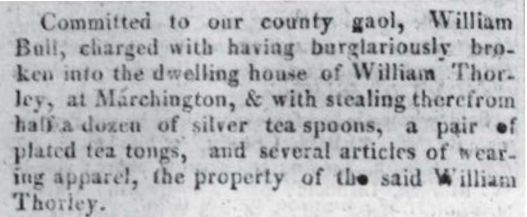

William Bull, convict and colonial builder in Van Diemen's Land

MALCOLM WARD AND MAUREEN MARTIN FERRIS

THE EAST COAST of Tasmania is home to an impressive variety of colonial buildings, ranging from grand mansions to cottages and outbuildings. Some of the grandest and most elegant homesteads, such as Cambria, Riversdale and Spring Vale, are located north of Swansea on the former estates of the Meredith family. Unexpectedly perhaps, these buildings, plus others in the district, have a link to the crumbling remnants of convict incarceration on Sarah Island, Macquarie Harbour. That link is William Bull, a convict, who after earning two life sentences emerged as a skilled colonial builder and whose legacy has outlasted that of many of the more virtuous citizens of Van Diemen's Land.

William Bull was born in 1781 in Leigh, a Staffordshire farming village deep in the heartland of England. He was the third child of Robert and Elizabeth Bull.¹ Robert was probably an agricultural labourer, the most common career for men in the country, and it is unlikely that William obtained any schooling. Possibly he had some work experience as a bricklayer or builder, but nothing definite is known about him until 13 January 1808 when, at an age stated to be 23, he was charged at the Staffordshire Assizes for breaking into the house of William Thorley at Marchington, a village a few miles from Leigh, and stealing some silverware and clothes.² This suggests that he was part of England's poor underclass, who looked on thieving as just another way, besides working, to get through a harsh life.



Committed to our county gaol, William Bull, charged with having burglariously broken into the dwelling house of William Thorley, at Marchington, & with stealing therefrom half a dozen of silver tea spoons, a pair of plated tea tongs, and several articles of wearing apparel, the property of the said William Thorley.

Staffordshire Advertiser, 16 January 1808

Stafford Affairs, continued from our last paper.
—Eight prisoners received sentence of death; one of whom (William Hawkefwood, for the wilful murder of Mr. Parker, of Womborne, by administering to him corrosive sublimate in a cup of camomile tea,) was executed on Wednesday. Two others are left for execution on Saturday next, viz. Samuel Calkin, for house-breaking, and John Ridge, for sheep-stealing. The prisoners who were condemned and afterwards reprieved, were John Cooper, for forgery; James Hinfell and Mark Jones, for sheep-stealing; John Nevill, for horse-stealing; and William Bull, for house-breaking. Two prisoners were sentenced to be transported for fourteen years, and three for seven years. Eight other were sentenced to punishments proportionate to the magnitude of their crimes. Only one prisoner was acquitted, and four were discharged by proclamation.

Derby Mercury, 14 April 1808

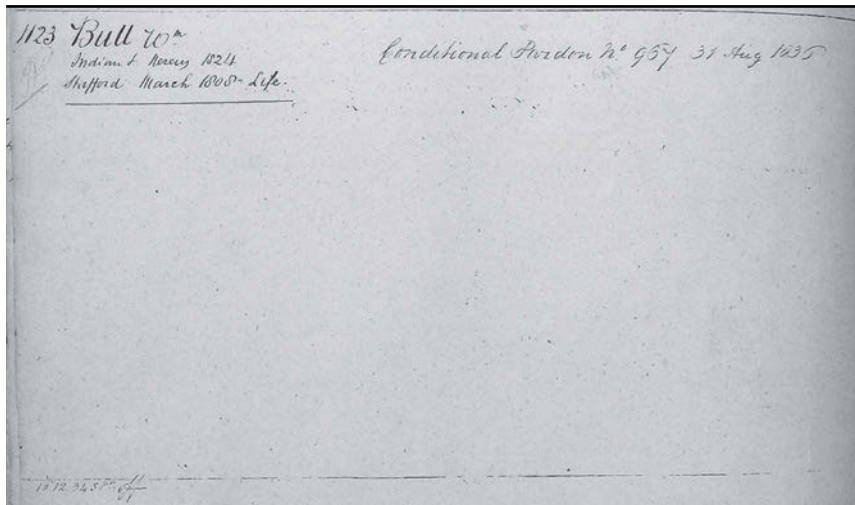
He was tried in April, found guilty and sentenced to death, but was reprieved and sentenced to transportation for life. Three of the eight people who received the death penalty that day were not so lucky, and were executed.³ In gaol Bull was classified as ‘disorderly’ and attempted to escape, but was recaptured and

