historic archaeology and archival research. Sarah's early career was in secondary education and she worked as an education officer at Museums Victoria and Heritage Council Victoria. Sarah lectured and tutored at Monash University and Federation University. She is the author of *Escaping the Claws of the Machine: A History of the Darebin Parklands* and *Coasts of Dream: A Biography of EJ Brady*. Her interest in the Western Gaol came about when working as the site historian for the 2023 archaeological excavation at 600 Collins Street, Melbourne.

Author email: pastandfuture@bigpond.com

Abstract

Female prisoners in Melbourne were incarcerated in the Western Gaol on Collins Street from 1854. Drawing upon archival and newspaper sources, this article explores the history of the Western Gaol from 1854 to 1858 and describes its repurposing and renovation as a female gaol in gold rush-era Melbourne. Archival sources provide insights into the administration of the gaol and its built history and provide glimpses of the women and their lives in the gaol. My research suggests that the Western Gaol played a contradictory role in the lives of women, both as a place of punishment and, at times, of refuge for the poor, the sick, the homeless and children.

Introduction

'Miserably inadequate, badly situated and unsuitable for a goal of any kind ... especially for females', was how the Legislative Council Select Committee into Penal Discipline described the Western Gaol in September 1857.[1] The report decried how women on remand mixed with 'notoriously abandoned characters serving long sentences' and recommended the closure of the Western Gaol.[2]

The Western Gaol, located on Collins Street in the block between King and Spencer streets, was one of a number of gaols, stockades and prison hulks commissioned to hold prisoners across Melbourne when crime rates rose dramatically following the discovery of gold in 1851. The rapid increase of Victoria's population, fuelled by migration from other colonies and overseas, saw the crime rate rise exponentially.[3] In 1851, there were 28 of 'the fair sex' gaoled in Melbourne.[4] This increased to 308 in 1852 and 382 by 1854. The numbers of women incarcerated in 1855 had blown out to 1,162.[5] The Western Gaol held the majority of female prisoners in Melbourne, both long and short term, from 1854 to 1858. A handful who required close security were imprisoned in the Melbourne Gaol in Russell Street.

The Western Gaol was a constant in the life of women who fronted up to the Melbourne courts from 1854 until 1865, making it a place of some significance in Melbourne's gold-era story. This article describes the built history of the gaol, its management and the conditions in which the women, and often their

children, were held. I argue that while imprisonment in an overcrowded and dank building punished women by denying them their freedom and comfort, paradoxically the gaol provided a place of safety for vulnerable women and children in times of crisis and need.

This was a period of social and economic upheaval in the new colony. The discovery of gold saw Melbourne transformed from a town servicing the pastoral industry to what historian Graeme Davison dubbed an 'instant city' by 1854.[6] With the lure of gold quadrupling the colony's population between 1851 and 1861—from 77,000 to 540,000—Melbourne's streets were overcrowded, housing and shelter were in short supply, and the authorities struggled to maintain public health and public order. There were 193 men to every 100 women in the colony and most were aged between 20 and 40. It was a society on the move. Men flocked to the goldfields, many leaving wives and children behind in Melbourne. The plight of deserted and widowed women became a serious social issue that consumed colonial authorities.[7] Some immigrant families were forced to live in tent cities where disease spread quickly. Alcohol was particularly toxic in the colony, the brandy often laced with narcotics and other additives that could send people mad. Janet McCalman describes it as the equivalent of modern-day methamphetamines—it fuelled violence and crime.[8] The boom years of 1852 and 1853 gave way in 1854 to an economic slump, high unemployment and low wages.[9]

The end point of my research is 1858 when female prisoners sentenced to more than 14 days were increasingly sent from the Western Gaol to the prison hulks *Sacramento* and *Success* off Williamstown in Hobsons Bay to serve out their sentences. From 1858 until its closure in 1865, the Western Gaol held women on remand, elderly male vagrants formally held in the Eastern Gaol and the mentally ill awaiting transfer to Yarra Bend Lunatic Asylum. The Western Gaol was demolished in 1865, the land sold and used as a timber yard. In the 1880s, warehouses were built on the former gaol site. In the 1960s, the warehouses were replaced by an office building at 582–606 Collins Street. This was demolished in 2023. The Western Gaol was located beneath part of this office block. This address was registered on the State Heritage Inventory during demolition as a place of potential archaeological significance under the *Heritage Act 2017*.^[10] My research into the Western Gaol began as the historian commissioned to prepare the archaeological assessment for 582–606 Collins Street in 2023.

