Cockatoo Island – An Historical Account

Cockatoo Island has a long association with the RAN. The Island has World Heritage Listing and some additional information can be found on our website at https://www.navyhistory.org.au/naval-heritage-sites/cockatoo-island. This article has been reprinted in the June 2003 edition of the Naval Historical Review (all rights reserved).

Cockatoo Island is Sydney Harbour's largest island. It was named after flocks of cockatoos that used to congregate in its large red gum trees. It is a sandstone mound rising to about 18 metres above sea level. The island was originally only 32 acres in size, but due to expansion over the years is now 44 acres. Its isolation, deep waters and proximity to other industrial sites since the first European occupation of the island in 1839 has led to the island having a dynamic and profitable history. It was first used as a penal facility for convicts transferred from Norfolk Island, then as a dockyard for the construction, repair and refitting of ships.

1839

Governor George Gipps ordered the construction of a prison on Cockatoo Island for convicts transferred from Norfolk Island. Their labour was to be used in the construction of roads and other public works of the colony. The convicts excavated the sandstone rock and constructed underground silos, which were used to store the colony's grain. These silos proved invaluable to the population of Sydney, as until then they had been forced to rely upon the irregular shipment of grain from England. Furthermore, the grain was not threatened by contamination, as the silos were airtight. The sandstone was also used for other construction projects around Sydney, including Circular Quay.

1851

Construction of Fitzroy Dock commenced. Governor Gipps recognised the advantage of building a dry dock to enable the repair of visiting ships of the Royal Navy. The dock was built entirely by convict labour; gangs of convicts in chains chiselling the sandstone by means of a chisel and hammer, and took six years to be completed. However, before construction of the dock commenced, the sandstone cliffs that lay across the chosen site had to be removed. Large charges of gunpowder, electrically charged, were used for this purpose. It was the first time gunpowder was electrically charged in Australia. Accurate calculations were made to ensure that the sandstone did not simply disintegrate. Indeed, the cliffs fell away in large boulders and the rocks were later used in the construction of various buildings.

1864

The administration of the island was split between the NSW Department of Prisons and the Public Works Department.

1870

The Penal Colony was abolished upon the construction of the Darlinghurst Gaol. The administration of the penal establishment at Cockatoo Island had received a great deal of criticism as the gaol was overcrowded – at one point 500 prisoners were held on the island in housing fit for about 300.

1871

An Industrial School for Girls and a reformatory for women took over the prison barracks until 1888. The island's name was changed to Biloela (Aboriginal for cockatoo) in an attempt to give it a new image. In 1908, a new prison was built at Long Bay and this finally brought about the end of a prison at Cockatoo Island. During the period 1871-1911 two wooden sailing ships administered by the Department of Education as Nautical School Ships were moored off the island. They were used as training ships for delinquent and orphaned boys. The sailing ships proved a great success and many of the boys became talented sailors.

1880

It became evident that a new dry dock would be needed to accommodate not only the increasing number but the increasing size of ships arriving at Cockatoo Island for repairs. Louis Samuel, a 23 year-old engineer, won the contract to build the dry dock, called Sutherland Dock. Upon its completion it was the largest dry dock in the world and over the years would require further extensions to accommodate the larger ships of the time. It was completed in 1892. Over the years, activity at the dockyard increased.

1911

The Royal Australian Navy was created on 10 July.

1913

Cockatoo Island was sold to the Commonwealth and became a defence establishment. From this time many naval ships were built and refitted at Cockatoo Island. The first RAN destroyer to be built at Cockatoo Island was completed in 1916.

World War One

The war years proved to be an arduous time for the dockyard. Repairs and refitting of warships and other vessels such as merchant cruisers and supply ships were in high demand. Around 250 ships were refitted and over 500 vessels were docked at Cockatoo Island during the war years.

The incredible scale of the work undertaken by the dockyard during these years can be judged by the following: the ships converted and refitted were arranged to carry in total 4,459

officers, 5,900 non-commissioned officers, 112,500 men, 1,800 munition workers and navvies and 17,000 horses. ((p 29 Cockatoo Island: A History, by R.G Parker)) Refitting work continued on a large scale after the war to return the ships and other vessels to their previous duties.

