

## THE HISTORY OF THE GAOL

### The breakwater

Trial Bay had been recognised as a safe shipping refuge from southerlies ever since its naming after the wreck of the Brig "Trial" in 1817. In the 19th century, coastal shipping was the main means of transport. Between 1863 and 1866 some 90 ships and 243 lives were lost, forcing the NSW Colonial government to act. In 1870 Parliament voted 10 000 pounds towards the construction of a breakwater to form a "harbour of safe refuge" at Trial Bay.

### The gaol

The Trial Bay Gaol was established in 1876 as an experimental Public Works Gaol where the inmates would construct the breakwater. Although work started in 1877, it was not completed until 1886 due to difficulties in working the hard stone, inconsistent funding and contractual problems.

When the second (southern) wing of the gaol was completed in 1900, electric lights, a new kitchen, scullery, bakehouse, toilets, wash house and weather shed were installed in the complex, strongly indicating NSW government support for the Public Works Gaol experiment. Yet only three years later work was abandoned and the gaol was closed in July 1903. Severe storms and increasing costs had seen only some 300 metres of the planned



Above: The Breakwater, c. 1949, NPWS Collection



Left: Trial Bay Gaol, 1900, NPWS Collection



Above: The first group of Trial Bay internees left Sydney on the steamship SS Yulgilbar in August 1915. Photograph, Paul Dubotzki Collection

## ALIENS AT HOME: THE WORLD WAR I INTERNEES AT TRIAL BAY



Above: Jewellery box, c. 1916, NPWS Collection

### Internment

The outbreak of fighting in Europe in August 1914 immediately brought Australia into the 'Great War'. Within one week of the declaration of war, all German subjects in Australia were declared 'enemy aliens' and were required to report to the Government and notify their address. In February 1915 the meaning of 'enemy aliens' changed. It came to include naturalised migrants as well as Australian-born persons whose fathers or grandfathers had been born in Germany or Austria. Since it was impossible to intern all 'enemy aliens' resident in Australia, the Government pursued a policy of selective internment. They targeted the leaders of the German Australian community — including honorary consuls and pastors of the Lutheran Church,

### Life at Trial Bay

Life at Trial Bay was strictly regulated. Reveille or wake-up was at 6.30 am, sick parade 7.45 am, breakfast 8 am, roll call 9 am, inspection of barracks 10 am, dinner (lunch) 1 pm, roll call 5 pm, tea (dinner) 5.30 pm and lights out 10 pm.

Until September 1917, the internees were supplied with the same rations given to Australian soldiers. From September onwards these were reduced to 'Imperial Rations', based on the rations supplied to prisoners of war in Britain. The official rations were basic but adequate. However, the internees could supplement their diet with vegetables from their own garden, fish caught at the beach and items sold at the canteen. The camp even had a gourmet restaurant, 'The Duck Coop', run by an entrepreneurial restaurateur. It offered fine food to internees who could afford it.

The activities of the internees transformed Trial Bay into a thriving place for sport and culture. Leisure and competitive sporting activities were organised by a number of private clubs. The Turnverein athletics club had the largest membership. The boxing, bowling and chess clubs also drew large crowds. Two choral societies performed German folksongs.

While the freedom allowed to internees created a holiday spirit, there was another side to the camp's daily life: the experience of forced



Left: An internee made this model of a Fokker 'Eindecker' (c. 1916), revealing the patriotic sentiment of internees to the war's progress. NPWS Collection photograph by Stephen Thompson



Left: Military Censors at work at Trial Bay, c. 1918, photograph Paul Dubotzki Collection



Left: internees swimming, with Arakoon village in the background, c. 1915, photograph Paul Dubotzki Collection



Left: The internees at Trial Bay were under the continuous military guard, c. 1916, photograph Paul Dubotzki Collection



Left: Roll call, c. 1916, photograph Paul Dubotzki Collection



Left: Men who were leaders in business and the professions now fronted up for supervised voluntary work of hard manual labour clearing bush or road works. Pictured: internees cutting wood, c. 1915-16, photograph Paul Dubotzki Collection



Left: Many of the internees made models and toys for their children. Pictured: children's toys made by internees c. 1916, NPWS Collection, photograph by Stephen Thompson

1500 metre break wall completed. External buildings were auctioned in 1904, and after 17 years of use, the abandoned gaol remained as testimony to an experiment with humane prison reform.

With the onset of World War I, the old gaol was given a new lease of life as a German internment camp (1915-1918). After the war, a caretaker was installed and, with no foreseeable future, the gaol was stripped of all movable buildings and materials in 1922, leaving the heritage listed ruin that you see today.