Female prisoners

This article draws upon existing research carried out into women and criminality in gold rush–era Melbourne. Janet MacCalman’s *Vandemonians* paints a vivid picture of the criminal underclass in gold rush Melbourne and the opportunities the city’s new riches and social disruption offered to the old hands from Van Diemen’s Land.^[11] Prostitutes were the symbol of female criminality for respectable Melbournians, and their work and lives are explored by Raelene Francis, Sarah Hayes and Barbara Minchinton.^[12] The significance of the vagrancy acts across Australasia, including Victoria, on the policing of women is interrogated by Catherine Coleborne.^[13]

The Western Gaol and the experiences of women living within its walls have never been studied. The history of female imprisonment in nineteenth-century Australia was largely neglected until the 1990s, aside from that of convict women.^[14] Recent historical research into female prisoners in Victoria has drawn upon the rich resources found in the Central Registers of Female Prisoners held at Public Record Office Victoria (PROV). Researchers have undertaken longitudinal studies investigating the criminal careers of 6,042 female offenders held at the Melbourne Gaol from 1860 to 1920 to identify patterns in the gendered nature of their offending; the influence of age, location and familial relations on criminality; and relationships between offenders.^[15] This research has proved invaluable in understanding female criminality in the nineteenth century.

The focus of this article is women’s experiences within the walls of the Western Gaol. Current installations and exhibitions telling the stories of female prisoners at the Melbourne Gaol, now the Old Melbourne Gaol, a prison tourism destination, look outwards, focusing on the city and the political, social and economic conditions that led to their incarceration.^[16] This article takes a different approach, taking its lead from Lucia Zedner who, in her history of English women in custody in Victorian England, argues that prison history should be written from within, with the significant actors being the inmates, warders, medical staff and administrators within the gaol walls.^[17] This approach provides an understanding of the gaol routine and conditions, and allows us to consider to what extent the gaol fulfilled its role of punishing and reforming. The experience of the prisoner inside, rather than the criminal outside, takes centre stage.

The archive

The female inmates left no memoirs, letters or books to interrogate; however, snapshots of their gaol experiences can be found in Victorian government archives. These archives form the basis of this research. My approach is informed by the work of Janet MacCalman and Clare Anderson who demonstrate how the seemingly marginalised and invisible can be found, almost accidentally, where their lives intersect with government authority.^[18]

Researching the Western Gaol posed archival challenges. PROV holds few records of the Western Gaol. Its single record, a register of female prisoners received and discharged at the Western Gaol between 1853 and 1858, is presently undergoing conservation.^[19] The Central Register of Female Prisoners Volume 1 (1855–61) provides biographical details for the cohort of prisoners transferred from the Western Gaol to the prison hulks *Sacramento* and *Success* in Hobsons Bay off Williamstown from December 1857. These are valuable sources, as they record previous sentences served in the Western Gaol. The women’s ages, aliases, former occupations, departure ports and dates of arrival in the colony, as well as their behaviour in custody, are also recorded.^[20] The 1855–61 register favours the ‘old hands’ who were multiple offenders, or those who committed felonies. It does not capture information on women held on remand, or those imprisoned for misdemeanours. Such women formed the majority of inmates in gaols and are those least studied by historians.^[21]



Figure 1: Robert Hoddle, Melbourne – Port Phillip – 1840 from Surveyor-General's Yard, State Library Victoria, <https://find.slv.vic.gov.au/permalink/61SLV_INST/1sev8ar/alma9916544173607636>.

Some of the most useful insights into the management of the Western Gaol were found in letters and the reports of visiting justices held in the Inspector of Penal Establishments and the Sherriff: Prisons files, located in VPRS 1189 Inward Registered Correspondence of the Colonial Secretary. [22] Claud Farie, a politician and pastoralist, was appointed sheriff in 1852.[23] The Sheriff's Office had responsibility for the Melbourne Gaol, Western Gaol, Eastern Hill Gaol and the regional gaols. Dr Richard Youl was appointed a visiting justice in November 1854.[24] He inspected the gaols weekly and wrote reports monthly.

