A Very Short History of the Stuart Town Gaol

By Megg Kelham

This is the text of an introductory speech which preceded a live audio visual performance held in the rear cell of the Stuart Town Gaol. The performance by Tom Hall and Tammy Brennan was part of a series of events called “Writings on the Wall” hosted by Watch this Space, an Alice Desert Festival 2010 event.

My love affair with this building began 2 years ago when I was asked by the National Trust of Australia (NT) to create a conceptual plan for the interpretation of this heritage listed building and realised that, like many long term residents of Alice SpringsUUs this beautiful old stone building with its spacious church-like rear cell, had been utterly invisible to me.

Its beauty had not escaped the notice of local artists like Pip McManus who I would like to thank for insisting, as I worked on the conceptual plan for the site’s heritage focussed re-development, that the space should be retained in all its bald and bare beauty rather than being cluttered with interpretive signage.

I first realised the potential this space had for public performance when I decided to present my archival research to the local community by projecting digital images of the documents and photographs associated with the gaol’s history directly onto its white washed walls.

When, a few months ago I saw Tom Hall perform at Watch this Space, I couldn’t help but suggest that the next venue for his performance should be the Stuart Town Gaol. And I would like to thank Karlee, the co-ordinator of the Watch this Space artists’ run initiative for running with the idea, checking out the space and without further ado getting the funding to make tonight’s performance possible! I love your ‘go-get’em energy” Karlee, thankyou – tonight’s event would not have happened without you!
Finally thanks to Tom and Tammy for loving this space as much as I do. They have spent the last week exploring its extraordinary acoustics, recording its special sounds and visual imagery and I know we’re going to be in for a real audio visual treat tonight when they put it all together in a live performance which I hope is only the first of many performances to take place here.

Before they begin I want, if I can, to give you a very short history of the building during the time it operated as a gaol.

The Stuart Town Gaol has its 101st birthday last week. It was built by a 50 year old sea faring smuggler from the Isle of White who had as his labourers the Turner brothers famed for having travelled from Brewarrina, near Bourke in NSW to central Australia by bi-cycle close to the turn of last century. It took a year to build. Every stone was hand cut locally, carted on the men’s shoulders and put together with locally made lime mortar which, according to Jim Turner, was rotten on the hands.

The first inmates were an Aboriginal man and one assumes, his wife from the Arltunga goldfields who were charged with “larceny of a dwelling” and an Aboriginal man from Alice Springs charged with common assault. A year after the gaol was built it was empty! And indeed for the first 19 years of the gaol’s history it is a gaol remarkable for being under rather than over occupied.

Like the mainstream history of central Australia the gaol’s history is deeply entwined with the cycles of boom and bust – economic and climatic, local and global – which characterise desert life.

Most of the gaol’s inmates were Aboriginal men, who were housed in the cell we are currently standing in. For many of these men, time spent in this gaol was their first human contact with Europeans. Gaol records reveal a direct correlation between drought and spikes in Aboriginal crime, which is not - with the benefit of hindsight - very surprising given that most of the nomads do time for killing cattle, an activity which increases dramatically during droughts and decreases just as dramatically whenever there are drought breaking rains.
The largest number of prisoners to live in this cell at any one time was 26 in 1928, when central Australia was in the grip of the battler breaking Coniston drought of the 1920s. It was probably the first time these cattle killers had ever eaten regular meals or had access to consistent supplies of European tobacco and sugar. They slept on the floor, pee-ed in a bucket in the corner and much to the annoyance of the government administrator who lived over the road they ‘coroborre-ed’ (his verb) all night. From roughly 9 to 5 every day they chopped and delivered firewood to the residents of Stuart, as Alice Springs was then officially called.

**European prison numbers** increased dramatically following the construction of the railway to central Australia which was completed just a few weeks before the onset of the Great Depression and provided a fast and free method of reaching Australia’s heart for those willing to “jump the rattler” as catching the train without paying for a ticket was called. Getting caught incurred a sentence of two weeks hard labour in this gaol. The sentence included three meals a day and a ration of tobacco. European prisoners worked on government building projects during the day.

Of the 600 or so individuals who spent time in this gaol during the three decades it was operational, only about 24 were women. Most of these were what I have come to call the ‘party girls’ - aboriginal women with a liking for alcohol, the company of European men and a habit of ignoring the ‘Prohibited Area” laws which, from 1930 to 1953/64, made it a crime for Aboriginal people to be in the central business district of Alice Springs without a permit. Increasingly longer sentences in gaol do not appear to have deterred the party girls from breaking the law, as their names – Evelyn, Mary, Ruby - re-appear in gaol documents.

The Stuart Town Gaol was closed just before the Second World War, partly because it was overcrowded but also because by 1938 a small but thriving town had grown up around it. Then, as now, officialdom thought an inner city location inappropriate for a gaol, preferring to locate criminals “Out of Sight, Out of Mind” of law abiding citizenry

In the 1970s the gaol was threatened with demolition by the construction of the law courts and new police station whose walls now overshadow it. It was saved by the
almost single handed efforts of one of Alice’s oldest residents Doreen Braitling and I’d like to dedicate tonight’s performance to her foresight and social activism which ensured that such a beautiful space exists for us to use.

And with that I’ll ask Karlee to introduce tonight’s artists to you.

Megg Kelham September 2010

Megg Kelham is a professional historian, educator and freelance broadcaster living in Alice Springs. She curated ‘Freedom, Fortitude and Flies’ a social history exhibition at the Battery Hill Mining Centre in Tennant Creek which tells the story of the Depression goldrush which kept the wheels of Australia’s economy turning through the eyes of the goldfield’s women and children. Megg has also produced audio tours, multi-media installations and educational resources for regional museums in the southern half of the Northern Territory. Some of her work can be found on-line at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wTNFTOvavDw.