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# BREAKWATER PIER AND PRISON HULK MOORINGS

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## Location

BATTERY ROAD WILLIAMSTOWN, HOBSONS BAY CITY

## Municipality

HOBSONS BAY CITY

## Level of significance

Heritage Inventory Site

## Heritage Inventory (HI) Number

H7822-0558

## Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Inventory

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Allom Lovell (1987:64) recommended that archaeological investigation should take place in this area before any lowering of the current ground levels was undertaken, as most of the area surrounding the Gellibrand Pier, Williamstown Boat Harbour, this site and Point Gellibrand in general had been substantially raised over time to fill in the gaps between the railway embankments. The remains of the early Convict Pier, Breakwater Battery and base of the tidal gauge house are probably still present within the fabric of the current pier.

**Tidal Gauge House:** Examination of an image of the gauge house in 1860 suggests that only the top section of the gauge house was removed, as the lower section former part of a landing and steps. It is therefore possible that this lower section remains in situ and was incorporated into the later boat harbour groynes and/or lies under subsequent land reclamation.

Interpretation  
of Site

**Breakwater Pier Signal Station:** The earliest signalling device on the pier was a red light referred to by Cox in 1866. Pier Battery Plans from 1871 indicated that the then lighthouse was to be replaced with permanent structure on top of Breakwater Pier Battery parapet, but it is unclear if this was ever built. In 1943, the MHT erected a timber framed signal station, a fibre-clad signal building and signal mast at the end of the pier. The signal building was still in place in 1989, but mast had been replaced in the 1950's.

**The Breakwater Pier Battery:** One of four new batteries recommended by Scratchley, this battery was located at seaward end of Breakwater Pier in 1861. Scratchley's 1861 plan of proposed defences for Port Phillip Bay shows a 2.4m high wall running along E side of Breakwater Pier and returning at the end. The wall was 37m long and 0.76m thick, and was made of solid timber with 6 loop holes on the side and one at the end. Muir and Watson were the successful contractors to arm Battery in 1864. The guns and batteries were upgraded using convict labour, relocated the lighthouse to end of pier in 1870-71. The structure was possibly demolished during pier renovations in the 1880s, as it is not mentioned again after that time.

Other Names

THE PIER BATTERY, CONVICT PIER, BREAKWATER PIER SIGNAL STATION,  
BREAKWATER PIER SIGNAL STATION, BREAKWATER PIER TIDE GAUGE HOUSE,

Hermes  
Number

13935

Property  
Number

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## History

Point Gellibrand was used as a landing place for stock by early European arrivals in the Port Phillip District. Early Government maritime infrastructure was established nearby as the point offered some shelter for landing passengers and cargo and the waters off Point Gellibrand offered suitable anchorage for larger vessels visiting Hobson's Bay. By 1841, when a government jetty had been constructed nearby at Williamstown, a plain oil-burning light had been erected by order of Governor Bourke at Point Gellibrand. Governor Bourke had also ordered that a battery be constructed at Point Gellibrand for the defence of the young settlement on the Yarra, but this was not begun until the 1850s.

By this time a Select Committee on the Ports of Melbourne and Geelong had recommended that wharves and a breakwater be constructed at Point Gellibrand.

Lieutenant-Governor Charles La Trobe proclaimed the 'parcel of land' known as Gellibrand's Point as a penal establishment on February 16, 1853, two weeks after two vessels, the *President* and the *Deborah*, which were moored in Hobson's Bay, were declared public prisons and Gellibrand's Point had been proclaimed as the place of landing and disembarking prisoners from these vessels. In June of 1853, the *Success* became the third hulk to be declared a public prison in Hobsons Bay. In 1854 the *Sacramento* and *Lysander* were also declared prison

hulks. They were to be moored northward of the lighthouse at Gellibrand's Point.

Prisoners from the hulks were engaged in a number of tasks at Point Gellibrand, including quarrying stone, laying out tramways, building a defence battery and constructing a prisoners' jetty which was the first jetty built at Point Gellibrand(1852-53)(Return showing the description, quantity and value of work performed by convict labour at Gellibrand's Point, Williamstown, from the 1st to the 31st October, 1855, VPP 1855/56, Vol.1 p. 361). It was constructed so that convicts on the prison hulks could be brought ashore via small row boats.

Tidal Gauge House: In 1855-56, a bluestone tidal gauge house was built at seaward end of Convict Jetty to record depth of water on bar at the entrance of Yarra River. It was closed and relocated to Commonwealth Reserve in 1943 when the Williamstown small Boat Harbour (H7822-0418) was filled in for oil tanks construction.

