

## MAITLAND GAOL AND MORPETH

Our May day trip was to Maitland Gaol, with a little time to spend afterwards at nearby Morpeth. The coach trip took around three hours plus a half hour or so at Ourimbah where we enjoyed morning tea. It was a showery day and this is a popular rest area, so we were fortunate to find a couple of shelter sheds which accommodated us all.

At Maitland Gaol, we were greeted by the fantastic Keith, a retired Corrective Services officer who had worked here for many years, so he really knew his stuff! He was so interesting, his stories were amazing and we could easily have spent another couple of hours with him. As it was, we had two hours here and only saw half of the complex.

Taking information from the Maitland Gaol website: The foundation stone was laid in 1844 before opening officially in 1848. The gaol closed its gates as an operating facility for the last time in January 1998, giving a history that spanned 150 years. Throughout that time, many buildings were modified or removed and the last of the new buildings was completed in 1993. Inside the massive sandstone façade, the walls and cells tell the stories of inmates - the graffiti and illustrations are records of time, of life and, in some instances, death. With 150 years of history, the site saw discipline including whippings of convicts right up to the lighter treatment of the white collar criminals in the later years. Walking around the gaol, you can see that the pain and struggle to survive, the frustration and determination, is all evident within the walls.

During those years, the gaol saw some of the state's worst offenders walk through the front gates. This included prisoners such as Chow Hayes, Arthur "Neddy" Smith, John Travis and the Murphy Brothers, Kevin Krump, Darcy Dugan and Ivan Milat. Their notoriety often preceded them with both staff and other prisoners knowing what they were there for. A total of 16 men were executed between 1843 and 1897 – until 1861, these were public hangings.



Women were housed here from its opening year up until 1951, the first hundred years of its operation. Sadly, during this time, many women had to bring their children with them or gave birth whilst being housed in the gaol. Conditions in the early years of operation were appalling, with overcrowding and unsanitary conditions, meaning that some children died here. Eventually their circumstances improved somewhat when they were moved to the newly-built C Wing.

The site, as it remains today, is how it was left when the doors were finally shut on this architectural beauty, now recorded as a Heritage listed site of NSW State significance. A visit is highly recommended, with guided (at weekends or by appointment) and self-guided tours (available seven days a week), plus the occasional ghost tour! It's well worth the entrance fee payable.

When we eventually got around to having lunch, it was at our own expense in the lovely historic town of Morpeth (actually a suburb of Maitland). A couple of delightful cafés here and, as it was Friday, most of the shops were open. As we had been so engrossed in the gaol, time here was limited and pretty soon we were back on the coach heading home. It absolutely poured on the highway and it took four hours to reach Penhurst! Still, we'd had a great day.