



# Cockatoo Island Senior History Site Study



Cockatoo  
Island



Australian Government  
Sydney Harbour Federation Trust

Welcome to Cockatoo Island. We're pleased to have you here to complete your site study!

A site study is an inquiry based examination of an historically or culturally significant location. Cockatoo Island is the perfect site for this investigation. The island has a fascinating history which reveals insights into the major social, political and technological progress of Australian society. It has been settled since 1839 and has been used as a convict penal settlement, a reformatory and industrial school, a prison and one of the most important maritime and industrial sites in Australia. Additionally, the Cockatoo Island Dockyard became a major contributor to the war effort. In 2000 the island was the subject of an indigenous land rights claim and in 2010 it was listed as a World Heritage Site.

This site study will:

- Deepen your knowledge and understanding of significant developments in Australia's social, political and cultural history.
- The skills to undertake the process of historical inquiry.
- The skills to communicate your understanding of history.

One of the most important things about studying history is using sources to uncover the facts of history. There are two main types of sources

**Primary Sources:** evidence from the time of an event, they are often one-off and are used as first-hand accounts to help us understand history. Primary sources can include diaries, letters, photographs, maps, video and film, sound recordings, interviews, newspapers and magazines.

**Secondary Sources:** published after an event and often interpret primary sources. They may give additional opinions and they can be biased. Secondary sources include textbooks, biographies, documentaries and articles

These can help you interpret history, along with the study of physical evidence

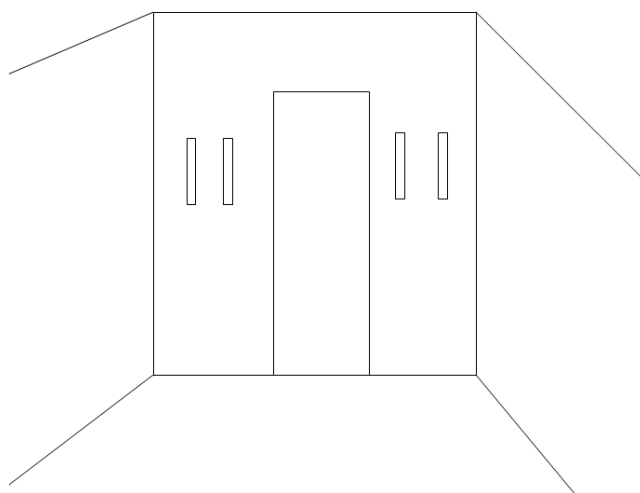
**Physical Evidence** can include sites, buildings and artefacts of the era may remain from the past. Although it may not reveal the whole story, physical evidence can help us to understand the past.

This excursion will base your study around particular locations to reveal layers of history. Throughout this excursion you will encounter all of these types of evidence to help uncover clues about the past to reveal facts about Cockatoo Island and Australia's economic, political, social and cultural history.

## The Guardhouse and Convict Barracks

The Guardhouse is one of the most important structures on Cockatoo Island; it is part of the convict precinct.

Look at the structure and mark in any clues you can see from the **physical evidence** on the diagram below. How has the form of the architecture met with the function of the room? Which physical clues help illuminate this?



### 3.3.3.1 The Military Barracks and Guard House (Building 1)

*During 1841, the Guardhouse and a barrack for 56 rank and file soldiers was constructed. In its original configuration, the building was constructed of sandstone ashlar work, with a timber shingle roof. The front portion of the building facing east was used as the Guardhouse and the Western Section used as a Barracks. The building is currently in ruins, however it had remained in continued usage until at least World War II*

Cockatoo Island Conservation Management Plan (CMP) for the Convict Buildings & Remains  
Volume 1  
Sydney Harbour Federation Trust, 2009

Using documents such as the CMP help us to understand further information not available just by studying the physical evidence.

List three things about the guardhouse not obvious from the remaining physical evidence

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What kind of source is the CMP?

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## Comparing Buildings and Usage

As you're walking throughout the site, note the difference in the buildings. There are many clues which can reveal different layers of history.

Take note of the difference in these three buildings.

	Building 5 Convict Barracks	Building 6 The Mould Loft	Building 10 The Drawing Office
What kind of material is it constructed of?			
When was it built?			
For what purpose was it constructed?			
What condition is it in now?			
What is it used for now?			

## Layers of history



This is one of the spots on the Island where you can see evidence of the different eras and histories of Cockatoo Island. Looking at the evidence, reading the interpretive signage and listening to your guide, write down the evidence that exists from different time periods on the island.

