

Her Majesty's Gaol and Labour Prison, Alice Springs

1938 – 1996

Other Names:

- Alice Springs Prison
- Alice Springs Gaol
- Old Alice Springs Gaol

Details

Her Majesty's Gaol and Labour Prison, Alice Springs, opened in November 1938. Male and female prisoners were held in separate cell blocks. Until 1964 male prisoners were segregated by race. Records show that some young offenders were also detained. In 1996 all prisoners were transferred to the Alice Springs Correctional Centre at Owen Springs.

Builders began work on Her Majesty's Gaol and Labour Prison, Alice Springs in 1936, just before the outbreak of World War II. The gaol, which replaced the Stuart Town Gaol as the regional prison for the whole of central Australia, was opened in November 1938. The gaol was the Northern Territory's only correctional facility following the bombing of Darwin in 1942 until the end of World War II, and for a short time in 1974 when Darwin's Fannie Bay Gaol was damaged by Cyclone Tracy.

From at least 1949 onwards European prisoners with sentences of more than three months were regularly transferred from Fannie Bay Gaol in Darwin to Alice Springs. European prisoners with sentences of more than two years were transferred to gaols in South Australia. From 1954 onwards, government policy was to place all of the Territory's European prisoners serving sentences of between three and eighteen months in the Alice Springs Gaol. Individual prisoners had to write to the Minister of Prisons if they wanted to stay in Darwin. Longer term European prisoners were still transferred to South Australia.

According to Melbourne's *Argus* newspaper, the Alice Springs gaol was originally built to detain 22 prisoners. The men's cell blocks had eight one man cells and two four man cells. The women's cell blocks, one for European and one for Aboriginal women, had three single cells each. Until the 29 April 1964 male prisoners were segregated by race. Aboriginal male prisoners lived in the four bed cells. Men of mixed Aboriginal and European descent were allowed to nominate which area of the prison they preferred. As only a small number of women were sentenced to the gaol, they were kept together. During the war the cell block that had been designated for European women was acquired by the Army for military prisoners including, for a short time, Japanese Prisoners of War. The Aboriginal women's cell block was used as additional accommodation for men to relieve pressure on the overcrowded men's cell blocks. A 1951-52 government report noted that the number of prisoners living in the gaol regularly exceeded 22.

Prison numbers rose sharply from the mid 1960s onwards. In 1968-69 the daily average number of prisoners was 56. Two years later, in 1970-71, it was 101. By June 1975 there were 121 prisoners in the gaol. These included 20 prisoners from Darwin who had been transferred to Alice Springs after Cyclone Tracey. The optimum number of prisoners able to live comfortably in the gaol at that time was estimated at 60. The majority of the new prisoners were adult Aboriginal men convicted of alcohol related offences.

The high incarceration rates and the disproportionate representation of Aboriginal prisoners in Alice Springs and Darwin attracted unwanted national and international attention. The situation sparked several government inquiries. In September 1974, acting on one of their recommendations, the Northern Territory became the first jurisdiction in Australia to de-criminalise drunkenness in an effort to reduce the prison population.

These inquiries into Northern Territory gaols also criticised the number of young offenders living in the Territory's adult prisons. A Visiting Justices report shows that on the 21st August 1975 there were 14 young offenders in the Alice Springs gaol. The visiting justice was a local citizen appointed by the government to visit the gaol on a regular basis to ensure that the prisoners were being well treated.

One of the government inquiries found that 15 young people had been held in the maximum security gaol for a total of 693 days in 1971-72. The report does not reveal where the young prisoners slept or ate or how much contact they had with the gaol's adult prisoners. The same report called for the urgent establishment of:

a separate remand centre for those accused of an offence but not convicted. It is appalling how easy it is for a child as young as fourteen to find his way to prison. At present juveniles are held in cells until transportation to Essington House can be arranged. Considering that Essington House is the only juvenile centre in the Northern Territory, this occurrence is not uncommon. Often a week has passed from the time of arrest until the time the child arrives at Essington House. This time is also needlessly extended by the fact that the youths are driven up to Essington House by car rather than flown on a commercial flight.

