



Nobbys - Newcastle Peninsula

Nobbys, the commanding island at the mouth of Newcastle Harbour is the most prominent landmark in Newcastle. First described by Captain Cook in May 1770 as "a small clump of an island lying close to shore", it has become a symbol recognisable to all in the Hunter and far beyond.

The origin of the name Nobbys is unclear. One fanciful explanation has it that a convict, Joseph Nobby, lived on the island and it was named after him. Another tale has it that its name is descriptive, a knob of rock. It has had a host of other names, none of which have stuck. Paterson on his voyage here in 1801 called it "Coal Island", the aboriginal name was "Whibay-gamba", other names were "Hackings Island" and even "Booby Island".

An early problem facing captains of sailing ships entering Newcastle was the loss of wind in the ship's sails as they passed the towering Nobbys outcrop at the port entrance. To alleviate this, the top was taken off Nobbys, reducing it to half its original height, with the resulting rock used in the construction of the breakwater. Construction commenced in 1818 and was carried out largely by convict labour.

The building of the pier was a hazardous job with the convicts having to work under all sea and weather conditions, night and day. Many lives were lost to the sea during the 38 years it took to build.

Nobbys remained an island until work was completed on the breakwater in 1846. At that time the breakwater only extended as far as Nobbys and was known as Macquarie Pier. The original construction was of a fairly poor standard and heavy seas frequently breached the breakwall. However, the breakwater did make the entrance to the harbour slightly safer.

Originally Nobbys was about 62 metres high but it is now less than half that height, standing at 27.2 metres (about 90 feet). In 1847 a proposal to remove another 10 metres off the top of Nobbys was put forward and in 1854 a Colonel Burney of the Royal Engineers set about this task, drilling tunnels into the rock to place charges. The locals, opposed to the plan, organised themselves and forced the abandonment of the demolition.

Nobbys did not always have a warning light. In 1804 a signal mast was set up on the present site of Fort Scratchley (then known as Signal Hill) to act as a general indication of the town's location. This was replaced by a coal fire beacon in 1813. A lighthouse was erected on Nobbys and was brought into service on 1 January 1858 and this lighthouse has been guiding ships safely into Newcastle Harbour ever since.

Work on extending the breakwater beyond Nobbys to Big Ben reef began in 1875. Work finished in 1883 but further repairs and extensions have been made.

Apart from making the entrance to the harbour safer, the breakwater also had the effect of creating a beach on the southern shore of the wall.