Evidence	Time Period

Consider how interpretive signage at historical sites informs your views and understanding of history.

## The Wars

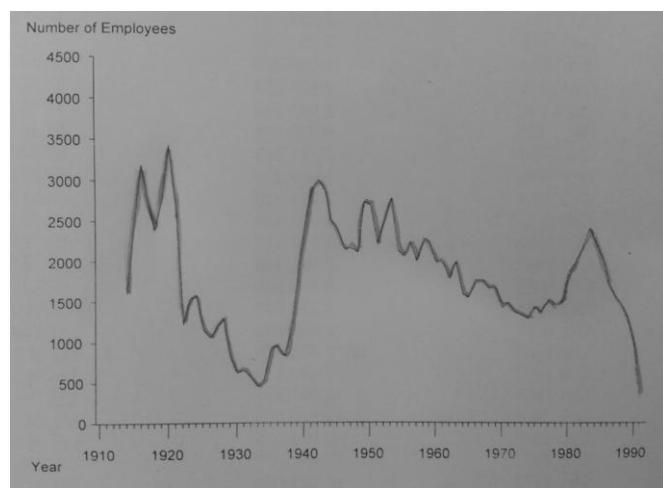
Cockatoo Island played an important role in both the First and Second World Wars. As well as building ships for the Royal Australian Navy it converted ships to troop and horse transports and hospital ships and repaired ships that had been damaged in battle.

Reginald Wald was an electrical fitter who began working on Cockatoo Island in 1942. This quote is from an oral history interview conducted in 2006

*A lot of American ships came in, and the worst ship I ever saw being brought in was the New Orleans, it was an American cruiser, and it lost about 130 feet off its bow. They brought it down from the Coral Sea backwards. They couldn't bring it forward because it would have sunk. They put it into the big dock and pumped it out, and they had a row of coffins on the dockside, and they started from the top. The American Naval personnel started from the top and they hosed out all the compartments, and they were getting parts of bodies that would represent a body and putting them in lead lined coffins on the top of the deck.*



**The USS New Orleans, without its bow**



This graph shows the how the population of workers on Cockatoo Island changed over time. What national and international events do you think affected the number of people employed in the dockyard?

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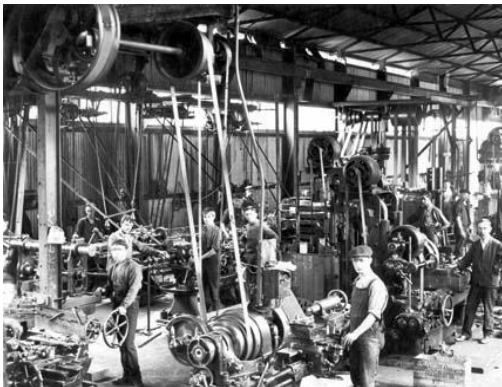
## The Turbine Hall and Machine Workshops

Cockatoo Island was one of the largest industrial sites in Australia. The unions were hugely active in advocating for workers' rights and many of the occupational safety laws that are standard today came out of Cockatoo Island and similar industrial enterprises. For a long time there was no safety gear provided, workers had to do their best to avoid injury. These stories are not visible just by visiting the site as it is today. Look at the following sources to assess how safety conditions have changed over time.

Neville Chidgey was a cadet naval architect between 1942 and 1943, this quote is collected from an oral history interview conducted in 2006

*No Protective Gear at all. No safety equipment other than what you provided for yourself, and no safety guards on the equipment – the band saws and all that sort of thing. You were taught to keep your fingers out of them, and you did, because there were a lot of people around you with a shortage of fingers. Some of the comedians who were getting short of fingers would say, 'I've still got three left' (laughs)*

Look at the following photos. What activities in these photos would be deemed unsafe in today's workplace?



The Machine workshop 1914



Painters and dockers cleaning a ship c. 1930



Working on a ship 1940



Welders working on a ship c. 1980

Looking at these photos describe how safety and working conditions changed over time.

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Are these primary or secondary sources? Why?

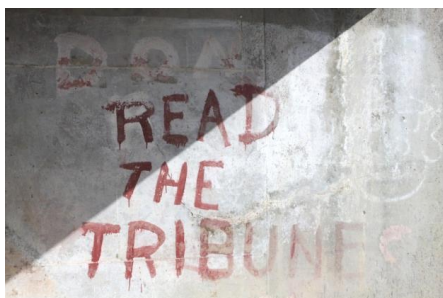
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## Unionism

Cockatoo Island workers were represented by over 21 unions, among the most influential were the Painters and Dockers Union and the Federated Ironworkers Union. The unions advocated for workers' safety and also took strong political positions.

