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Eaglehawk Neck – Prison or Pleasure

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The dramatic-romantic contrasts that has attracted people to the Tasman Peninsula for 150 years is typified by Eaglehawk Neck. The thin sandy isthmus was after all part of the reasons for Port Arthur's existence, allowing the Peninsula to become an un-natural gaol, as the British and Colonial governments exploited its abundant timber stands with convict labour.

Unusual natural features of the Giant Causeway, Blowhole and Devil's Kitchen – contrasting with the heavy surf of Pirates Bay and placid narrows of Eaglehawk Bay. These scenic attractions were commented on by the official visitors from the 1840s onward.

A military guard was in place on The Neck by 1831; by early 1832 a line of nine dogs recommended by Ensign Peyton-Jones were chained across the narrow neck. A series of weatherboard-brick-rock structures were in place by 1836, similar in style to the Shipwright's House, Port Arthur (1834).

In this cottage stayed The Neck's first "tourists", Governor Denison and family, a visit recorded in his journal and in that of another military visitor, Major Stoney, in 1852.

"The Guard House is situated in front of the canine phalanx, who are treated somewhat like the soldier, receiving their regular rations of one pound of bread and one pound of meat each day".

"On the rise of the hill, some 500 yards from The Neck, are the barracks for about thirty men: and to the right of it the officers' quarters, with a neat garden round it. Lately this cottage has been added to, as the Governor and family spent the summer there for the benefit of sea-bathing, the officer moving to Port Arthur during His Excellency's visit".

"There are several patches of tilled land around, which the industrious soldier is allowed to labour at his own benefit, and which repays the labour well. A pathway conducts you through a few yards of scrub to the beach."

"On the left is a very extraordinary natural curiosity – a long line of tessellated pavement cut in exact squares..."¹

¹ Major H.B. Stoney, "A Year in Tasmania", 1852

Four years later, F.J. Cockburn recalled, “I was very sorry to leave Eagle Hawk Neck, for my visit there was one of the pleasantest (sic) I ever paid in my life, and the grandeur, wildness and beauty of its scenery had a great charm for me.”²

To offload stores at The Neck a “superb jetty 300 yards long extends from the shores over³ the shallows to deep water into Eaglehawk Bay, allowing cutters of 51 tons burthen to discharge their cargoes”.

In 1869 Tasmanian guide books refer to the beauty of The Neck, so that by 1877, when the general public were allowed onto the Peninsula, interest in this forbidden “neck-of-the-woods” was intense. Visitors arrived by ship using the jetty for Risby’s sawmill, in place even before 1877.

Henry Chesterman, sawmiller (and later demolisher of Port Arthur’s Military Barracks, and Impression Bay station), also secured forest at The Neck. The *SS Taranna* and *SS Koonya* took visitors to the site of the Military Station on Mondays and Thursdays.

Apart from the steamer direct to The Neck in summer, excursioners could travel from Taranna on the mail coach or a “brisk walk of 4 or 5 miles will accomplish the distance”. By 1905 an overland route from Bellerive was possible by taking the train to Sorell (15 miles), coach to Dunalley (21 miles), and a horse-drawn vehicle to Eaglehawk Neck (12 miles).

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² F.J. Cockburn “Letters from the Southern Hemisphere”

³ J.T. Lempriere, Penal Settlements of V.D.L. (1839)