1920s

Whilst the war years had proved very lucrative for the dockyard, construction work diminished in the 1920s to such an extent that it was difficult to run the dockyard at a profit. Attempts were made to get commercial engineering projects for the dockyard to keep the employees gainfully employed. However, the High Court intervened for constitutional reasons. It argued that Cockatoo Island, as a government instrumentality, could not compete with private enterprise. These limitations forced the Government of the day to consider leasing out the dockyard and the plant. In 1923, the management and control of Cockatoo Island, in accordance with the provisions of the Commonwealth Shipping Act 1923, was transferred to the Australian Commonwealth Shipping Board. In 1933, Cockatoo Island was leased to a newly formed Australian Company: The Cockatoo Docks and Engineering Company Limited.

1929-33

Wing-Commander L.J. Wackett, the celebrated aeronautical engineer and aircraft designer, was behind this unusual activity on Cockatoo Island. Numerous repairs were undertaken on various aircraft, the largest project being the rebuilding of the Southern Cross in which Sir Charles Kingsford Smith had flown the Pacific. Sixty percent of the plane had to be rebuilt after crashing when landing at Mascot on 19 March 1932.

ALBATROSS in Cockatoo Dock Nov 11 1932

1933

During the 1920s shipbuilding had slowed down but picked up again just before the outbreak of World War II. The Commonwealth ordered the construction of a naval escort vessel HMAS Yarra, followed by HMAS Swan. HMAS Adelaide was modernised, as was HMAS Australia, which was fitted with additional side armour. The liner Moreton Bay was converted into an armed merchant cruiser, whilst another vessel, the Changte, was converted into a victualling supply ship.

World War Two

During the war years dockyard activity at Cockatoo Island was frantic, as the island became the major shipbuilding and dockyard facility for the Pacific region after the fall of Singapore. Hundreds of ships from the RAN and US Navy were docked at Cockatoo for refitting and repairs. Wartime dockings totalled 750 vessels, of which 395 were merchant ships and 350 were naval ships. Work was particularly lengthy because many of the ships were seriously damaged and required long periods in dry dock. Eleven RAN ships required repairs including Australia and Hobart. Hobart had suffered extensive damage, notably to the stern, which was only just hanging on with two propellers and shafting blown off. Australia had suffered considerable damage after being attacked by Kamikaze pilots at the Philippine landings.

HOBART (1) in Sutherland Dock, Cockatoo Island 1944.

1947

This year marked an important change for Cockatoo Island. Vickers Limited, an engineering company based in London took over the majority of the shares in the Cockatoo Docks and

Engineering Company Pty Ltd. Vickers had been invaluable to Cockatoo during World War II, providing much needed technical aid and training support.

1948

The Daring class destroyer program began. These were based on a British design. Voyager and Vampire were built at Cockatoo and completed by the late 50s. It was the first time 'all-welded' hulls were to be built in Australia. Lack of expertise in this area meant that some of Cockatoo's technical staff was sent to the United Kingdom to learn the new techniques required. Cockatoo gained a lot of experience in all-welded ship construction and became a leader in the field, advising shipyards throughout Australia. The increased threats from both air and submarine attack meant the destroyer had greater defence responsibilities. The destroyers provided aircraft carrier escort, and gunfire support to the Fleet. Their strong, light construction combined high speed with maximum armament, which included the big guns, lighter anti-aircraft guns, torpedo launchers and anti-submarine mortars. HMAS Voyager sank after a tragic night-time collision with HMAS Melbourne when routine manoeuvres went tragically wrong. Voyager was cut in two, leading to the death of 82 sailors.

1950s

Construction of Type 12 frigates commenced. HMA Ships Parramatta and Stuart were completed by 1961 and 1963 respectively. Their peacetime role involved patrolling and surveillance; escort duties in ocean and coastal water; command and control of maritime forces and navigation and seamanship training. They were considered to be very sophisticated frigates. Stuart was the first ship to be fitted with the IKARA anti-submarine guided missile. IKARA was an innovative Australian development that was later adopted by foreign navies.