What is a union? \_\_\_\_\_



Graffiti outside the Dog Leg Tunnel,  
Cockatoo Island

There were tensions among the different unions who tried to gain control of the Island's workers and management. The unions used pamphlets and leaflets to communicate with the workers, such as *The Codock News* and *The Tribune*.

Can you find any other graffiti that shows traces of the union movement on the Island?

In 1989 the Australian Government announced that it would not offer another ship building contract to the Cockatoo Island dockyards and that the Island would be for sale. This had a massive impact on the workforce who realised that this threatened their jobs. The workers went on strike and the Island shut down for 14 weeks. The Island was shut down for industrial use in 1991.

*They're closing our work down  
Hoping we won't make a sound  
Convicts bought here  
They built a dock  
The evidence is there today  
Of all this toil and pain  
That's why we will remain  
On Cockatoo  
We're working here on Cockatoo—  
We're staying here on Cockatoo—  
We're here to stay on Cockatoo—*

'Cockatoo, No Surrender'

Written and Performed by Peter Hicks



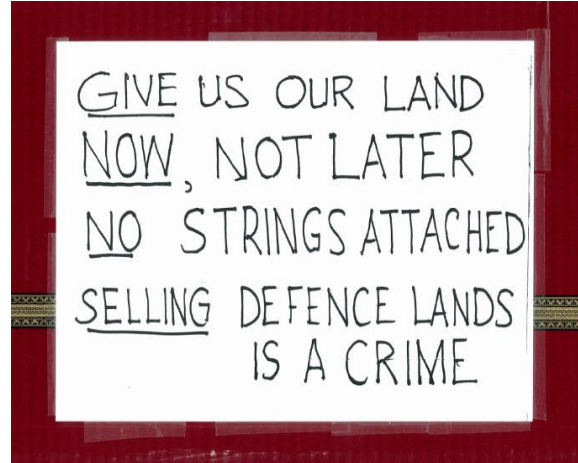
Workers striking on Cockatoo Island 1989

What kind of sources are the graffiti, song and photo on this page? Why are they important in revealing different aspects of historical stories? \_\_\_\_\_



## Community Action and Remediation

When the industrial action on Cockatoo Island ceased the government planned to sell the land to a corporate developers. However, in 1995 concerned community members started the group *Friends of Cockatoo Island*. They fought to keep the defence sites that the government was trying to sell open for public use. Their community action was successful and the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust was formed. The Trust remediated the site and opened the Island for public access. Now Cockatoo Island is listed as a National, Commonwealth and World Heritage Site.



Friends of Cockatoo Island protest sign, c. 1995



Cockatoo Island Industrial Waste, Northern Apron c. 1992



Northern Apron as it is today, a remediated campground for public use

Why is it important to preserve historic sites for public use? Outline your strategy for protecting Cockatoo Island for public and community heritage.

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## Extension Activity

### Classroom debate

Get together with your classmates and have a debate about history and conservation. Cockatoo Island is on the National, Commonwealth and World heritage lists. Do these ratings help preserve important history or prevent progress?

**Topic: *It is important to save heritage sites and the government are the best custodians for these sites.***

Split the class in half. One half must argue in the affirmative, agreeing with the topic and the other half in the negative disagreeing with the topic.

You can either hold the debate informally as a classroom discussion, or as a formal debate

The format for a formal debate is as follows

<b>Chairperson-</b> Introduces the topic and each of the speakers	<b>1. First Affirmative Speaker -</b> Presents the outline of the topic and presents a major argument supported with evidence	<b>3. Second Affirmative Speaker -</b> Rebuts the first negative speaker's argument. Presents one to two arguments supported with evidence	<b>5. Third Affirmative Speaker-</b> Rebuts the second negative speaker. Summarises and closes the affirmative argument
	<b>2. First Negative Speaker-</b> Defines the outline of their team's argument. Rebuts the the affirmative team's introduction. Presents the a major argument supported with evidence	<b>4. Second Negative Speaker-</b> Rebuts the second affirmative speaker's argument. Presents one to two arguments supported with evidence	<b>6. Third Negative Speaker -</b> Rebuts the third affirmative speaker. Summarises and closes the negative argument

Use your excursion to Cockatoo Island and further research to inform your debate. Have the class discuss the outcome of the debate afterwards and agree on a winner.