sent aboard the hulk *Captivity* at Portsmouth, with his age recorded as 22.⁴

Bull was transported on the *Indian*, which sailed on 18 July 1810 and arrived in Sydney on 16 December 1810.⁵ The following year he escaped from custody. The public were warned not to harbour this man, aged about 28, with a pale, thin face, fair hair, and ‘a slight halt in his walk from the loss of his toes, which occasions his shoes to turn up’.⁶ A life sentence was generally seen as lasting about twelve to fourteen years. What became of Bull in the next twelve years is not known, but in March 1822, nearing the end of his sentence, he was convicted in the Sydney Criminal Court of discharging a musket at peace-officers to prevent apprehension.⁷ Described as a bricklayer, he was again sentenced to ‘life’ and sent to Port Macquarie.⁸ After yet another escape attempt, Bull was recaptured and sent to Macquarie Harbour in Van Diemen’s Land on the *Ann* and was there given the police number 1123.⁹

Charles Meredith in his later life wrote some notes on ‘Old Bull’, as he did with many of his father’s contemporaries (not always flatteringly!). He recorded that Bull had escaped twice from Moreton Bay, obviously confusing it with Port Macquarie. Charles recorded that Bull had suffered great privations during his time in the bush, and that all his ‘companions’ had been killed by Aboriginal people. He wrote that Bull ‘was a very spare man, his weight did not exceed nine stone’ (57 kilograms) and that he ‘built the house at Cambria, Riversdale, Spring Vale, in fact the greater part of the houses in Swan Port’.¹⁰

In several of his convict records in Van Diemen’s Land, William Bull of the *Indian* and the *Ann* was apparently confused by the clerks with another William Bull who was sentenced in London and transported on the

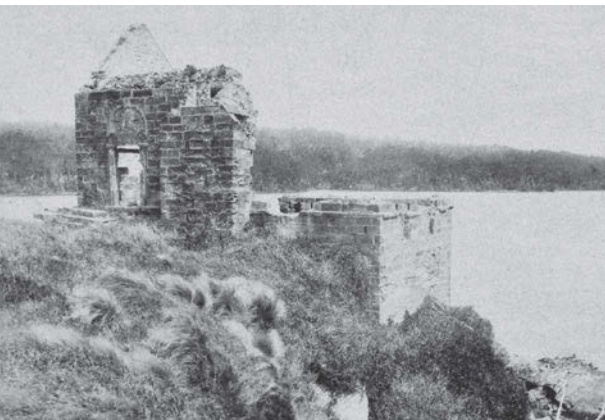


Conduct record of William Bull (CON31/1/1, police no 1123, image 385, Tasmanian Archives)

Grenada in 1818, then on the *Nereus* to Van Diemen's Land. He was given police number 796. This convict had a bad conduct record with servitude recorded until 1839.¹¹ The conduct record of William Bull, Staffordshire bricklayer, police number 1123, shows that he committed no offences during his sentence in Van Diemen's Land and gained a conditional pardon on 31 August 1836. At the bottom of the conduct record is a note, '16 12 34 S P^t off', suggesting that he was present at the magistrate's office at Swan Port that day.¹²

At Sarah Island, the settlement in Macquarie Harbour, this serial offender appears to have found his niche. In April 1828, his services as a bricklayer and mason were described as 'indispensable' in a letter from the commandant, Captain Butler, to the colonial secretary. Butler noted that Bull had built a gaol, lime shed, the 'new penitentiary', kitchens and other structures at Sarah Island.¹³ These structures survive only as ruins, with few images of them in any form of repair. The 'new penitentiary' was built to accommodate 89 prisoners and was 'a stone erection of two stories high, consisting principally of 3 large rooms where the prisoners sleep at night, and where they are locked up'.¹⁴ This is the best-preserved building today. In 2006 the surviving part was described as a

rectangular structure, essentially of local sandstone construction (squared blocks), the walls of up to 2 storeys survive on one side and of up to at least 1 storey on 2 other sides; 12.15m x 6.3m). Recognisable elements are postholes, the main chimney, the front steps and main doorway.