Breakwater Pier: Breakwater Pier was constructed as a timber breakwater with an embanked approach from 1859 to 1861 by contractors McKway and McDonald. The Pier, which incorporated an earlier (1857) octagonal tide gauge house, was constructed over an existing stone pier which had been built by convicts in 1852-53. The pier structure was designed as a two level structure on the landward end to allow access to the tide gauge house on one level with the railway on the other level. The seaward end of the Pier was of uniform height.

Gellibrand Pier (known until 1923 as Railway Pier or Old Railway Pier) was constructed between 1854 and 1859, the year in which it was declared a legal wharf. Construction began under the auspices of the *Melbourne, Mount Alexander and Murray River Railway Company*, which planned to construct railway lines linking Melbourne and the port at Williamstown to Bendigo and the Murray River.

Work on the pier began at the same time as work on the railway line and consisted of the construction of an earthen embankment run out into the bay. Later contracts extended the pier in timber. The final contractors, Porter and Robinson, enclosed the earthen embankment in bluestone walls (*Argus*, 17 November, 1859, p.5) The private railway company ran out of funds in 1856, prompting the Victorian Government to take over the partially-completed railway line and pier. From September 1857, however, trains running from Geelong to Melbourne terminated at the Railway Pier and passengers completed their journey to Melbourne by steamer. A temporary station was located at the pier. The Victorian Railways Department's first railway workshops were established at Point Gellibrand in 1857 and remained on this site until the opening of the Newport Railway Workshops in the 1880s.

When a 2.6m high railway line was to be carried out onto Gellibrand Pier, it was feared that the embankment would isolate the jetty from town, and recommendations were made to build a tunnel to allow access through to the Convict Jetty in 1854. Rails were laid for the jetty tramway in 1855.

Before the Railway Pier was completed the Victorian Government had voted to extend the prisoner's jetty at Point Gellibrand to form a breakwater for the railway pier. The existing bluestone jetty was to be extended 1000 feet in a northerly direction. M.L McKay won the contract to complete the breakwater, which would not only serve as a breakwater, but also afford a 'steam basin for the use of colonial steamers' as well as allowing vessels to lie alongside and discharge cargoes during the heaviest of gales (*Argus*, 11 May, 1859, p.4). A bluestone tide gauge house was erected on the shore end of Breakwater Pier. By the 1880s a boat harbour, partially enclosed with stone groynes, was located between Railway and Breakwater Piers.

From the 1880s, the Melbourne Harbor Trust dredged channels from the piers to the main shipping channel in Port Phillip Bay and dredged around the piers to enable vessels of ever-increasing size to tie up at the piers. In 1899 the piers were dredged to a depth of 28 feet (MHT Commissioners Annual Report, 1899). In 1931, they were dredged to a depth of 32 feet (MHT Commissioners *General Plan of the Port of Melbourne*).

The Victorian Railways Department managed Gellibrand and Breakwater piers until 1913, when the Melbourne Harbor Trust assumed responsibility for these and the Railway Pier at Port Melbourne. A third railway pier (later called Nelson Pier) was constructed at Williamstown in 1878 and the three piers were used entirely for railways purposes until they passed into the hands of the MHT. Connected to the country and suburban rail network, by the first decade of the twentieth century the three railway piers at Williamstown were used 'almost entirely' for exports. While some wool was exported from the piers, the bulk of the export cargo was wheat (Ferguson, p. 8). In the 1920s a state government-appointed board recommended that grain elevators be established at several Victorian country railway stations, with grain terminals built at the Port of Geelong and at the railway piers at Williamstown. The elevator and terminal building at Geelong, together with a grain handling pier, were begun in 1936. Work began on the Williamstown terminal in 1938, but only the foundations and basement were completed. During World War II the Melbourne Harbor Trust converted these foundations into air raid shelters for port

workers at the nearby dockyards and workshops.

In the 1950s the Standard Vacuum Oil Company, building a new oil refinery at Altona, reclaimed four and a half acres of land from the boat harbour between Gellibrand and Breakwater Piers and erected oil storage tanks there. At the same time, Breakwater Pier was extensively extended and remodelled to enable the delivery of crude oil at the pier. The tide gauge was removed to a new building on the Ann Street pier in 1946, when it was found that its location on Breakwater Pier did not allow adequate communication with open water (MHT Commissioners' Report 1946, p.71). The bluestone tide gauge house was moved to the Commonwealth Reserve in Nelson Place, Williamstown some time after this.

The docking area was on the sheltered western side with ships using a series of sawtooth berths. The side of the Pier was straightened in the 1880s and it was lengthened in 1933-34. The pier was remodelled in 1954 to take super tankers, at which time the tide gauge house relocated to Commonwealth Reserve, Williamstown. Breakwater Pier may have historic significance to the State of Victoria.

