

*Gabion walls of the Cascades Female Factory street facade*



# A far cry

writer *Fiona Stocker*

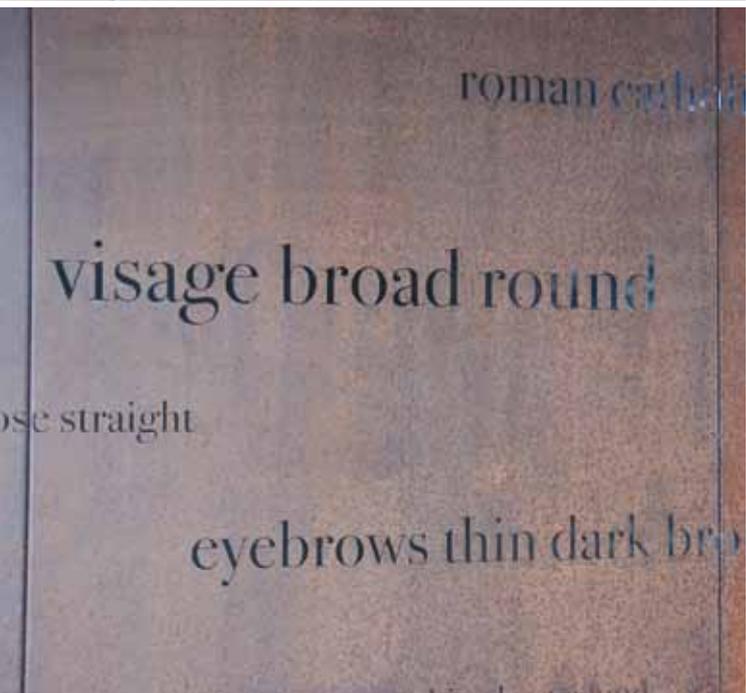
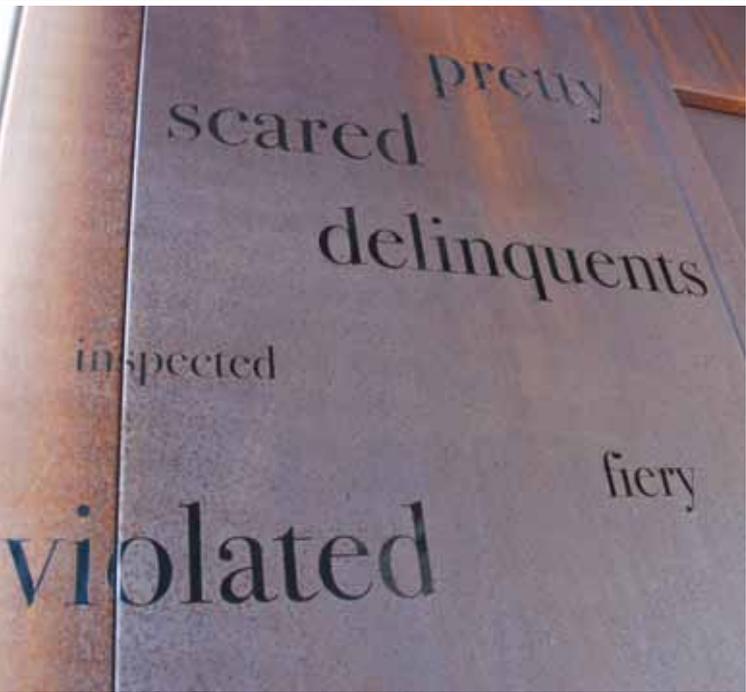
images courtesy *Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority*

South Hobart is a leafy suburb and it's almost pleasant to walk around the remains of the Cascades Female Factory. It's overlooked by weatherboard houses with hilly gardens, perched on the banks of the Hobart Rivulet. Up the road, the historic Cascade Brewery crouches in gothic glory. Only the hulking presence of The Mountain, kunanyi, gives a hint of what life was like here in the convict factory between 1828 and 1856, with roiling clouds spilling over the mountain's summit delivering chilling fury on those below.

On my first visit, I had no inkling of what to expect within the factory's towering sandstone walls. It was a brief visit with family, and I the only one with a nose for history. One needs imagination, compassion and a good tour guide to fully experience such places, and even sensitively raised children do not always have the patience or awareness for thorough exploration. So I resolved to come back alone to properly absorb the stories which seep from the stones, from the silence, from the words etched into the steel panels lining Yard One's entrance. *Notorious, savage, delinquent.*

Still, on that first visit I stood in the matron's cottage with my 10-year-old son, turning page after page in the register of infant deaths which occurred in the "nursery". We look and read wordlessly, with a dawning sense of the full catastrophe of this place. The silence takes on a different hue as I explain to him that these are the names of all the babies and children who died here, and in this column, what they suffered. "Pneumonia, convulsions, marasmus, dysentery, diarrhoea, acute catarrh." My son is bewildered. So many illnesses he has never heard of. Can they afflict him? He has a vague awareness of being protected by vaccinations and modern living. It is a difficult list for him to absorb. And for me.





This is the room I return to a year later, having allowed time to explore fully, take a tour and watch *Her Story*, a dramatic re-enactment by Judith and Chris Cornish. What draws me back is the stories of the infants and mothers who lived out their awful plight here. Female convict history, I am learning, is crowded with orphanages, domestic servitude, work in the factory which served effectively as slave labour for the colony, and unwanted or accidental pregnancies the result of ignorance, rape or desperation. The listings of a father's name in the factory's registers are sparse. This is a place where women were abandoned to their fate.