Above: 'Old penitentiary', date unknown
(*Tasmanian Archives, PH30/1/60*)

Right: Interior of the New Penitentiary, date unknown.
(*The Convict Buildings of Macquarie Harbour, Ian Brand, 1976, Tasmanian Archives, NS1345/1/1*)



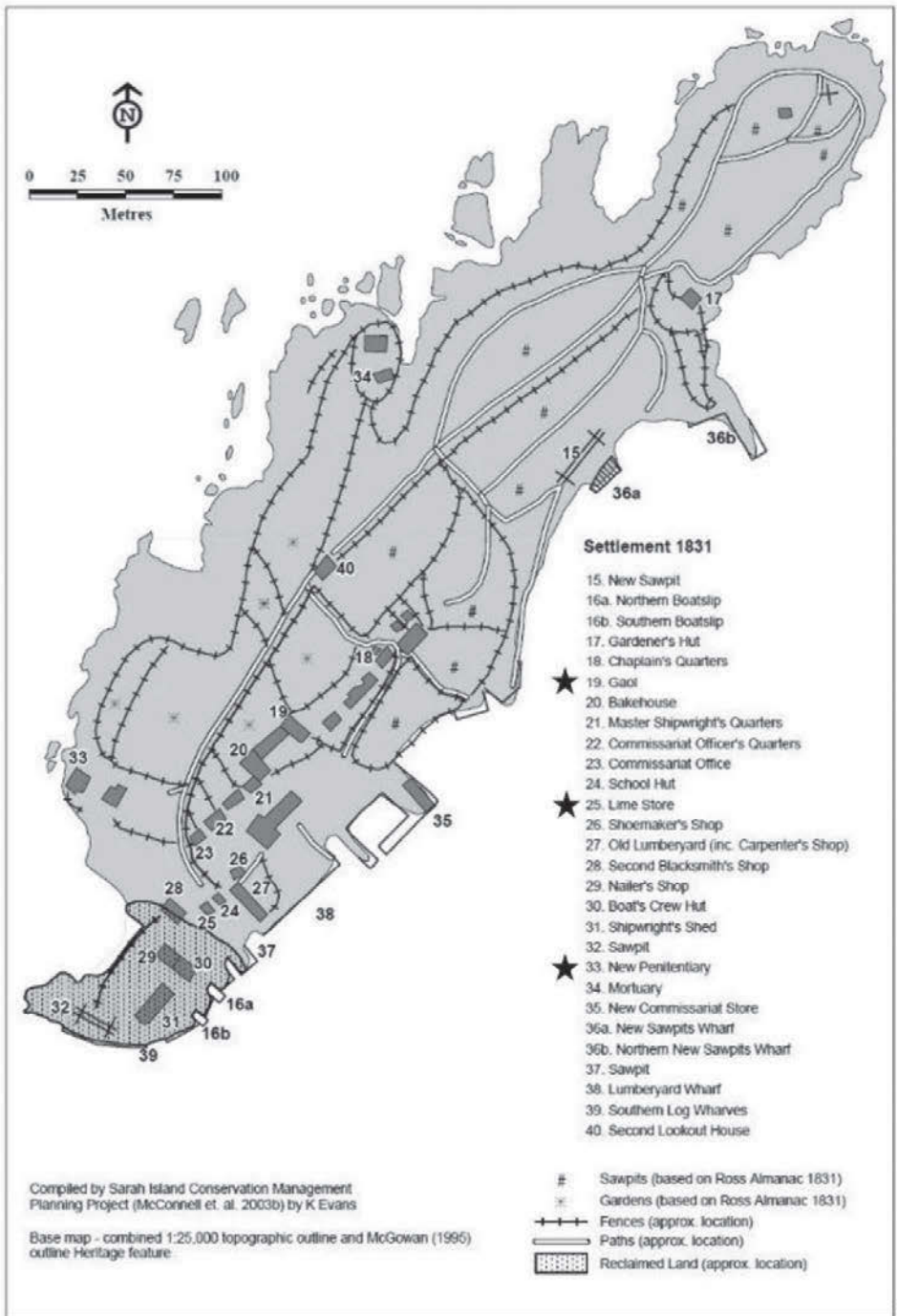
The gaol was described as a standing ruin with three standing walls and footings and substantial rubble infill. Nothing remains of the lime store.¹⁵

The commandant at Macquarie Island was so impressed with Bull's work that in April 1828 he recommended Bull be granted a ticket of leave in nine months' time.¹⁶ On the back of the letter, Lieutenant-Governor Arthur noted that Bull had yet to serve out his original sentence and had a record of bad behaviour. Therefore, he would only agree to a later transfer to Hobart Town, with no promise of a ticket of leave.¹⁷