Left: *The Gentle Art of Photography*, c. 1900s, NPWS Collection

businessmen and the destitute. Some internees had been accused of being disloyal by neighbours or had come to the attention of the police by accident. In NSW the principal place of internment was the Holsworthy Military Camp where between 5000 and 6000 men were detained. Women and children of German and Austrian descent, detained by the British in Asia, were interned at Bourke and later Molonglo near Canberra. Former gaols were also used. Men were interned at Berrima Gaol (constructed in the 1840s) and Trial Bay Gaol (constructed 1886).

### Trial Bay Internment Camp

Trial Bay Gaol was not well prepared for the first internees who were accommodated in tents. Early photos show a number of white tents inside and outside of the gaol walls. Most of the internees were finally accommodated in the cells of the two wings. The interned consuls and officers were accommodated in wooden barracks that were located between the walls and the main building. Towards the end of 1916, they were moved to wooden barracks on the outside, to the left of the gaol, overlooking Trial Bay. The Australian Government did not provide all the blankets and bedding required until many weeks after the internees arrived.

confinement and boredom. The shock of life in gaol cells created a new identity for men who had been removed from their families and communities. Most of the internees experienced feelings of isolation, and suffered because of the monotony and lack of privacy.

*Causes for friction are popping up everywhere and you have to pull yourself together all the time in order to avoid confrontations. Things get easily out of dimension and people become irritable and touchy due to the long imprisonment. You just can't avoid it. Some days the mood is following the course of the war, one day there's high tension and then again one is doomed to wait and wait.*

- W. Daehne, diary entry, Sunday 21 April 1918, ML MSS 261/3 Item 18

Relations between internees and camp guards were formal and tense as, unlike the men at Berrima — who lived in the naval regimentation of officer and sailors — the Trial Bay internees were more inclined to protest. This generated ongoing conflict.

In January 1916, internees went on strike after one described by the guards as an 'unceasing trouble maker' was sent to Holsworthy for a minor incident.

The most difficult problem of camp life for internees was sexual frustration, engendered by being confined in an all male environment for years on end. The enforced celibacy led to a number of psychological problems. Many internees experienced the symptoms of depression and anxiety disorders. Dr Max Hertz, one of the prominent internees at Trial Bay, who was also camp doctor and an internationally renowned orthopaedic surgeon from Sydney, reported on 'self abuse' and the 'ugly side' of the sexual question.

Above: Soldiers and internees' buttons, c. 1916 - 1918, NPWS Collection





## THE KOMMISSIONEN

By their own efforts and persistent negotiations with camp administrators, internees contributed to improved camp conditions. According to the convention for dealing with prisoners of war, the Australian Military provided for an elected committee to deal with the camp's general welfare.

Several subcommittees, or *Kommissionen*, were established to oversee education, library, theatre, music, kitchen, bakery, post and, most importantly, the canteen.

The camp *Kommissionen* ran adult and continuing education programs on science, arts and literature, finance and management. Language courses, held in a separate building called the Berlitz School, included European languages, Chinese and Malay.

The camp's newspaper, *Welt am Montag* (World on Monday), played an important role at Trial Bay. It was the only known publication of its kind in Australia, at the time, which was free from censorship, highlighting the extraordinary status and special privileges of the camp. Circulation was by subscription and restricted to the camp.

### Theatre company and orchestra

The theatre in Trial Bay opened on 17 August 1916 in a timber barn that seated 280 people. Performances were held on Saturday and Sunday nights. A new play premiered every weekend. The theatre performed 56 plays in 1917. The plays provided a diversion to the daily grind.

Above: *Welt am Montag*, c. 1916, NPWS Collection photograph by Stephen Thompson



Above: The company had 60 historical costumes and a considerable amount of modern clothing for men and women, all of which the internees made. Men played all women's roles.



Left: Kurt Wiese, taken prisoner by the Americans in 1917, did the programs and backdrops. He went on to work on movies such as *Bambi*.

Pictured: Trial Bay, July 1917 by Kurt Wiese, NPWS Collection



Above: Constructing the stone cairn, c. 1918, photograph, Paul Dubotzki Collection



## TRIAL BAY GAOL SITE MAP

### How to get there

The Gaol is within Arakoon State Conservation Area, which is located 4 kilometres east of South West Rocks. South West Rocks can be accessed via the Pacific Highway. It is 39 kilometres north east of Kempsey on the New South Wales mid north coast. For further research and information contact

Trial Bay Gaol  
Arakoon State Conservation Area  
PO Box 25  
South West Rocks, NSW, 2431  
Phone (02) 6566 6168

Open from 9 am to 4.30 pm every day except Christmas Day

The camp's orchestra also performed there and played an important part in the camp's social environment. A particularly significant performance was Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in C-Minor. It was seen as a metaphor of the Great War, of Germany's fate and a hopeful outcome.