Many people visit after finding that an ancestor was one of the 6,000 women who passed through the factory, and one such woman joins my tour, her great-great-great-grandmother having



*far left Entrance passage text*

*left Internal entry yard*

*above Visitor viewing text*

been incarcerated here. As we are guided through the administration, hospital and nursery yards, shown the isolation cells and told of hard labour and conditions, she is increasingly ashen-faced. Any impression of a sunny, companionable life fades away as the space fills with the tormented presence of its inmates. They are everywhere; their names engraved into steel panels in the stonework of the hospital yard; the descriptors given them when the surgeon inspected them for disease and the gatekeeper searched them for alcohol, tobacco, money or concealed possessions.

Women arrived after a four-month voyage from England or Ireland, and perhaps a prolonged quarantine aboard ship in the harbour at Hobart. Searched on arrival, their features and demeanour were listed in a register as a means of identification. The antiquated descriptions – “Notorious strum-

pet”, “Deceitful but orderly” – are now etched into the panels between which modern visitors arrive. They hover before us, like some terrible legacy.

The fabric of the 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings was not so sun-bleached as they are now. The remaining outer walls were the external barricades of a compound in which inmates were cruelly separated and confined, their space defined by dank, high stonework, their existence lived out in deep shadow.

It takes only a little imagination to conjure the hardship that was born here, but as our guide informs us, images come more vividly. The filth and water underfoot when the rivulet was in flood; the red rawness of hands made to unpick tarred and sea-salted ropes and nets so they could be rewoven; the heavy iron collar of spikes worn as punishment in a solitary cell.



As we move through the factory, I wonder how such hardship would have conditioned the women. What were they like? What would any of us become under such maltreatment?

Dianne Snowden, president of the Female Convicts Research Centre, says there is no cardboard cut-out stereotype. Convict women were diverse. Presumably, some were softer creatures but many were hardened. Our guide tells us the average age was 26. Many had a history of petty crime, alcoholism, had worked on the street by choice or obligation.

In one awful way the women had no choice but to rely upon each other for the care of their infants. Permitted to nurse their children until

around nine months, they were then returned to hard labour as punishment for becoming pregnant. The infants they left behind were cared for by the other mothers remaining in the nursery, before being sent to orphanages, if they survived. The combined burden of hoping desperately for humanity and tenderness, while dreading neglect and suffering, must have been intolerable.

As the *Her Story* performers lead us through the yards and line us up like a modern day rabble, it crosses my mind to skulk out of sight behind the man beside me. I'm confronted with my own cowardice at the promise of mere audience participation, which palls in comparison to the routine terror of a century and a half ago. It's hard



*clockwise from above*

*The nursery*

*Baby cradles in the nursery*

*Her Story performers Judith and Chris Cornish*

*Washing in the nursery yard*

*Aerial view of Yard One*

to imagine why the authorities in the colonies were so cruel, but we are told that the women passing through the factory were seen as being in need of reform. It was believed that the work they did for the colony would set them free, which has a dreadful and familiar ring about it.

It has been a source of surprise and mystery to me, since coming to live in Tasmania, that there still exists in some a sense of shame in connection to their convict ancestors, and that convict history was concealed for years. Perhaps I've misunderstood where that shames stems from, but it seems to me there can be none associated with an ancestor who perhaps stole a morsel of food because they were starving, or who was wrongly accused of some trivial misdemeanour and given a life sentence. The real shame lies in their systemic treatment, the darkness within those walls passing on into Australian history.



*Her Story performers Judith and Chris Cornish with visitors in Yard One*

The Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority, which is responsible for the Cascades Female Factory as well as that other more renowned site, wants the experiences of the women and infants fully commemorated. The two places have everything in common. While a strange, ethereal quality shimmers over both on a clear day, the same grimness can be found at the merest scratch of the surface. Despite that, where Port Arthur visitors number about 360,000 annually, only a tenth of that number visits the Cascades Female Factory.

In a back room of the matron's house, now used to display artefacts such as the heavy flat irons from the laundry and wretched scraps of clothing, I come across the design for a new interpretation centre to be built within the site. Liminal Studio of Hobart, along with design collaborators Snøhetta and Rush Wright Associates, won an internationally significant architectural design competition with their proposal for a long, dark structure, at once imposing and discreet. The design team was required to have a "significant proportion of female participation", and the judging panel was entirely female.

The winning design, for a long, dark building and a courtyard, has a sombreness about it. It is fitting, as one of the site's volunteers tells me, "because this is a dark place".

The structure promises to be a visceral evocation of the experiences of those who were confined in the factory, and an exploration of their struggle, a reminder to us to hold our liberty and our loved ones closer. **40**

*Further reading:* [femalefactory.org.au](http://femalefactory.org.au); [femaleconvicts.org.au](http://femaleconvicts.org.au); [fromtheshadows.org.au](http://fromtheshadows.org.au).

*The Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority is responsible for the Cascades Female Factory, Port Arthur and Coal Mines Historic Sites, known collectively as the Port Arthur Historic Sites. All three are included in the UNESCO World Heritage List of 11 sites comprising the Australian Convict Sites World Heritage Property.*

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