In 1829 Bull was sent to Hobart for service in the public works, and in 1830 he was 'on loan' to 'Capt McLean'.¹⁸ This is likely to have been Captain Peter MacLaine who arrived in Hobart in May 1829 and settled at Woodstock at Spring Bay, on the east coast.¹⁹ Bull was granted a ticket of leave in September 1830.²⁰

From Spring Bay, Bull appears to have gone further north to Great Swan Port and worked for George Meredith, and there he stayed for at least the next eleven years. The first record of him there was in a letter from Meredith to his wife in June 1831: 'Bull had better commence dressing the stones & let him be told I shall pay him wages according to the work he does'.²¹

Meredith was a settler on the east coast who had emigrated with his family, arriving in March 1821. He spent long periods away from his farm, in Hobart, often embroiled in law suits, campaigns against the government



Sarah Island, 1831, with stars added showing the location of buildings associated with William Bull (Sarah Island visitor services site plan 2006, NPWS, p. 10)

GOVERNMENT NOTICE.

no. 178.

Colonial Secretary's Office,

Sept. 15, 1830.

THE Lieutenant Governor has been pleased to grant the undermentioned Indulgences:—

Tickets of Leave,

To

William Browne, 517, Phoenix, (1)
Henry Murray, 435, do. (2)
Elizabeth, the wife of William
Welton, 26, Morley
James Moxham, 488, Chapman
John Fox, 301, Woodford
William Elliott, 102, Lord Hunterford
Elizabeth Wicks, 53, Brothers
James Gibbons, 275, Richmond
William Buckley, 533, Prince of Orange
William Bull, 1123, Indian
John Holden, 526, Com. Hayes
Mary Gibson, 31, Providence
Henry Brown, 430, Malabar
Stewart Jamieson, 150, do.

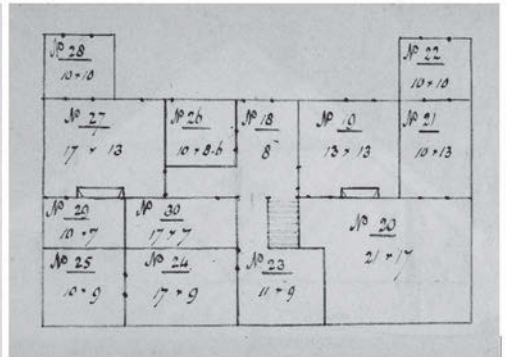
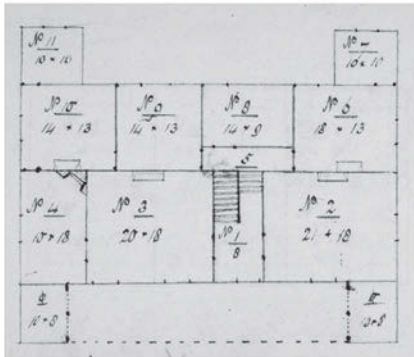
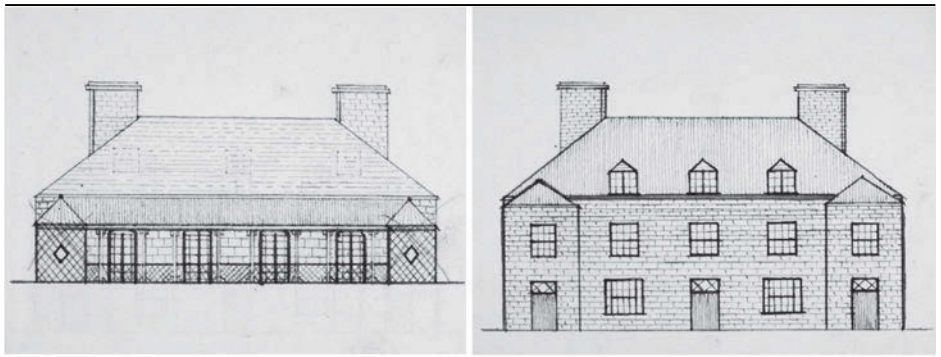
Hobart Town Gazette, 18 September 1830

or other business.²² He had entered the shore-based whaling business in 1824 and was reasonably successful, so by 1831 he was ready to start building his grand house, Cambria. This was a large undertaking and George Meredith was credited as being its 'architect' by his son Edwin.²³ Whether this was meant in the technical sense, or as 'conceiver', is unknown, but the latter can be regarded as more likely, although the only hint of true professional input is a reference to paying an account of Jackson and Addison in 1836.²⁴ Jackson and Addison were builders in Hobart and the Addison brothers, John and Hugh, owned and built Coswell, south of Swansea, about 1830.²⁵

The 1836 account is unlikely to have been for building services, more likely for fittings and/or supplies.

