

## YOUR VIRTUAL DISCOVERY VISIT – 46 TO THE HERITAGE STORIES OF ROTTNEST ISLAND



*The Virtual Visit series was initiated during the COVID-19 pandemic when Rottnest Island was closed to the public due to social distancing restrictions and periods of use for quarantine from March to June 2020.*

*Now that the Island is again open to visitors, these Virtual Visits are continuing in 2021 to enable a further enjoyment of stories introduced at the Wadjemup Museum, the Chapman Archives or sites around the Island.*

*Enjoy, reflect and share.*

### BELL ON SIGNAL HILL



*Rottnest bell on Signal Hill, Thomson Bay behind the heliograph station.*

Bells placed in particular locations had specific purposes and some of those have made their way into our culture as icons of the past. Others are more practical and have played a big role in family life for centuries. Until relatively recent times, bells were a common feature on any agricultural enterprise for both practical and cultural reasons. There are two traditional markers during the daily farm routine - the noon day meal and the end of the working day. The challenge was how to let everyone know, across broad acres and multiple out-buildings.

It was a time when pocket watches were expensive and not normally worn during heavy outdoor work. There were no loudspeakers to call in the farm hands or workers. Everyone needed a signal that it was time to gather for a hot meal or that the working day was over. The centrally located bell was a perfect solution. It also had the added advantage, if rapidly rung, of indicating an emergency or fire. If rhythmically rung it could announce a church service or funeral. In some areas, a variety of message signals were developed, or ringing patterns used to distinguish bells from adjacent farms. In folk tradition, it is recorded that each church and possibly several farms had their unique rhymes connected to the sound of the specific bells. An example is tradition is the Pete Seeger and Idris Davies song "**The Bells of Rhymney**".

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vK\\_eVaLeiQ0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vK_eVaLeiQ0)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O2oK6pMv14g>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YgtKDdQ-JTI>

Modern movie culture has conditioned us to associate the practical and portable triangular bell with cowboys and the adventure of the Wild West. Traditionally shaped bells were the more stationary option, often mounted to posts near the door of the farmstead or main farm building. Taking their cue from the famous bells of history, beginning in the 1800's and beyond, these smaller bells were indispensable for the orderly running of country life and farm routine.



A bell on a hill in Thomson Bay establishment filled farm bell purposes for the Prison from 1864 to 1902. It regulated the daily routine of work and meals as well as announcing shipwrecks, fires and other disasters. On Sundays, it announced church services. The bell was installed by Henry Vincent, coincident with the opening of the new Prison. The hill on which the bell was installed, soon came to be known as Bell Hill, but later, after the installation of a large flagpole and heliograph station, acquired its current name, Signal Hill. The bell disappeared at the time of the Prison closure in 1902 and unfortunately, in spite of repeated investigations, has never been reidentified or rediscovered,





During its time as the Prison Bell, the unvarying daily routine was 7am – reveille or wake up, 12 noon lunch and 5 pm evening meal. The story of the bell is provided through a book *Rottneest Its Tragedy and Its Glory* written in 1937-38 by Edward Jack Watson who grew up on the Island as the son of the Reformatory Superintendent, John J Watson.

Don Watson, the grandson of John J, was familiar with both the book and the stories told by his father, Edward. It was while on a trip to the Island in 1999 on an evening visit to Signal Hill, the site of the original bell, that Don conceived of the idea of providing a replacement bell. This initiative was in part prompted by the fact that no one still living had heard the bell and the knowledge of its history was passing from memory.

<http://convictvoyages.org/>

Failure to locate the original bell, led to a two-year search to find, authenticate, and acquire a bell as close as possible to the original. A bell cast in London in 1791 was located in St John's Church in Windemere where it had served the parishioners for 135 years. With technical advice and support from Eayre and Smith, Bell Hangers and Foundry in Derbyshire, Don on behalf of his siblings and the Watson family was eventually able to purchase the bell, ship it to Australia and deliver it to the Rottneest Island Authority in July 2000. Don's son, Peter, an architect, provided drawings and an engineering plan for a modern tower almost identical in form to the original to enable its construction by the Rottneest Island Authority. Thus, through inspiration, perseverance and community minded generosity, a significant part of Rottneest Island history was restored. **[Check the RVGA Chapman Archives for the detailed story].**

The re-instated bell was ready by December 2000 and it rang in the New Year on 1 January 2001. For some years following, the bell was rung by an RVGA guide around mid-day as part of the auditory heritage of the Island. The Watson bell was also tolled for the burial of Des Sullivan on 25 November 2007, Des had been Island manager from 1959 to 1984. The task was performed by RVGA Guide, Janice Ferguson, and followed the traditional form a "teller" of three triple chimes denoting a male and then 88 slow singles with a significant pause between each, one for each year of Des's life. Tolling for a woman would commence with a teller of two triple chimes.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kA6CX6giurc>

<https://www.usurnsonline.com/funerals/death-knell/>

For a combination of technical, vandalism and stakeholder issues, the bell is currently silent. It is hoped that further consideration of options to address issues will eventually see reinstatement of the bell's use as part of the Rottneest heritage experience.





*The Watson bell and bell tower today*

In a tangential segue from bells, town hall clocks were important to communities because other than the landed gentry, very few families were wealthy enough to own a clock. Men's pocket watches were expensive heirlooms. The clock tower was often situated in the north-west corner of the building. This, together with a four-faced alignment with the directions of the compass, helped travellers to orient themselves. Opened in 1870, the Perth Town Hall is the only convict-built capital city Town Hall in Australia.



<http://twomenandalittlefarm.blogspot.com/2011/03/farm-bell-what-is-one-and-why-we-want.html>

<https://victoriancollections.net.au/stories/summon-the-living>

[https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/978-1-137-56135-0\\_10](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/978-1-137-56135-0_10)

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/32524538>



*The bell came from St John, Bowness on Windemere which served the community from 1887 to 1995.*

<https://surveyoflondon.org/map/feature/155/detail/>

[https://www.wikiy.org/en/Tailors Eayre & Smith Ltd-8022880646](https://www.wikiy.org/en/Tailors_Eayre_&_Smith_Ltd-8022880646)