In 1857, the Legislative Select Committee into Penal Discipline was established in response to allegations made by a Citizens Committee against John Price, the inspector general of penal establishments. Price was accused of overseeing a system that was cruel and harsh. (Price was murdered by prisoners before the select committee finished its deliberations.) The entire gaol and penal system was reviewed and recommendations made. Both Youl and Farie gave evidence describing conditions in the Western Gaol and their views on the female prisoners. Inquests were held into deaths in prison and the deposition files held at PROV provide glimpses into life and death in the gaol.[25] Government reports published in newspapers and court and crime reports were also valuable sources of research.

The gaol, 1840

Figure 1, a sketch by Melbourne's surveyor Robert Hoddle, shows a view of the gaol in 1840 from the corner of Spencer and Collins streets near where Captain Lonsdale first set up camp in 1838, beginning the official British occupation of Kulin lands. The gaol was built on the Government Block, section 16, bound by King, Collins, Spencer and Bourke streets.

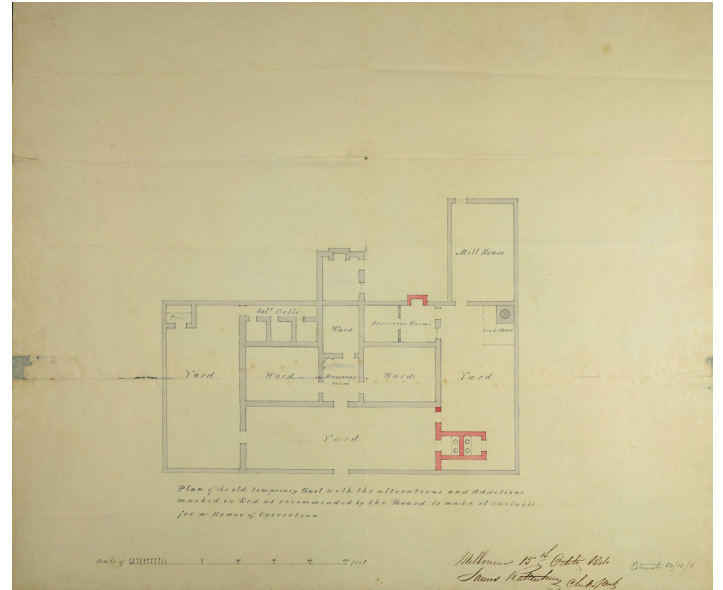


Figure 2: This plan shows the layout of the gaol before it was transferred to the military. The red lines are proposed additions that did not eventuate. PROV, VPRS 19/P0, 44/1886A Plan of Old Gaol with Proposed Additions.

Here, convict workshops, police and military quarters and immigration barracks were built over the next 15 years.[26] The red brick building, convict built with high windows is marked with a G for gaol.[27] Built to a watch house design, it was to be a temporary gaol until a more substantial prison could be built. [28] The goal was extended in 1842 to include a cell for the insane, an enclosed yard, solitary cells and an ineffectual treadmill, used for punishment of hard labour, installed in a mill room.[29]

By 1843, plans for a new gaol in Russell Street were in motion (Figure 2). The colonial secretary saw no need for two gaols in Melbourne and the Old Gaol, as it was then known, was handed over to the 99th Foot Regiment in 1846.[30] Fieldpieces and 12lb howitzers were placed outside the gaol, their muzzles directed towards the Yarra to repel invaders.[31]

House of correction

A proclamation in the *Victorian Government Gazette* in May 1852 announced that the building known as the Western Gaol was now a house of correction. The house of correction model originated in sixteenth-century London as gaols for vagrants or those who committed minor offences. It was believed that a regime of solitary confinement, hard labour and education in a house of correction would reform and rehabilitate inmates.[32] Similar ideas were adopted by British prison reformers in the nineteenth century. Existing prisons were dirty, overcrowded, unhealthy and often violent places that encouraged criminality though association. By contrast, it was believed



Figure 3: In this detail of a drawing of early Melbourne, we can see the buildings in the block bounded by Collins, King, Bourke and Spencer streets. The Melbourne Gaol is marked by the number 12. This indicates a slightly different location to the location in the Bibbs map (see Figure 4), presumably the result of artistic license. N. Whittock, 'The City of Melbourne, Australia', drawn from official surveys and from sketches taken in 1854 by G. Teale, State Library Victoria, <https://find.slv.vic.gov.au/permalink/61SLV_INST/1sev8ar/alma9917291243607636>.