A series of elevations and floor plans of Cambria is preserved at the Tasmanian Archives and the house was built mostly according to those designs, the most noticeable differences being a different placement of the chimneys, and the lack of gazebos on the veranda which appear on the plans.²⁶ It is not known what part Bull played in building Cambria, but it is unlikely he had any part in the design. With experience as a bricklayer and stonemason, he probably worked on building the house, and directing others less skilled, following the plans. However, if the only plans to follow were those currently in the Tasmanian Archives, or like them, then a great deal of skill would have been required by the builder in interpreting them to produce a structurally sound and functioning dwelling, especially in respect of the roofing and fireplaces and chimneys.

Bricks were being made for the house in 1832 and Meredith called for plenty, with enough for walls and a greenhouse (both of which were built, but are no longer extant).²⁷ In late 1832 he obtained another bricklayer for six months, a convict by the name of George Hooker, indicating that construction was to begin in earnest.²⁸ Meredith referred to the house's 'commencement' early the following year and 'Bull the mason' was in

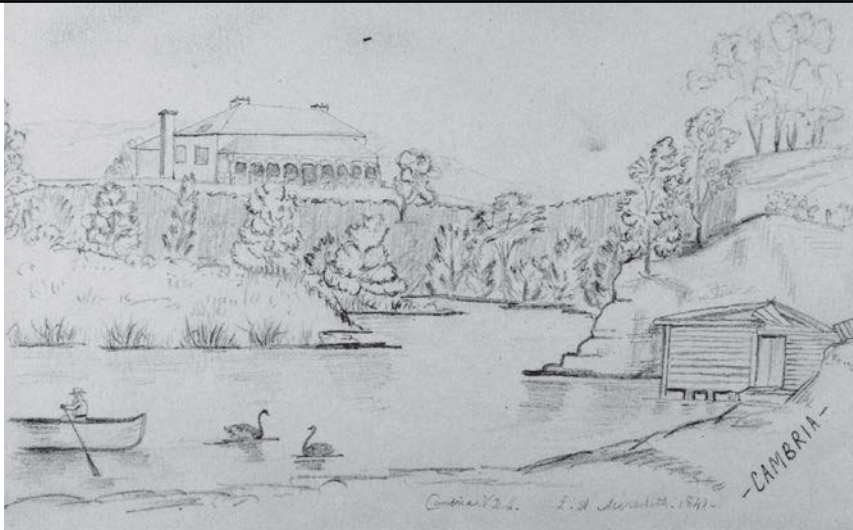


Top left: Front elevation of Cambria. Note the crosses through the side gazebos – they were never built
 Bottom left: Main floor, the front is at the bottom. Note four front doorways
 Top right: Rear elevation
 Bottom right: Basement, note entrances only to the rear, at top (*NS123/1/10, Tasmanian Archives*)

charge of a number of men.²⁹ The house took about four years to build: windows were fitted in 1835, furniture arrived in about March 1836 and, soon after that, Meredith was writing to his wife looking forward to her hosting a ‘drawing room party’.³⁰

Situated high on a river bank, the house took advantage of the river bank levee and has an appearance of a one-storey structure at the front, while two levels and attics are revealed at the back. The whole comprises 25 rooms and a number of other spaces for stores.

The house is built of rendered brick. The front elevation is quite simple and features four original pairs of French doors leading from a stone-flagged veranda into two formal rooms and an entrance foyer. The front rooms are linked by an enfilade arrangement of connecting doorways. The rear of the house has two-storey pavilions projecting at either end and three entrance-ways on the lowest level lead into service and storeroom areas. The middle level consists of inter-connecting rooms, mainly bedrooms, and attics exhibit themselves to the outside with dormer windows. Two



Sketch of Cambria by Louisa Anne Meredith, 1841 (*Tasmanian Archives*, NS123/1/44). This appears to be a study for a finer drawing, in the collection of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, under accession number AG5587

main chimneys pierce the roof, but these service multiple fireplaces on all levels, and the arrangement of these alone demonstrate the great skill of the designer and builder.

