Convict and Industry

Much of the modern Newcastle landscape has been shaped by the hands of convicts and industry. Explore the city's early years as a convict settlement. Visit remnants of the great industrial enterprises that once defined the city. Discover amazing engineering feats that allowed the city and its people to prosper.

This walking tour starts at the Convict Lumber Yard, one of the most significant archaeological sites of convict industry in Australia. It ends at Newcastle Museum, the home of incredible objects and exhibitions that celebrate the industrial and convict heritage of the region.

The GNR Railway Yards

The now tranquil parklands of the foreshore were once a vast maze of railway sidings and goods yards. The Great Northern Railway, running from Honeysuckle Point to East Maitland, was extended to Newcastle East in 1858. For more than a century this maze of railway sidings and goods yards allowed trains to meet the ships for loading and unloading of cargo along Queens Wharf. Coal from all over the region was freighted here, with the clattering wagons extending to Newcastle East in 1858. For more than a century this maze of railway sidings and goods yards. The Great Northern Railway had been damaged by floods in Maitland and these two Aboriginal brothers were part of the army of workers tasked with getting the trains moving again.

Robert and Bill arrived in the Hunter in 1955. The Great Northern Railway had been severely damaged by floods in Maitland and these two Aboriginal brothers were part of the army of workers tasked with getting the trains moving again.
Evolution 2
Reflecting the bustling movement of people and trains are local artist Sandra Minter-Caldwell's sculptures Evolution 2.
Consisting of an assortment of silicone bronze cast leg fitted with wheels, the work reflects the energy of the area, recalling the rotating wheels of busy locomotives, moving wagons and freight to feed local industry. The sculptures also explore the movement of people through the park today, with people walking, jogging and riding bikes, scooters and skateboards in all directions.

Zaara Street Power Station
In 1915 the Zaara Street Power Station joined the locomotives and steam ships to help keep sheet over the East end of Newcastle. The Power Station was built by the New South Wales Railways. It was capable of supplying so much electricity that it was connected to the grid of the Newcastle Borough Council in 1917 and supplied much of Newcastle’s electricity needs throughout the 1920s. Zaara Street Power Station remained in operation until 1975 and was demolished in 1978.

Macquarie Pier and Nobbys Island
During the early years of Newcastle, navigation of the Harbour could be a perilous task. To protect lives and shipping something had to be done.
On August 4th 1818, Captain James Wallis, Commandant of Newcastle, built a Governor Lachlan Macquarie to this spot and proposed constructing a causeway between the mainland and Nobbys. The next day the foundation stone for the new structure was laid. Convict labour was used to construct the pier through to its completion in 1846. It went through several rebuilding programs, vastly improving the safety of the harbour entrance. In the 200 years since construction, the city’s most iconic beach, Nobbys Beach, has formed along in length.

Cathedral Park Burial Ground and Christ Church Cathedral
Approximately 3,300 people were buried in what is known today as Cathedral Park. In 1817 Governor Macquarie declared the three acres of land that looked down upon the fledgling penal settlement for use as a church and cemetery, making this the oldest of Newcastle’s historic cemeteries. In 1819 the Cathedral, Christ Church, was consecrated and was demolished in 1923.

The First Gaol
Newcastle's gaol was constructed in 1818 on this site. The Gaol was separated from the rest of the town by large sand dunes formed by the vegetation being removed to prevent escaping convicts from escaping immigration. The first gaolers were convicts themselves and it was not only a place of confinement but also a place where corporal and capital punishment took place. In 1828 women from the overcrowded Parramatta Female Factory were transported to Newcastle.

The Bogey Hole
Another lasting project produced by convict labour is the Bogey Hole, located at the base of Shepherds Hill. Construction began in 1849 by order of Commandant Munro for his personal use. Originally known as the Commandants Bath, the pool was cut by hand into the rock platform by convicts. While its completion date is not known, it was in use when the Commandant left the settlement in 1823.