that humane treatment, the separation of offenders into classes, employment, solitary confinement and religious instruction could reform offenders.[33]

William Westgarth, the chair of the committee appointed to enquire into prison discipline in Victoria, articulated these ideas in 1852, writing that prisons should be 'not only a place of safe custody and a place of punishment, but ... a place also of reformation'.[34] The discovery of gold produced an urgent need to expand Victoria's prison system, especially after the arrival of ex-convicts from Van Diemen's Land resulted in 'the disorder of society and the increase in crime'.[35] The Melbourne Gaol and the minor Western and Eastern gaols were too crowded for 'physical and moral health of the inmates' and there was no capacity for 'discipline and employment'.[36] Wentworth recommended urgent alterations and improvements to the Western Gaol. In 1852, he reported that it held seamen, while women were held at the Melbourne and Eastern gaols. Figure 3, a drawing of the City of Melbourne in 1854, shows the walled Western Gaol adjoining the soldiers' camp on the government block.

The Western (or Female) Gaol—the setting

Renovation of the Western Gaol, which would become known as the Female Gaol, began in 1852. New gaoler's quarters at a cost of £740 were built, and, in 1853, turnkey quarters for £1,200.[37] The main brick building needed to be extended and repaired, and tenders for building materials and trades for the Western Gaol were advertised in newspapers in 1854 and 1855.[38] Figure 3 shows the Western Gaol in 1854 before extensions and renovations commenced.

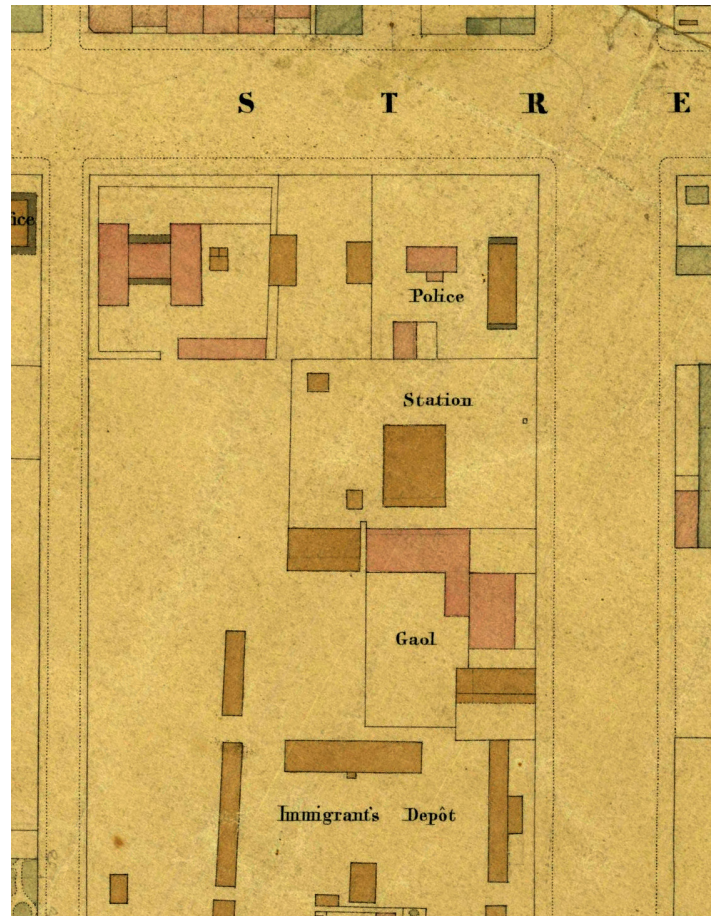


Figure 4: This detail from the 1856 Bibbs map shows that the Western Gaol had been extended with an additional brick building along the northern wall, one wooden building outside the perimeter of the gaol (possibly the gaoler's quarters) and a wooden building, possibly wards, west of the original brick gaol. Three enclosed yards are shown. PROV, VPRS 8168/P3, MELBRL12; MELBOURNE.

