

Reformatory School for Boys – Hulk *Proserpine*

15 March 1871 – 16 February 1881

Details

The Reformatory School for Boys, run by the government, was established at Lytton in 1871, on the former prison hulk *Proserpine*. The hulk was declared a Reformatory School for Boys under the *Industrial and Reformatory Schools Act 1865*. Boys under the age of 18 years were sentenced to a term of confinement at the reformatory by Children's Courts. In 1881 the boys were transferred to the new Reformatory School for Boys, Lytton.

The Queensland Water Police describe the transformation of the 'Proserpine' from prison to reformatory.

On the arrival of the "PROSERPINE" at Fisherman Island on the 11th May 1864 an inspection was carried out to assess the quality of work undertaken to convert her from a cattle ship to a prison. The work was found to be most favourable and a credit to those responsible and was reported in The Brisbane Courier (Qld.:1864-1933) the following day. The only concern to be reported by The Brisbane Courier was, "...that the prisoners will be made too comfortable, and will enjoy a life of idleness incompatible with their usual habits."

With a influx of prisoners from throughout the colony the overcrowding of the prison system continued to put strains on the Brisbane gaol, and the "PROSERPINE". In November of 1865 prisoners from "PROSERPINE" were put to work to clear the vegetation from St. Helena Island, Moreton Bay, in preparation for the establishment of a quarantine station however as the overcrowding of prison system became unacceptable the Government scrapped the idea of moving the quarantine station and St Helena Island became Queensland's maximum security prison.

The "PROSERPINE" remained anchored at the mouth of the Brisbane river as a prison hulk until the last 49 of her prisoners were moved to St. Helena Island on the 20th May 1867. With St. Helena Island now providing relief to the over crowded prison system it was intended to use the "PROSERPINE" as a reformatory to house approximately 100 juvenile offenders however it was not until 1871 when she was declared to be a 'Reformatory School for Boys' under the Industrial and Reformatory Schools Act 1865.

Boys under the age of 18 years were sentenced to a term of confinement at the reformatory by the Children's Court at Brisbane, for the purpose of segregating neglected and convicted juveniles from the poor influence of adult prisoners, so as to better promote their reformation and rehabilitation.

At the time the "PROSERPINE" was under the supervision of a Superintendent (the first of which was appointed on 15 March 1871) and a Visiting Justice. The former was responsible for admissions, discharges, internal discipline and the general administration of the reformatory. The Visiting Justice, who visited the "PROSERPINE" at least once a week, was responsible for ensuring institutional regulations were adhered to; inspections of the boys to ensure they were properly cared for; the investigation of

complaints; and magisterial inquiries into the deaths of inmates. Both the Visiting Justice and the Superintendent reported directly to the Colonial Secretary.

A medical officer and school teacher also visited the "PROSERPINE" to look after the health and education of the inmates. Teachers were appointed by the Board of General Education until 1875 and then by the Department of Public Instruction.

As part of their education and rehabilitation, the boys were put out to service in various trades, such as farm work. Whilst the reformatory was located on board the "PROSERPINE", however, such employment was confined to domestic and general maintenance chores. It appears that some boys were transferred to orphanages before the expiration of their sentences. Parents of neglected and convicted inmates were required to contribute financially to the maintenance of their sons whilst in the reformatory.

The use of the "PROSERPINE" as a reformatory was advised in the Gazette of 7 February 1872 as follows: –

General Order No. 526 (Gazette 7 February 1872)

'Officers of the Force, more especially those in large towns, are hereby informed that the hulk "Proserpine", having been proclaimed a reformatory is now ready to receive boys of the criminal class'.

The first report of the Superintendent was written in 1879 and appears in the Queensland Votes and Proceedings, Parliamentary Papers for that year. The first appointed Superintendent was James William Wassell and his wife Rebecca was appointed as the Matron, both being appointed on 15 March 1871.

More info

Chronology

- **Reformatory School for Boys - Hulk Proserpine (15 March 1871 – 16 February 1881)**
 - Reformatory School for Boys, Lytton (16 February 1881 - 1 October 1899)
 - Diamantina Reformatory School for Boys (1 October 1899 - 5 May 1900)
 - Westbrook Reformatory for Boys (5 May 1900 - 30 October 1919)
 - Farm Home for Boys, Westbrook (30 October 1919 - 26 May 1966)
 - Westbrook Training Centre (26 May 1966 - 1987)

Related Entries

Run by

- [Colonial Secretary \(10 December 1859 - 6 August 1896\)](#)

Date: 1871 - 1881

Related Legislation

- [Industrial and Reformatory Schools Act 1865, Queensland \(1865 - 1911\)](#)

Resources

- Savige, A., *Rascals and renegades: the 'Proserpine' reformatory for boys, 1871-1881.*, Soldiers of the service: some early Queensland educators and their schools, 1992, 1992
- [The Boys at the Reformatory Hulk](#), Brisbane Courier, 31 March 1873
- [Research Guide to orphanage and children's home records at Queensland State Archives](#), Queensland State Archives website, February 2022

Records

For more information and to access your records, follow the links below:

Records

- [Institution Files, Queensland Government-run Institutions \(c. 1871 - c. 2001\)](#)
 - [Visiting Justice's Minute Book, Reformatory School for Boys - 'Proserpine' Hulk and Reformatory Schools for Boys - Lytton, Diamantina, Westbrook \(16 September 1874 - 28 February 1916\)](#)
 - [Case Files, Reformatory School for Boys - Reformatory School for Boys, Lytton, Diamantina Reformatory School for Boys, Westbrook Reformatory for Boys, and Farm Home for Boys \(1 March 1890 - 20 August 1953\)](#)
 - [Discharge Register, Reformatory School for Boys - Hulk Proserpine, Reformatory School for Boys, Lytton, Diamantina Reformatory School for Boys and Westbrook Reformatory for Boys \(14 March 1872 - 6 September 1906\)](#)
 - [Visiting Medical Officers' Journals - Westbrook \(18 February 1873 - 19 April 1990\)](#)
 - [Visitors' Books - Westbrook \(18 February 1873 - 9 July 1984\)](#)
 - [General Correspondence, Reformatory School for Boys, Lytton, Diamantina Reformatory School for Boys, Westbrook Reformatory for Boys and Farm Home for Boys, Westbrook \(26 June 1885 - 29 November 1941\)](#)
 - [History Papers - Westbrook \(22 February 1892 - 31 December 1992\)](#)
 - [Admission Registers, Reformatory School for Boys - Hulk *Proserpine*, Reformatory School for Boys, Lytton, Diamantina Reformatory School for Boys and Westbrook Reformatory for Boys. \(16 March 1871 - 6 September 1906\)](#)
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