Commandants and Police Magistrates of Port Macquarie

The most significant change in the town’s administration was in the important position of Police Magistrate an office once held by the Commandant. In June 1832 Major Benjamin Sullivan became the first civil appointment to this position. The Military Commander remained in charge of the garrison and the convict establishment, but the Police Magistrate was the government’s channel of communication in all other matters, as well as presiding in his court over matters of law for both convicts and free settlers.

Commandants and Police Magistrates

March 1821 - April 1824
April - November 1824
November - December 1824
January 1825 - February 1826
February - November 1826
November 1826 - April 1827
April - October 1827
October 1827 - June 1828
June - August 1828
August - October 1828
October - November 1828
November 1828 - June 1832
June 1832 - August 1836
August 1836 - July 1847

Captain Francis Allmen
Captain John Roland
Lieutenant GR Carmac
Captain Henry Glynn
Captain Samuel Wright
Captain Archibald Clunies Ross
Lieutenant Thomas H. Owen
Captain PC Croft
Lieutenant Thomas Meyrick
Captain Philip Auern
Captain Robert Hunt
Captain Henry Styring
Major Benjamin Sullivan
William Naim Gray
The Colony (New South Wales)

The penal colony of New South Wales was formed specifically for receiving convicts and was unique in this regard. It was the first time that convicts, and only convicts, were sent to un-colonised land to build the colony that would be their goal.

In its early years the whole colony was a prison. Remote, unexplored and with access, escape only by sea, no specific accommodation was required in which to confine convicts. Those who reformed, or at least stayed out of trouble, were eligible for a range of liberties, subject to good behaviour and the length of their original sentence. Prisoners who were disruptive, or who re-offended, were dealt with by the magistrates who could order a range of punishments including flogging and hard labour. Public works at a distance from Sydney provided plenty of scope for enforced labour in unpleasant occupations, made escape more difficult and reserved secondary offenders from contact with other prisoners. Distant out settlements at Norfolk island and the Donovet offered the same benefits as the original settlement at Sydney Cove in regards to convicts security, but were not designed as places of secondary punishment.

In 1804 the first settlement specifically designed for secondary offenders was established at Newcastle where coal mining, lime burning and timber getting were the main occupations. Isolation and natural resources were essential elements in the location of such places, with the added benefit at Newcastle of hard and unpeopled labour. However, Newcastle’s location was eventually breached by the extension of the settlement into the Hunter Valley. Some more distant place was now needed if offenders were to be banished beyond the expanding boundaries of the settlement.

The Settlement (Port Macquarie)

For many thousands of years prior to European occupation of the region, the Birpai were the traditional owners of the lands and waterways of the Hastings. The traditional country of the Birpai is bounded by the watersheds of the Manning River to the south, the Macleay River to the north and the Asusley River to the west.

Surveyor-General John Oxley’s expedition to trace the Macquarie River and to find an inland sea met with disappointment, but his chance discovery of the Hastings River redeemed its apparent failure, offering a possible source of water for the convict settlement for another place of secondary punishment.

Oxley provided the first detailed description of the Hastings region in 1819. After climbing a mountain Oxley saw the Pacific Ocean, waterways, topography vegetation and areas of Aboriginal occupation. The mountain was subsequently named Mount Sea View.

Describing Port Macquarie Oxley reported:

“The port abounds with fish, the shacks were larger and more numerous than I have ever before observed. The forest and rising grounds abound with large kangaroos and the marshes afford shelter and support to the innumerable wild fowls. Independent of the Hastings River, the whole country is well watered, there is a fine spring at the very entrance of the Port, I named this inlet Port Macquarie in honour of His Excellency the Governor, the original surveyor of these expeditions.”

Following this report, the Governor, Lachlan Macquarie, ordered a further expedition to survey and explore Port Macquarie and the Hastings River. In 1815, the explorer-artist Allan Cunningham reported favourably on the agriculture potential of the lower Hastings, John Oxley and Lieutenant Phillip Parker King noted, however, that the river bar would be an obstacle to larger vessels, impressed with the apparent abundance of resources and warm climate, Macquarie notified the Home Secretary of the expedition results. Macquarie was subsequently instructed to establish a penal settlement in Port Macquarie in 1820.

Surveyor James Meehan originally laid out the settlement in 1821. By 1825 Port’s convict population had peaked and to anticipate the arrival of free settlers in 1831 the town was surveyed on a new and regular alignment which survives intact today.

Port Macquarie closed as a place of secondary punishment in 1832, however, a Government establishment remained until 1947, housing ‘speculative’, the term given to established convicts those that could read and write and do bookwork, and those unable to do useful work. Invaluable to the aged and the frail, in a newly built gable, forming a centre for public works in the district.

In 2005, Port Macquarie-Hastings Council, in partnership with a number of government agencies, private organisations and individuals, installed a signpost system that focuses on 13 of Port Macquarie’s historical and archaeological precincts. The signs, located along a 6 kilometre walk, provide an insight into life in Port Macquarie from 1821-1847.