The Bibbs map shows the site in 1856 (Figure 4): the original red brick building with the frontage on Collins Street, and the additional brown wooden and red brick buildings with three enclosed yards.[39] No architectural plans have been located showing the layout in more detail. There were six whitewashed association wards, each housing 20 prisoners, and a hospital ward. Stone cells in the 1840 gaol were used for solitary confinement and holding violent 'lunatics'.[40] Most likely, the kitchen, laundry, privies and washrooms were external buildings. The gaol and enclosed yards measured 1,180 square metres (almost half an acre). The seven barracks of the Immigration Depot lay behind the gaol. The gaol began to take female prisoners in November 1854.

According to Dr Youl, renovations at the gaol were completed by April 1856, but there were still problems with the buildings and yard.[41] The gaol often flooded after heavy winter rains. Claud Farie asked the Public Works Department to repair the water

tanks in June 1856, and the following month the gaol's floor was raised.[42] However, the drainage problem was not resolved. In July 1857, the yards flooded once again, turning to mud, and the women and children were kept in their dormitories during the day. 'It was impossible', Youl wrote, 'to confine this number of prisoners until the yards were fixed'.[43] His July 1857 report acknowledged that some improvements had been made, and that the yard had been raised and drainage improved.[44] A day room—an open walled structure where the women could shelter in the yard from the sun and the rain—was built in July 1857. It was also used as a dining area.

Despite these improvements, the gaol was still 'a miserable place' according to Youl.[45] It was not only the prisoners who suffered in the damp conditions. When the gaoler William Abbot, who lived in the gaoler's quarters with his wife and three children, died in June 1857, Dr McCrae, the colony's chief medical officer, attributed his death to 'the damp and unhealthy nature of the whole premises of the gaol'. [46]

The offences

Most women imprisoned in Victoria during the gold rush were convicted under the *Vagrancy Act 1852*. [47] The Vagrancy Act was seen as a means of preserving and imposing order on a society suffering from the excitement of gold fever.[48] The Act criminalised hundreds of behaviours. You could be arrested and gaoled for being homeless and without means of support, being drunk more than three times in 12 months, illegal betting, displaying pornographic drawings, singing obscene songs or consorting with known thieves.[49] The Victoria Police Criminal Statistics for the second half of 1858 show that, of the 1,588 offences committed by females in the colony over the first six months, 782 of them, almost half, were for drunkenness or being drunk and disorderly.[50]

The terms 'drunk and disorderly', 'indecent conduct' and 'vagrancy' could cover a myriad of behaviours. When 48-year-old widow Caroline Swinerton was sentenced to 12-months imprisonment in 1857, the prison register recorded her crime as 'indecent conduct'. [51] A brothel owner in Geelong, she was accused of attempting to prostitute her 10-year-old daughter outside the Theatre Royal in Melbourne. [52]

Anne Aitchinson was a 'notorious and abandoned prostitute' sentenced to three months or a £15 fine for using abusive and threatening language. [53] Seven days gaol was the punishment meted out to Jane Singleton and Honora Innes when they were caught fighting in the street. Catherine Houston and

Sarah Williams kept a 'disorderly house' in a laneway off Little Bourke Street, where a visiting constable witnessed dissipated groups of people singing obscene songs while Williams made indecent offers to men on the street. [54] The pair were charged and found guilty of vagrancy and sentenced to six months with hard labour in the Western Gaol. [55]

Jane Smith and Anne Young were charged with robbery in January 1857: the victim, Mr Hamilton, had visited Anne's house and found £21 missing after he left. This was known as bilking—robbery following a drunken seduction and/or paid sex. The defence argued that Hamilton was too drunk to remember where he lost the money. The robbery charges were dropped and instead the women were found guilty of vagrancy and sentenced to 12 months with hard labour. The defending lawyer objected, questioning the legality of changing the charge. [56] Victims of bilking were considered bad witnesses, as they were drunk when the alleged offences took place.