1960s

Cockatoo Dockyard received very few orders for naval vessels. Indeed, they were very disappointed when in 1962 the Government ordered two guided-missile destroyers, Hobart and Perth, from the United States. HMAS Brisbane was ordered a year later. Several ships were constructed at Cockatoo after this time, however the dockyard was forced to look for outside work. Cockatoo won the contract to build the merchant ship Empress of Australia.

1970s

The service and refit of the Oberon class submarines took place and operated up to 1991 when the RAN decided to purchase Collins class submarines. Refitting of submarines lasted at least 12 months. In order to free up Sutherland dock, they decided to built a 'slave dock' – a type of floating pontoon which was for the exclusive use of the submarines. It proved to be a very useful asset, as once the submarine was loaded onto the slave dock, it could be towed to any berth around the island.

The decline in shipping in Australia, and the size of new container ships, meant that Cockatoo Island dockyard was no longer viable. HMAS Success was the last ship to be built before Cockatoo closed in 1992.

Cockatoo Island 1972

1990s

The Commonwealth regained control of Cockatoo Island in 1992/93. A lot of the plant and machinery was sold and some 40 buildings were demolished. Several wharves were also removed because of their decaying condition.

2000s

Cockatoo Island is now administered by the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust. The Sydney Harbour Federation Trust is a self-funding agency created by the Australian Government responsible for vision planning and management of Sydney Harbour sites including Cockatoo Island and Snapper Island in Sydney Harbour, Woolwich Dock and Parklands in Woolwich, HMAS Platypus in Neutral Bay, Georges Heights, Middle Head and Chowder Bay in Mosman, North Head Sanctuary in Manly, Marine Biological Station in Watsons Bay and Macquarie Light station in Vaucluse. The Harbour Trust's role is to cultivate a long-term vision plan for these sites to ensure they are integrated into the life of the city and create a lasting legacy for the people of Sydney and Australia

Tours of the island are now available via their website http://www.harbourtrust.gov.au/visit/cockatoo-island/tours-excursions

Ships Built at Cockatoo Dockyard:

1912-16	HMA Ships Huon, Torrens, Swan – torpedo boat destroyers. These ships were the first warships wholly built in Australia for the Royal Australian Navy.
1913-16	HMAS Brisbane – Town class cruiser
1917-22	HMAS Adelaide – Chatham class cruiser
1918-20	Dundula, Eudunda – cargo ships
1922-24	Fordsdale, Ferndale – refrigerated cargo steamers, the largest merchant ships ever built in Sydney.
1924-25	Cape Leeuwin, Cape York – lighthouse steamers
1926-28	HMAS Albatross – seaplane carrier, Australia's first aircraft carrier.
1930-31	Cape Otway – lighthouse steamer
1934-36	HMA Ships Yarra, Swan – escort sloops
1938-41	HMAS Kookaburra, Koala, Kangaroo, Karangi – boom defence vessels
1938-40	HMAS Parramatta, Warrego – escort sloops.
1940-42	HMAS Bathurst, Goulburn, Bendigo, Wollongong, Cessnock, Glenelg, HMIS Madras, Bengal – Bathurst class minesweepers
1938-42	HMAS Arunta, Warramunga, Bataan – Tribal class destroyers
1941-43	River Clarence, River Hunter – cargo steamers
1942-46	HMAS Barcoo, Barwon – River class frigates
1944-50	HMAS Tobruk – Battle class destroyer
1946-59	HMAS Voyager, Vampire – Daring class destroyers. These were the first all-welded warships built in Australia (with HMAS Vendetta, built in Victoria). Vampire is on display at the Australian National Maritime Museum in Sydney.
1947-49	Wonga, Yelta – steam tugs
1951-63	HMAS Parramatta, Stuart – Type 12 frigates
1962-65	Empress of Australia – passenger/ vehicle ship, the largest ship of its type built in the world at that time.
1964-68	HMAS Stalwart – escort maintenance ship
1964-71	HMAS Torrens – River class destroyer escort
1974-77	A S Mayne – bucket dredge
1979-86	HMAS Success – Durance class fleet underway replenishment ship (AOR).