### The Trial Bay Internment Camp closure

The Internment Camp was closed in July 1918. Anticipating the end of the war, internees were moved to Holsworthy to prepare for their deportation to Germany. During 1919, 6150 internees were deported from Sydney on various ships.

Another reason for closing the camp was the persistent rumour that the exposed coastal location made it possible for internees to contact passing German vessels. In 1917 it was reported that internees made radio contact with the German raider *SMS Wolf* while it was in the vicinity. The Royal Australian Naval Intelligence Service warned that an attempt to rescue the prisoners was considered likely and recommended that the camp be closed. This was merely wartime melodrama.

### The monument

Before their departure, the internees had built a monument on the hill above Laggars Point, in memory of five comrades who had died while detained. The bodies of three internees were buried at the cairn site: Conrad Peter (1877–1917), Herman I.W. Adam (1879–1915) and Arno Friedrich (1888–1917). It was during the construction of this cairn that the communication with the *SMS Wolf* was said to have occurred. The cairn was destroyed in July 1919, probably by anti-German vandals. In 1959 the monument was rebuilt as a gesture of post-World War II goodwill, with funds provided by the West German Government and assistance from the Macleay Shire Council and Rotary Club of Kempsey.

The Migration Heritage Centre at the Powerhouse Museum is a NSW Government initiative supported by the Community Relations Commission.