'Vagrancy' became a way of punishing the defendant without adequate proof. According to Catherine Colborne, the Victorian vagrant law was criticised for 'both its breadth and vagueness', which effectively made policing easier. [57] However, there was also a welfare aspect to police work, as arrest and incarceration for vagrancy could provide shelter for society's most vulnerable. [58]

The gold rush offered new opportunities for Melbourne's criminals and ex-convicts from Van Diemen's Land, some opening brothels, recruiting orphan teenagers and taking on immigrant girls who came to the colony, friendless and without family. [59] Prostitution was a form of waged work that was always in demand in a city awash with money and men. Raelene Francis and Barbara Minchinton have written about the hierarchy within the sex industry in late nineteenth-century Melbourne. At the top were ornate brothels discretely serving the elite. At the bottom were the streetwalkers who may have had multiple clients and bilked. [60] Those on the middle and upper rung of the sex trade were less likely to enter the prison system. [61] The women who worked the streets in the gold rush period and frequently drew attention to themselves by being drunk, loud, disruptive or 'in your face' were more likely to find themselves in the Western Gaol. If the brothel owner and the women were discreet, they could escape the attention of the authorities, or they could simply pay a fine and move on. Henrietta Hall, described as 'one of the most stylish and well-known *habitués* of this classic location', was charged with running a disorderly house in La Trobe Street. The magistrate found no evidence of public indecency and advised

cells. In his evidence to the 1857 penal discipline committee, he reported that he only had to inflict such punishment one or two times a year. He also reported that the women did not fight among themselves.[86] Dr Youl's monthly reports included a few brief paragraphs describing the behaviour of prisoners in the different gaols. A typical report from March 1857 read: 'The Female Gaol. Women good, the gaol greatly crowded a considerable number of children are confined with their parents.'[87]

It was only the 'old hands'—that is, the ex-convicts—who swore and caused disruptions.[88] The 'most notorious woman in Melbourne', Vandemonian ex-convict Winifred Johnston, arrested for being drunk and disorderly and suspected burglary, made her escape in December 1856 by removing bricks from her solitary cell, climbing though the high windows and over the brick wall.[89] She was arrested the next day at The Gap on the way to the goldfields. At court, Johnston cross-examined Mr Gale, the gaoler, and remarked that 'the people at the Western Gaol were not remarkable for being vigilant'.[90]

Most prisoners appeared to keep a low profile, their transgressions hidden or ignored. At times, their friends outside made contact. Bridgit Doyle was given a caution for trying to pass tobacco to a prisoner being transferred to the Western Gaol from the Supreme Court.[91] Ann Thorp was fined 40 shillings for passing tobacco to prisoners.[92] Youl advised that children living in the gaol with their mothers could not be allowed to exercise in the streets because their mothers would send them out to buy gin and tobacco.[93] Elizabeth Turner was fined 20 shillings for 'holding communication' with inmates of the gaol.[94] On her release from gaol in December 1857, Emma Ryan, alias Emma Williams, was accused of violently assaulting a drunken Thomas Cox and stealing his watch in Stephen Street. Cox reported that he 'got acquainted' with Emma in the gaol where he had worked as a carpenter. The jury found her not guilty.[95]

Children

In England during the nineteenth century women sentenced in local gaols to short sentences took their babies to gaol and left their older children with grandparents, siblings, partners, friends or neighbours.[96] Melbourne was a city of strangers, family connections were distant and most women with children in the gaol had been deserted by the children's fathers.[97] Therefore, out of necessity, some mothers took their babies and young children to gaol. Children aged under six received a daily ration of wheaten bread, fresh meat, milk and soap.

Return of Children confined at Female Gaol Melbourne														
30 April 1856														
2 years		3 years		4 years		5 years		6 years		7 years		8 years		Total
Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
8	3			2		2		1	2			1	1	21

Figure 7: Return of children confined to the Female Gaol, Melbourne, 30 April 1856. PROV, VPRS 1189/PO, file 56/3913.

The presence of children in the gaol distressed and angered Youl. In his April 1856 report, he wrote that the children in the gaol were in a deplorable state and would become 'animals' if they were not provided with education.[98] There were 83 prisoners and 30 children in the gaol that month. To drive home his point, Youl attached a chart showing that 21 of the children were aged under eight (Figure 7).[99]

Some older children found wandering the streets of Melbourne were arrested and sent to join their mothers in gaol. Will and James Connelly were charged with vagrancy in 1858 and joined their mother who was serving a term of 12 months.[100] Jane Simmons was only three and a half when she was arrested with her sisters Harriet Pickering, aged five and a half, and Margaret Pickering, aged six. They were charged with being idle and disorderly or having no means of support. They joined their mother, Ann Curran, in the Western Gaol.[101] Dr Youl described having a young boy approach him and ask him to 'have the kindness to send him to the female gaol'.[102] His mother and sister were in gaol for drunkenness. He told Youl that many of his friends had been in gaol with their mothers.[103]