The history of these sites has been more extensively documented in the Victorian Heritage Register Listing for Gellibrand and Breakwater Piers (H1088).

Breakwater Pier, with the modifications that have taken place over time, demonstrates the changing functions and uses of the site from its original purpose as a convict jetty, to a timber breakwater, to the site for the tide gauge house, to a railway pier playing an important role in the wool and grain trade and to its current role in handling exports and imports for the oil and petrochemical industry in Victoria. The Pier, along with Gellibrand Pier, has an association with Point Gellibrand. Both structures had a major impact on the success and prominence of the Point in the early maritime history of Victoria. The Breakwater Pier encased the original convict jetty in its structure, has an association with the prison hulks moored off Point Gellibrand between the 1850s until the 1880s. These hulks played an important role in the early history of the prison system. This was the first jetty to be constructed at Point Gellibrand and possibly one of the first structures to be built by the convicts. Together with the Gellibrand Pier, the Breakwater Pier is associated with the economic growth of Victoria. It played an important role as a grain and wool port from the 1850s until the 1930s.

#### HOBSON'S BAY PRISON HULK MOORINGS

In 1851 when gold was discovered in Victoria, and most able bodied men fled their jobs to try their hand at prospecting. This led to an acute shortage of labour in the community, and many maritime infrastructure building projects were delayed as a consequence. The government therefore resorted to using prison labour to assist in some of these projects.

In 1852, the first of five prison hulks were moored off Point Gellibrand in the area between Gellibrand Pier and the Convict Jetty, with one directly off the end of the Convict Pier. These hulks were used to supplement the inadequate government prison facilities which were overloaded by the influx of gold seekers (and the subsequent rise in crime) from 1852- 1872. As the hulks were not aesthetically pleasing and detracted from the harbour's image to new arrivals, Point Gellibrand was suggested as their optimal location as it was considered a secondary port area. The vessel *Success* was purchased and used as the first prison hulk in 1853, with the *Sacramento*, *President*, *Lysander* and *Deborah* also converted to hulks in the same year. Quarmill's 1853 painting shows the hulks were painted yellow to distinguish them from other vessel traffic. The hulks continued to be used even after the major Williamstown piers were constructed, and remained and acted as a holding point for prisoner transferring between mainland prisons. Prisoners on hulks work to supply the labour force needed for the quarrying of bluestone for ballast and construction purposes. The location of the hulks appears to have moved over time as the Gellibrand and Breakwater Piers were constructed.

Prisoners were segregated as part of the hulk system according crimes, gender and age. The *Deborah* was used for refractory seamen in 1853, the *Sacramento* housed working prisoners, the *Success* and *President* operated as a punishment prisoners hulk (1857), at least one hulk occupied by Indigenous Peoples. A year later, the *Sacramento* was disbanded and used as female prison, while the *Lysander* and *President* were closed and not reoccupied in the late 1850's. The *Deborah* was still in use as late as 1884. The *Success* was used as a boys' reformatory in the 1860's, and was later converted to an explosives hulk in 1869, where it was used for that purpose until 1884, when it was towed to Sydney and subsequently sank. The hulk was later raised and resurrected as a tourist prison attraction in Australia and America, before it was deliberately burnt in 1946.

The *Sacramento* and *Deborah* convict hulks were later used as torpedo stores and ships at the Torpedo Depot (Heritage Victoria *Deborah* File S163), before being moved Greenwich Bay where they are last shown inside land

reclamation works being undertaken there in 1879.

Butler (2000:12) also shows five prison hulk moorings to the SW of the compass adjusting buoys and west of the Coode Canal extension. No further information was located regarding these hulks, but it is feasible that they existed here, as a feature labelled as 'the Prisoners Jetty' (H7822-0561) is evident in 1894.

Sources:

Argus

Victorian Government Gazette

Victorian Parliamentary Papers

Jill Barnard, *Jetties and Piers a background history of maritime infrastructure in Victoria*, Heritage Council of Victoria, 2008.

Wm Ferguson, 'Report on the Port of Melbourne', 1908, *VPP* 1908, Vol.2

Melbourne Harbor Trust Commissioners' Annual Reports

Return showing the description, quantity and value of work performed by convict labour at Gellibrand's Point, Williamstown, from the 1st to the 31st October, 1855, *VPP* 1855/56, Vol.1 p. 361.

*This place/object may be included in the Victorian Heritage Register pursuant to the Heritage Act 2017. Check the Victorian Heritage Database, selecting 'Heritage Victoria' as the place source.*

*For further details about Heritage Overlay places, contact the relevant local council or go to Planning Schemes Online <http://planningschemes.dpcd.vic.gov.au/>*