History

From ancient Aboriginal occupation to colonial settlement, followed by prison, maritime and military functions, Rottnest Island has had many different roles over the years. Now one of Western Australia’s most popular tourism destinations, visitors can gain an insight into Rottnest Island’s rich history by visiting the island’s many historic sites.

ABORIGINAL

» Known to local Aboriginal people as Wadjemup, which means ‘place of spirits’ in the Whadjuk language, the island is of significance to Aboriginal communities across Western Australia.

» Artefacts have been found at a number of sites on Rottnest Island pre-dating 6,500 years ago and are possibly tens of thousands of years old, indicating previous Aboriginal occupation of this area prior to the separation of the island from the mainland.

» For almost a century the island served as a prison for Aboriginal people (except for a period of closure between 1849 and 1855) during which some 3,700 Aboriginal men and boys, from many parts of the State, were imprisoned.

» Over the prison period, the Aboriginal prisoners constructed a large number of buildings and other structures including the Sea Wall, lighthouses and other heritage buildings.

» The prison officially closed in 1904 although prisoners were used to build roads and other works on the island until 1931.

» An Aboriginal Burial Ground is located within the Thomson Bay Settlement.

» There are 17 sites on Rottnest Island listed under the Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972-1980.

» From May 2018 onwards the Aboriginal Prison (known as the Quod) has been returned to the Rottnest Island Authority and a future use more appropriate to the building’s history will be determined through a state-wide consultation process.

RECREATIONAL

» From 1902 ferries carried tourists to Rottnest Island on Sundays.

» The first public jetty was built in 1906 to the south of Thomson Bay Settlement, where the Army Groyne stands today.

» In 1907 Rottnest Island became a recreation and holiday destination.

» Recreational and holiday pursuits have continued on Rottnest Island from this time to the present day except for its closure in 1914 and again from 1940 to 1945 for military functions.

» The island has been a surfing hot spot since the 1950s.
COLONIAL SETTLEMENT

» 1829 - The first Europeans took up residence on Rottnest Island shortly after the first settlement of the Swan River Colony was established.

» 1830s - Rottnest Island was used as pastoral land and was considered to be a place with potential for salt harvesting, farming and fishing.

» 1859 – 1864 - Hotel Rotnest was originally constructed as the Governor’s Summer Residence and remained such until 1913.

» 1919 - The Governor’s Summer Residence became the Government House Flats.

» 1953 Government House Flats received its first license to operate as a hotel.

» 1881 – 1901 - Rottnest Island Boys’ Reformatory was opened to reform young boys who had come into conflict with the law.

» 1909 – the reformatory was re-purposed for holiday accommodation and is still used as such today.

MARITIME

» The earliest discovery of Rottnest Island by Europeans is credited to Dutch navigators during the 17th century.

» More than thirteen ships have been wrecked within the waters of Rottnest Island.

» The Rotnest Island Pilot Station operated between 1848 and 1903. Pilots were experienced sailors whose job was to guide ships around dangerous reefs.

» Lighthouses played a key role in the pilot boat operations by providing a communication link between the pilot boat station and incoming ships.

» The last pilot left Rotnest Island in 1903, ending more than 55 years of piloting, and a new signal station system established.

» There is a Pilot Service exhibition in the 1859 Pilot Boathouse (Thomson Bay) that includes a replica whaleboat.

» Two lighthouses remain on the Island – at Bathurst Point and Wadjemup Hill. The Wadjemup Lighthouse is open to the public and tours are conducted daily.

MILITARY

» Rottnest Island has played a military role in both World War 1 and World War 2 and has also had post-war training functions.

» During World War 1, Rottnest Island was an internment camp for more than 1,100 German and Austrian Slav internees.

» In the 1930s Rottnest was identified as being critical to the defense of Fremantle and guns, barracks, railway and other army institutional buildings were built on the Island. The guns were manned 24 hours a day.

» In June 1940 the Island was declared a prohibited area and all recreational activity ended. The declaration was intended to last for three months, but continued for five years until June 1945.

» By April 1945 all Thomson Bay buildings had been vacated by the military with the exception of the bakehouse and garage. Approximately 200 Italian internees were sent to the Island for four months to carry out repairs and renovations.

» Dismantling of the battery was finalised in March 1953. An artillery maintenance detachment remained on the Island until 1960.

» Kingstown Barracks was first managed by the Rottnest Island Authority in 1984 and became an Environmental Education Centre since hosting hundreds of school children and groups in Barrack-style accommodation.