Workers at The Honeysuckle Point Railway Workshops, 1887 (Photograph courtesy of Newcastle Region Library collection 001003631)

Rose Cottage
9 Rose Cottage, 51 Bolton Street
Behind the modern buildings of Bolton Street sits Newcastle’s oldest surviving building. Rose Cottage. It is believed to have been constructed in 1828.
By this time the only convicts remaining in Newcastle were employed in mining and breakwater construction. In 1824 Newcastle was divided into 190 allotments that established the layout of central Newcastle as it exists today. Rose Cottage occupied allotment 15.
Cut off from the road by a realignment of the street, Rose Cottage survives today as private offices.

10 The Bogey Hole
This is the site of Newcastle’s first water reservoir. By the 1870s Newcastle was home to thousands of people, with no reliable source of fresh drinking water. Wells dried out in summer and were easily contaminated by the city’s waste. People were dying from preventable water born diseases.
To ensure safe drinking water was available, the Hunter River Pumping Scheme was initiated in 1880. This ambitious engineering project pumped water from Maitland to Newcastle.
The works began supplying clean drinking water to Newcastle’s population in 1882.

Water Reservoir

13 Water Reservoir

11 Cathedral Park Burial Ground and Christ Church Cathedral

Cathedral Park

14 Newcastle Museum (Railway Workshops)
The buildings that house Newcastle Museum once formed part of the Honeycomb Point Railway Workshops. These works were a crucial part of the Great Northern Railway’s operations. Established during the construction of the railway in 1854, the assembly, repair and maintenance of the region’s fleet of locomotives and wagons took place here.
From an enormous 60 tonne ladle used for pouring molten steel at BHP, to a button from a convict’s tunic uncovered at Stroud; Newcastle Museum is home to objects, exhibitions and stories exploring Newcastle’s convict and industrial heritage.

12 Australia’s First Railway
Just off Church Street is the site of the first railway ever constructed in Australia. Built in 1831, it didn’t use horses or locomotives to propel its wagons but rather gravity. The Australian Agricultural Company built an incline plane or locomotives to propel its wagons but rather gravity. The incline plane was double track and its wagons each held a ton of coal. Loaded wagons were lowered down the inclined plane by a rope passing around a large wheel. To control the speed of their descent, the other end of the rope was attached to empty wagons, which were returned to the top of the hill for reloading.
Once the wagons arrived at the bottom of the hill they were pushed by labourers out onto the wharf, where a shoot hanging over the waiting ship meant that the coal contained in the wagons could be loaded directly into the vessel’s hold. Remnants of the railway survived in a modified form, utilising locomotives, until demolition in 1923.

Convict Coal Mining
Lieutenant Shortland happened upon the Hunter River while searching for escaped convicts in 1797. He found no evidence of the escaped convicts, but he did find coal. Coal had been a part of local Indigenous culture for thousands of years. The earliest European coal mining in the Southern Hemisphere commenced here in 1811 under what was to become Fort Scratchley.
Early coal mining in Newcastle was a hard task performed by unskilled convicts. These convicts were led by a professional miner named John Platt and together they raised nine tonnes of coal a day.
Coal mines dominated the landscape of Newcastle for decades, much of the ground beneath the city’s CBD is a honeycomb of pits. The old tunnels beneath the Fort are still there, having been sealed by the 1880s construction of the military installation.

Joseph Lycett, Convict Artist
Much of what we know of how early European settlement in Newcastle looked, as well as insights into local Indigenous culture and traditions, are drawn from the paintings, engravings and sketches of a convict. Joseph Lycett was convicted of forgery and sentenced to 14 years with transportation to Australia in 1811. Found to be responsible for further forgery in Sydney, he was sent to Newcastle as punishment. It was here that his skills as an artist came to the attention of Captain James Wallis.
Wallis allowed Lycett to utilise his creative talents on a variety of projects. He drew up the plans for the first church on this site. Completed in 1817, he also produced paintings for the altar piece. Captain Wallis encouraged him to paint the local Aboriginal people. Wallis wanted to prove to his superiors in Sydney he was capable of maintaining harmonious relations between the convict and Indigenous populations of Newcastle. The resulting works provide a valuable early record of the Aboriginal way of life.
After receiving an official pardon, Lycett returned to England in 1822 and published books of his illustrations. Several prints and paintings produced by him are held in the Newcastle Art Gallery collection including: Inner view of Newcastle 1818 which travelled to the Royal Academy, London in 2013 for inclusion in the exhibition Australia spanning 200 years of Australian art.