The report suggested that it would be better if the majority of juvenile offences were dealt with on the settlements and missions from which most of the offenders came.

Departmental reports and letters about the Alice Springs gaol show that an increasing number of young offenders were held in the gaol from the 1960s onwards as a result of what officials described as an increase in juvenile delinquency. The government's annual welfare report for the year 1960-1961 attributed the increase in the number of young people convicted of crimes to 'the work of the women police who have been active for the full year'.

The local media expressed its concern about what to do with children and teenagers who committed crimes in 1951. The Centralian Advocate reported the case of a 'young delinquent' who was still 'at large' and committing crimes because of the lack of a 'small institution' for delinquent children where he could be detained. The paper also reported that the 'authorities' did not think an age specific institution was warranted.

There is documentary evidence that as early as July 1959 young offenders were being imprisoned at the Alice Springs Gaol. Correspondence exists from a gaoler asking the Assistant Supervisor of Education in the Northern Territory to help pay for a correspondence course for a young male prisoner who wanted to study for his Intermediate Certificate. This took place six months after the Territory's first Child Welfare Ordinance was passed.

A 1963 government report describes a young Aboriginal male living in the gaol's isolation cell, a small concrete room located in the middle of an exercise yard in the south west corner of the gaol's grounds. This cell had been constructed in 1951-52 to detain people with mental illnesses and prisoners sentenced to solitary confinement for not obeying internal prison rules. Reports describe how the youth was moved out of the cell so a 'mental defective' could move in. When this prisoner was transferred to South Australia, the young man was returned to the isolation cell. It is not known where he slept during the period when the 'padded cell', as it was also known, was occupied by the adult prisoner.

Two years later, on 21 December 1965, a young Western Australian prisoner was transferred from Fannie Bay Gaol in Darwin to Alice Springs because authorities did not think he should be accommodated near a prisoner who had been given a death sentence. The Department of Welfare, who were responsible for looking after young offenders, sent the boy back to Broome as soon as he had served his sentence.

The most notorious case of a young person being detained in the Alice Springs gaol took place in October 1964 when a 12 year old boy was held in the 'cell normally used for solitary confinement' causing 'much adverse reaction' in the community. Harry Giese, the Director of Welfare, noted that the incarceration was necessary because the Northern Territory didn't have any facilities for juveniles convicted of criminal offences. Essington House, the Northern Territory's sole juvenile detention facility, only housed young people on remand. One of the biggest critics of the placement of the boy in the Alice Springs Gaol was Judge Bridge. Bridge was a Sydney lawyer appointed judge of the Northern Territory Supreme court in 1961.

The 12 year old was interviewed by the local Visiting Justice who assured administrators in Darwin that the youth was being well looked after. When he was interviewed 'privately', the boy had told the Visiting Justice that:

he was being treated kindly and [was] well cared for, that he is doing gardening – growing cabbages – which work he likes. He has been allotted the cell normally used for solitary confinement, which I inspected. It has been converted to a normal cell with bed and bedding as used by other prisoners. He is being issued with suitable reading matter including approved comic papers. In the cell were a number of illustrated books of a semi-educational nature such as "Look and Learn – all about Railways". There was also a supply of ruled paper on which [he] had been writing lists of words to improve his spelling. His light is left on till the normal hour of the evening.

The Visiting Justice's report described how the youth was being kept apart from the other prisoners. Although he was eating in the prison dining room he was seated at a small table with his own guard away from everyone else. He had been to the prison cinema with the other prisoners but again, was seated separately with guards. The Visiting Justice concluded that the gaoler was taking all the appropriate steps to ensure that the boy was well cared for.