Orphaned, abandoned or destitute children were also sent to the Western Gaol. A little boy in Collingwood was arrested for stealing bottles in May 1856. His destitute, widowed mother had seven children, all in poor condition. He was sent, weeping to the Female Gaol.[104] Another boy, both parents dead, was held in remand at the gaol until he could be admitted to the Orphan Asylum after he was caught stealing wood.[105] A 10-year-old boy from Castlemaine whose father was in a lunatic asylum was sent to Melbourne by the police; with nowhere to place him, he was put in the Female Gaol.[106]

Farie recruited educated prisoners when he could to teach the children to read. The children were separated from the convicted women and kept with the women on remand during the day.[107] Farie responded to Youl's complaints by arguing that a children's reformatory should be built; however, until then they had to be imprisoned with their mothers or else they would be 'left on the street'. [108]

What impact the presence of babies and children had on relationships in the gaol on a day-to-day basis is not recorded. The children's behaviour is not commented on in the visiting justices' reports, suggesting that some kind of order was maintained by the women. How the children experienced the gaol is also not known, which is not surprising as children's voices are often the most silent in the historical record.[109] The boy who pleaded with Youl to be sent to the gaol suggests that it was not a place to be feared—or, perhaps, that it was less fearful than life on the streets.[110]

The hospital ward

A small room was set aside in the gaol as a hospital. Its patients included prisoners who were sick, women suspected of insanity who were held for seven days for medical assessment, and women brought to the hospital destitute and unwell. Dr McCrae visited the Western Gaol at least once a week. A dispenser visited once a day with medicines and a nurse tended the patients.

According to the 1855 Blue Book, the disease most prevalent among the prisoners was 'nerves and brain', indicative, perhaps, of excessive alcohol, an existing condition or the psychological effects of trauma.[111] The chief medical officer's report for 1857 noted that there were, on average, 148 people held in the gaol daily and that their illnesses were minor, the most common being dysentery, bronchitis, indigestion and diarrhoea. Dr McCrae wrote that 'many of the complaints were of a trifling nature, but females are fond of medicine and if they were allowed to have it as they wished they would always be dosing themselves'. [112] Possibly this was an example of nineteenth-century medical gender bias—the dismissal and trivialisation of women's symptoms by doctors.[113]

Coronial inquests were always held when a death occurred in prison. The women who died at the Western Gaol were generally not those serving sentences, but women admitted as 'lunatics' to be assessed or those in the last throes of illness. Many of these died in the most tragic of circumstances. Isabella Ham, the wife of a labourer on the goldfields, was admitted to the Western Gaol for 'lunacy'. After

being treated by Dr Webster, she was released. Three days later, she returned and gradually 'sunk from the world'. She died from 'disease of the brain' aged 35.[114]

Alcohol and disease killed 42-year-old Mary Smith, also known as Sarah Bolton, in 1856. Arrested for vagrancy, this was Mary's eleventh stint in gaol in the last 18 months. Suffering from a syphilitic disease, she was 'completely out of her mind' in her last days. The subsequent inquest determined that she died from apoplexy caused by 'intemperance and dissipation'. [115]

One of the deaths listed in the 1857 chief medical officers report was of Catherine Sandey, a destitute and deserted woman who was sent to the Western Gaol for a medical assessment. En route from Port Albert, Gippsland, her infant son choked to death. In the Western Gaol she stole a bottle of disinfectant and poisoned herself before she could be admitted to the Yarra Bend Lunatic Asylum.[116] Polly Tyrrell had handed her two-week-old baby to a stranger before being found intoxicated and arrested for child desertion. She was suffering an abscess on her breast and unable to feed, so an inmate acted as the baby's wet nurse until the baby died from 'derangement of the digestive system'. [117]

Former inmates returned to the prison when they or their children were seriously ill. Mary Clarke, a former inmate, was destitute, her husband in the Melbourne Hospital, when she requested entry to the Western Gaol. She died of dysentery after treatment aged 54.[118] Seven-month-old Charles Higgins, suffering dysentery, was handed over to nurse Ellen Perkins when his mother Elizabeth was admitted to the gaol. He died two days later in his mother's arm. The gaol was praised for its kindness to Elizabeth.[119] Mary Edwards, a destitute, deserted and emaciated 40-year woman old broke windows to gain admittance to the gaol. Sent to the hospital, she died of tuberculosis. [120]