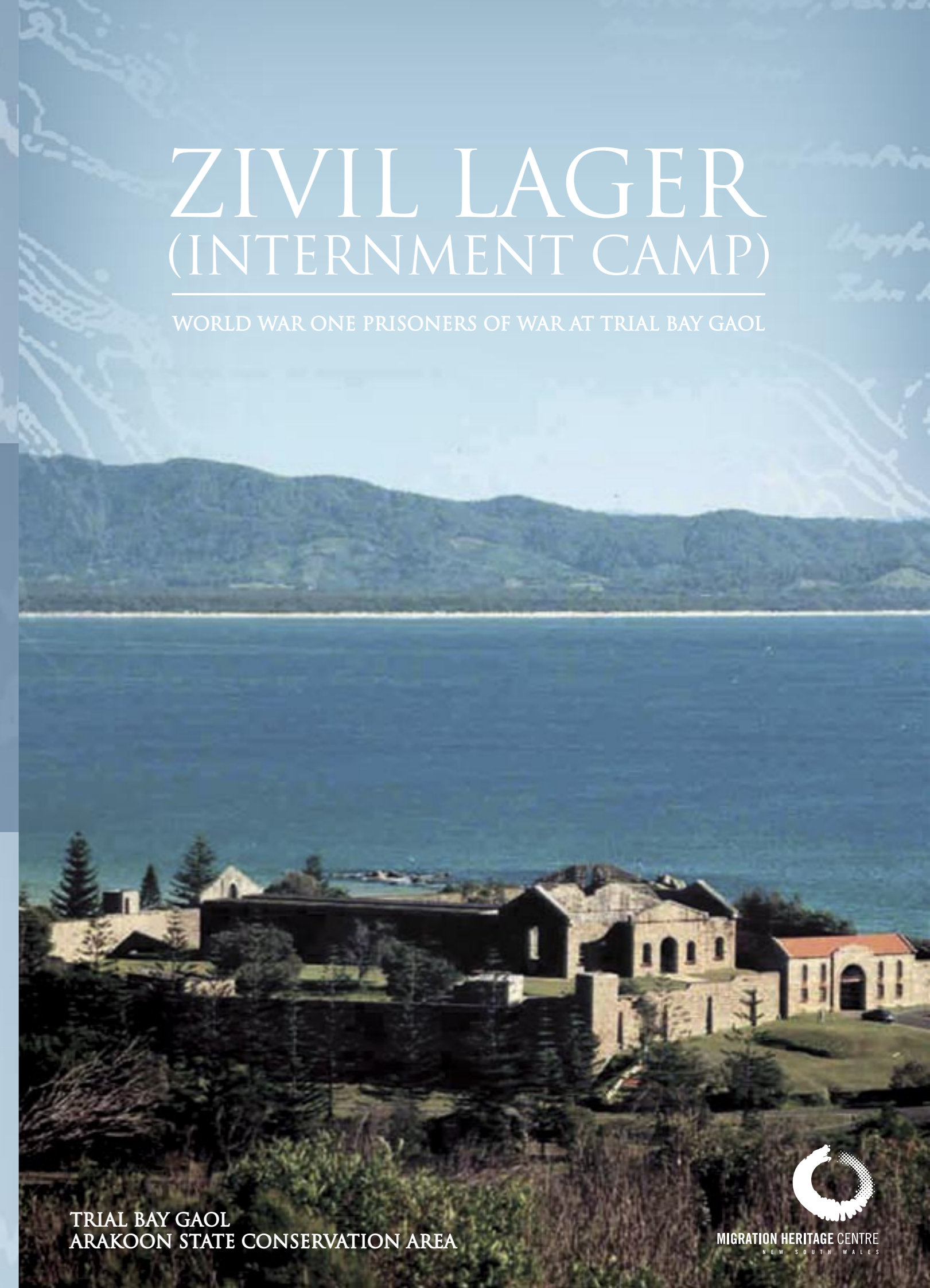
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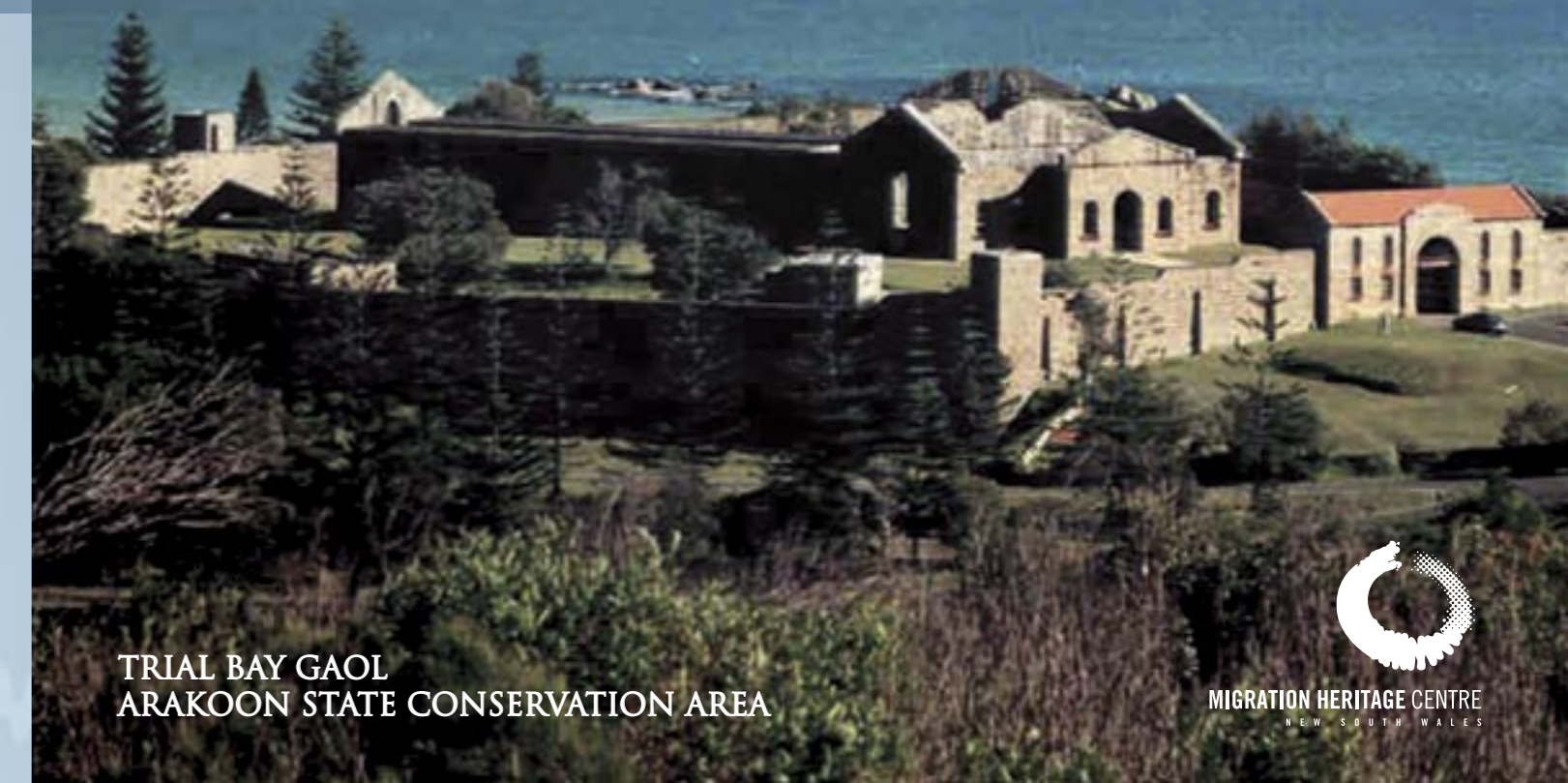
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# ZIVIL LAGER (INTERNMENT CAMP)

WORLD WAR ONE PRISONERS OF WAR AT TRIAL BAY GAOL



TRIAL BAY GAOL  
ARAKOON STATE CONSERVATION AREA



MIGRATION HERITAGE CENTRE  
NEW SOUTH WALES