Additions to the Alice Springs Gaol in the 1970s increased the number of beds for prisoners to 110. The need to keep young offenders in the gaol for long periods of time declined when Giles House Juvenile Detention and Training Centre opened in Alice Springs in 1978. Government reports from the 1980s and 1990s show, however, that young people continued to be detained in Northern Territory Gaols even after Giles House was opened.

A 1996-97 Federal government inquiry into children and the law in Australia stated that there had been '26 children detained at the prison at Alice Springs this year, one of whom was a 12 year old girl.' It is not clear from the report whether the gaol referred to was HM Gaol and Labour Prison Alice Springs which was closed in the middle of 1996 or the Alice Springs Correctional Centre at Owen Springs which replaced it. The report did make it clear that there were no separate facilities for young people at the old gaol and that:

The absence of separate juvenile units in adult prisons presents serious problems. Evidence presented to the Inquiry from a young person who had been in detention indicated that use of the protection unit in prison to separate children from adults can stigmatise young offenders. One submission pointed out that, in areas where there are no juvenile facilities in adult prisons, such as Alice Springs, children are held on remand in isolation cells...Although children are supposed to be separated from adult offenders, the submission stated that this is enforced inconsistently.

In June 1993, three years before HM Gaol & Labour Prison in Alice Springs was closed, the original gaol buildings were given heritage status as part of the Alice Springs Heritage Precinct built just before World War II. The Precinct, including the gaol, was entered on the Register of the National Estate in May 1996. The Gaol closed two months later.

The gaol's heritage status did not, however, prevent the Northern Territory Government from announcing plans to demolish the buildings and open the land up to private development in 1997. A group of concerned local residents protested against the gaol's destruction and stopped the demolition. After much lobbying from a number of local community organisations, the Northern Territory Government agreed to lease the gaol to the National Pioneer Women's Hall of Fame (NPWHF) who opened it as a museum dedicated to the preservation of women's

history on International Women's Day, 2007. NPWHF is also developing exhibitions dedicated to the site's prison history. The isolation cell where young offenders were held was demolished sometime before the National Women's Hall of Fame gained access to the site.

Gallery



Alice Springs gaol

Description: The isolation cell block where young offenders were often held is the small building on the right hand corner of the gaol grounds.

More info

Chronology

- Heavitree Gap Gaol (1904 - 1909)
 - Stuart Town Gaol (1909 - 1933)
 - Alice Springs Gaol (1933 - 1938)

- **Her Majesty's Gaol and Labour Prison, Alice Springs (1938 – 1996)**

Related Entries

Run by

- [Department of Community Development, Northern Territory Government \(1978 - 1987\)](#)
Date: 1978 - 1984
- [Department of Correctional Services, Northern Territory Government \(1984 - 1987\)](#)
- [Department of Health and Community Services - Correctional Services, Northern Territory Government \(1987 - 1989\)](#)
- [Department of Correctional Services, Northern Territory Government \(1989 - 2001\)](#)

Related Organisations

- [Essington House \(1963 - 1974\)](#)
Young offenders were often held in cells at Her Majesty's Gaol and Labour Prison, Alice Springs prior to being placed at Essington House.
- [Giles House Juvenile Detention and Training Centre \(1978 - 1991\)](#)
After 1978 the majority of young offenders were placed at Giles House instead of being held in Her Majesty's Gaol and Labour Prison in Alice Springs.

Records

For more information and to access your records, follow the links below:

Records

- [WB Receiving Home - Alice Springs - Bradshaw House \(1964 - 1971\)](#)
- [Board of enquiry Ordinance Appointment of Board to enquire into certain matters concerning H17 Gaol and Labour Prison Alice Springs Correspondence letters etc \(1944 - 1944\)](#)

- [Reports of visiting Justices \(1974 - 1977\)](#)
 - [Restructuring the criminal justice system - Northern Territory investigation and reports \(1973 - 1975\)](#)
 - [Correspondence files, annual single number series, Northern Territory Administration \(1915 - 1978\)](#)
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