Catherine Coleborn argues that the 'ad hoc welfarism' operating in gaols in the 1860s and 1870s meant that the destitute, elderly and infirm, once they were fed and allowed to rest, had a better chance of survival in gaol than on the streets.[121] This was also the case in the 1850s when Melbourne's only public hospital, built in 1846–48, could not cope with the demand generated by the gold rush population.[122]

A new system of seeking refuge

In December 1857, the *Age* reported that a woman called Buckley (also Buckley), a widowed mother with an infant and 'a constant customer at the female gaol', presented herself to the magistrate, declaring herself a vagrant without means of support.[123] The judge issued a warrant stating that she was sentenced to three months hard labour at the Female Gaol. Buckley then escorted 'herself to gaol'. [124] This, the journalist reported, was 'a new way of seeking refuge'. [125] Buckley was an old hand, having been imprisoned seven times previously. She entered the gaol where her behaviour was described as 'indifferent'. [126]

Between 1854 and 1858, Melbourne was still a frontier town. Social welfare, such as it was, was provided piecemeal by a handful of private charities sponsored by churches and dependent upon donations. It was not until the late 1850s/early 1860s that asylums specifically for homeless women and their children, known as industrial schools, were established. [127] The poor and destitute in Victoria had no right to relief, there were no poor laws, and unrepentant prostitutes and criminals were unlikely to elicit sympathy from the largely middle-class charity workers. The confidence with which Buckley, her new baby in her arms, approached the bench and sought access to the Western Gaol suggests this was an accepted means of survival when you were desperate.

There is no evidence to suggest that imprisonment in the Western Gaol deterred women from committing crimes or misdemeanours. Women moved in and out of gaol with such rapidity that there was little chance of reform. The labour tasks, such as they were, were not onerous. Zedner reached the same conclusion in her study of Tothill Gaol, Westminster, in the 1860s, arguing that gaol was seen as a place of refuge; a sentence of a few days at Tothill was 'a chance of a brush and wash up'. [128] Likewise, at the Western Gaol, the cost of briefly losing your freedom was worth paying when the outcome was food, shelter, clothes, a bath, medicine and time to recover from the effects of alcohol and the threat of violence on the streets.

The Western Gaol was also a communal female space that could be shared with your mother, sister or child, friends and co-offenders. Women, especially those combining theft and prostitution, often worked in pairs, and a 'culture of female reciprocity', which may have included friendships and a sense of family, developed. [129] Alana Piper has argued that the absence of men in the lives of female prisoners in the late nineteenth century resulted in the formation

of female-centred households. [130] It is possible that similar types of quasi-familial relationships developed among women in gold rush-era Melbourne where the desertion of wives and children was common. The damp and miserable location of the gaol was always criticised by its administrators; however, it was also clean and well run. [131] Women who may have lived on emigrant ships, in convict settlements, or in Melbourne's polluted and overcrowded laneways in tents or wooden cribs, were, perhaps, accepting of such discomforts.

Conclusion

Archival records suggest that the Western Gaol provided both welfare and punishment in gold rush-era Melbourne, and that it served an important role in providing shelter to a range of vulnerable women and children, including new mothers and babies, the homeless, alcoholics and the sick. Although prisoners lost their freedom, they received in return a form of welfare and support that was not available to them outside the prison walls.

The archive provides a tantalising glimpse into the workings of the gaol, but it tells us little of the private lives of its inmates. What did the women do in those hours in the yard or locked together in the sleeping wards? Some answers may emerge through historical archaeology, as it has in other colonial sites of incarceration and refuge. [132] The archaeological excavation of 600 Collins Street in 2023, the site of the former Western Gaol, uncovered a bluestone water tank, most likely part of the 1850s drainage works at the gaol. The artefacts excavated include women's and children's shoes, syringes, roughly cut beef bones, smoking pipes and sewing materials. The ubiquitous Melbourne oyster shells and ceramics, common in other Melbourne archaeological excavations, were absent, suggesting this was not a domestic site. The assemblage is currently being catalogued and analysed and may give us more insight into the women and children who found both a place of incarceration and refuge in the Western Gaol. [133]

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