Riversdale, to the north of Cambria, was another farm of George Meredith's and the house there was built after the completion of Cambria, probably around 1838.³¹ Although smaller than Cambria, it was still a large and gracious house, over two storeys, built of rendered brick, laid in a Flemish Bond (where bricks are laid along rows alternating their long side with a short side, and each row is off-set). Inside, separate staircases were built for the householders' and servants' use. It was home to Charles and Louisa Anne Meredith for several periods before Old Bull built their own home, Spring Vale, further to the north again.

Construction of the mill at Riversdale has been credited to Bull in the literature, but, although his participation cannot be ruled out, it seems more likely that others were at least leading the work. A newspaper report in 1842 indicated that one of the Amos clan (probably John) began the building and it was completed by one of the Allen family.³²

Bull's third known house, Spring Vale, was built in about 1842 of fieldstone, with dressed sandstone at the corners and openings. Louisa Anne Meredith described Bull in *My Home in Tasmania*:

I believe that a large proportion of the stone and brick buildings both in and around Swan Port are the work of the same man – one of those thin, wiry, withered, erect old people who look just the

same for forty years ... I can see no difference in our old friend of the trowel since he first began chipping ironstone, nine years ago ... I well remember feeling some misgivings as to his living long enough to finish even the first building.³³

At the time he built Spring Vale, William Bull would have been about sixty years old.

According to Charles Meredith, Bull also did the brickwork at Francis Cotton's Kelvedon.³⁴ The date of construction of Kelvedon is not well known but it was started in the early 1830s and extensions continued into the 1840s. Charles Meredith wrote that Bull had said that 'he had never worked with a better carpenter' than Francis Cotton. Charles also wrote that Bull was responsible for 'the greater part' of the houses in Swan Port.

Bull could have found a sort of haven working for the Meredith family. They write of him appreciatively, even fondly; the result of his skill and hard work was there for all to see and he had earned a respected place in society, with regular pay and probably fair working and living conditions – possibly considerably more comfortable than life might have been had he remained in Staffordshire. He also lived (probably) to the age of 74, much higher than the average life expectancy of about 60. However, he did not marry; possibly he did not wish to, but the shortage of women made marriage more difficult for convict men.

After the Meredith building program ended Bull stopped working for them and he probably moved on to other projects in the Swan Port (Swansea) area. At some stage he probably moved to Hobart. A William Ball,

Riversdale (*Maureen Martin Ferris*)





Spring Vale, sketched by Louisa Anne Meredith in the 1840s (My Home in Tasmania, *Louisa Anne Meredith*)

stonemason of Macquarie Street, Hobart, died of a disease of the bladder in November 1857, aged 74, and this is very likely to be William Bull as his age is the same as Bull of Staffordshire. At the time

of his death he lived opposite the Cascade Inn in South Hobart, a poor area inhabited mainly by labourers.³⁵ However, perhaps the famously convivial inn provided some home comforts and friendship in his last years.

SO ENDED the story of a largely unheralded colonial builder of skill and talent. His initial record as a convict was unpromising, with disorderly conduct, several escapes and a second life sentence for discharging a firearm towards officers. On arrival at the harsh Macquarie Harbour penal settlement, he either reformed or the shortage of skilled labour brought him to the fore and enabled him to show his value, for which he was possibly rewarded on site, as well as being sent back to Hobart. At Spring Bay, Bull was noticed by George Meredith who, having suffered for years with the shortage of skilled labour on his farm, took him up to Great Swan Port and put him to work on a series of substantial projects. His grand houses remain as testament to William Bull's skills, as do the more utilitarian structures, now ruins, at Sarah Island.

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MALCOLM WARD is a PhD student at the University of Tasmania, researching the life of George Meredith. He has authored and co-authored several books on colonial buildings.

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- 3 *Staffordshire Advertiser*, 9 April 1808.
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- 6 *Sydney Gazette*, 18 April 1812.
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- 13 Butler to Burnett, 8 April 1828, Colonial Secretary’s Office, General Correspondence, CSO1/1/291/6986, p. 149, TA.
- 14 Colonial Secretary’s Office, General Correspondence, CSO1/1/371/8466 (for the number of prisoners); ‘Journal of George Washington Walker’ quoted in ‘Brand papers, Volume 1A: index to structures’, archived web site: ‘Ian Brand’s Macquarie Harbour historical research’, <https://stors.tas.gov.au/au-7-0050-00022074> viewed 17 September 2019.
- 15 *Sarah Island visitor services site plan 2006*, National Parks and Wildlife Service, pp. 50, 48, 52.
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- 17 Arthur notes on Butler to Burnett, Colonial Secretary’s Office, General Correspondence, CSO1/1/291/6986, p. 150, TA.
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