

# The Mackay Prison: 1888-1908

Clive Moore

*History Department, University of Queensland*

Mackay and district has a relatively short history, but already so some of its institutions have been forgotten.

In 1863 the small settlement at the mouth of the Pioneer river was declared a port and the first police were appointed. In 1864 J.T. Baker, then the Sub-collector of Customs, was appointed as Police Magistrate.<sup>1</sup> The legal system spread alongside settlement and there were soon prisoners to deal with at the several police stations in the district, sentenced either by the Police Magistrate or by a Bench made up of three Justices of the Peace. Each police station had a small lock-up, or watchhouse, but the one at the Mackay police station was always the major one for the district. The Mackay lock-up was built in the early 1860s, next to the police station. It consisted of two cells, each about eight feet square and ten feet high. The lock-up and keeper's room were under one roof and an 1869 report says that by then the whole building was already in an advanced state of decay. Mackay had one sergeant (mounted) and one constable who was also the lock-up keeper.<sup>2</sup>

The court records for Mackay in the 19th century show about half those sentenced were Melanesians, because half the working population of the district was Melanesian<sup>3</sup>, but Europeans, Asians and Aborigines also committed their fair share of crimes and were incarcerated in the same lock-ups and prison. Prisoners sentenced for longer than a month were usually sent off to the large prisons at Rockhampton and Townsville, but those serving lesser sentences, or awaiting trial, were accommodated locally. As the population increased so did the number of offenders. By the 1880s the existing detention centres were no longer able to cope and the government authorised the construction of a new lock-up.

This was built in 1888 on Sections 98 and 99 of the Parish of Bassett, approximately 13 hectares, bordered on the south by Barnes Creek, on the north by Vines Creek and the Rifle Range, on the east by Bassett Basin, and on the west by what is now Bassett Street. Today this is the area covered by Bassett, Vine, Knobel, Creek, Martin, Golson and Carr Streets. In size it is best described as a lock-up but from 1893 it was officially proclaimed a prison.<sup>4</sup> The plans of the 1888 building still exist in the files of the Public Works Department, held at the Queensland State Archives in Brisbane. There were five cells, one 14 x 13 x 10 feet, two 14 x 8 x 10 feet and

two 14 x 6 x 10 feet. Access was via a front verandah, with an office at one end. There were also two other buildings within the stockade, one containing a kitchen and store room, the other a bathroom and toilet facilities. All of the buildings were constructed from wood and raised on short stumps. They were surrounded by a high wooden stockade (one report gives its height as 8 feet 6 inches, and another as 12 feet) and there were at least two four-room gaolers cottages nearby.<sup>5</sup> At some stage large brick kilns and a salt works were built on the bank of Vines Creek, presumably as an activity for the prisoners.<sup>6</sup>

The main complaints from the gaolers were that the buildings and the stockade were constantly being eaten by termites, and that the cells were overcrowded. At peak periods up to one dozen men had to share the largest cell, and if any of the prisoners needed isolating (women, murderers, lunatics and those with the TDs) accommodation was short.<sup>7</sup>

The lock-up cum prison was used from 1888 until about 1908, when it was converted into a Plague Station or isolation hospital for infectious diseases. Locals remember it in use during a diphtheria epidemic early this century. After 1908 prisoners were accommodated in the Mackay police station lock-up or sent away to the larger prisons at Rockhampton and Townsville. The old prison buildings were demolished about 1922 and on a 1925 map the area is marked as having been subdivided into the present suburban blocks. Today most residents of Mackay have no knowledge that this small prison ever existed.

#### REFERENCES

1. H..L. Roth, *The Discovery and Settlement of Port Mackay, Queensland*, Halifax: King and Sons, 1908, p. 54; J. Kerr, *Pioneer Pageant: a history of the Pioneer Shire*, Mackay: Pioneer Shire Council, 1980, pp. 21-2; C.R. Moore, *Kanaka: a history of Melanesian Mackay*, Port Moresby: Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies and the University of Papua New Guinea Press, 1985, pp. 133-4.
2. 'Management and Working of the Police Force', *Queensland Votes and Proceedings* 1869, Volume 1, pp. 821-2; 'Report from the Commissioner of Police for the Year 1870', *Queensland Votes and Proceedings* 1871, p. 274.
3. Moore, *op.cit.*, p. 188-97, and Appendix Four, pp. 361-4.
4. *Queensland Police Gazette* 1893, p. 300.
5. *Mackay Mercury and South Kennedy Advertiser*, 7 February 1888; *Queensland State Archives* WOR/A 1910, No. 5995.
6. *The Daily Mercury*: 16 May 1979; 8 August 1984; 27 May, 21, 28 June, 19 July, 10 September 1988.
7. *Queensland State Archives* WOR/A 1910, No. 5995, Sub-Inspector, Mackay, to Commissioner of Police, 7 March 1907.