Water wise: how rivers shaped a colony

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For the Europeans at Risdon Cove the sixteenth of October 1803 looked like a normal day for their fledgling camp. Normal, of course, being a relative term here. The site was probably bustling, as the newcomers set about making their presence permanent on the edge of the Derwent River. Without fanfare, the 29 year old Irishman James Meehan departed from the camp.¹ His task was to survey the land around the Derwent River for ten to twelve miles from the camp. He was looking for land with rich soils and river access, that could be farmed easily, for useful timbers and other resources. He noted down lands that would not be productive, while measuring distances, and marking trees for future reference. His discoveries would guide the earliest European forays into farming along the Derwent River, as both free and convict settlers received their land grants.

This paper examines the nature of these early grants, by focussing on one specific aspect of their creation – their connection to the waterways. It will give a brief overview of the rules governing land granting in the Australian colonies. The regulations were informed by a long history of similar land use, and this paper gives some selected examples to demonstrate the pattern’s versatility. Finally, it will discuss the advantages the pattern conferred as Europeans established their landholdings across the penal colony of Van Diemen’s Land.

The rules

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¹ James Meehan, ‘Meehan Survey, Risdon Area’ (n.d.), LSD 355/1/3, TAHO.
It can be easy to forget that many of the hallmarks of the harsh penal system in Van Diemen’s Land, including penitentiaries and chain gangs, were introduced after almost two decades of a system that gave convicts a grant of land at the end of their sentence. These grants were based on a set of instructions sent out to Governor Arthur Phillip in 1789, and stated that

…it in all grants of land to be made…regard be had to the profitable and unprofitable acres, so that each grantee may have a proportionable number of one sort and of the other, as likewise the breadth of each track to be hereafter granted be one-third of the length of such track, and that the length of such track do not extend along the banks of any bay or river, but into the mainland, there thereby the said grantees may have each a convenient share of what accommodation the said harbour or river may afford for navigation or otherwise. ²

There were some key requirements in this ‘long-lot’ pattern. Land grants were to have ‘profitable and unprofitable acres’, meaning useable and waste lands would be divided equally among the settlers. Each land grant was to be three times longer than wide, with the short end on the river bank. Properties were not to stretch lengthwise along the river banks, ensuring each individual had access to the waterway. An example of these regulations in action is seen at Figure 1, a map of the Sandy Bay grants given to emancipists.³

I occasionally meet the perception that land grants were given to former convicts as a reward – they finished their sentence, and were congratulated with a hearty handshake and a lovely plot of land for their perseverance. In Britain there was growing concern about this very idea. It was thought that transportation was losing its efficacy as a punishment, as former convicts told their networks about the new life they were able to

² Phillip’s Instructions re Land Grants, 22 August 1789, HRA I (i), 126.
In reality, this opportunity for a fresh-start was a side-effect of meeting the practical needs of a colony within a resource-hungry empire.

Free settlers, as well as former convicts, received land grants in the colony, following the scale set out at Figure 2. It is apparent that although everyone benefitted from this system, the hierarchy was enforced through the amount of land granted to the different class of settlers. One question remains: how did each grantee locate their land? For the Norfolk Island emancipists who were sent from that colony to Norfolk Plains, Meehan was instructed be on site, ready to ‘point out to each settlers his own farm’. This is the first known reference to settlers receiving guidance for locating their grants. In areas that were opened for European settlement earlier than Norfolk Plains, such as New Norfolk, it is not known if grants were pegged out prior to the arrival of the settlers, or whether they were given a rough aspirational sketch to implement. The first records show that the land grants at this settlement were laid out according to the instructions, but the earliest surviving map dates to seven years after the land’s alienation, and may reflect a corrected settlement rather than the original layout (Figure 3).

In later years settlers would arrive with letters of recommendation, and be sent out to find suitable land in one of the areas that had been ‘opened’ for settlement. They had a lot more freedom, although the government was still strictly controlling the general areas they could choose. This oversight was more oblique, phrased in terms of approval and discretion rather than outright directions. In 1820, Evans reported to John Bigge that a settler would arrive, receive permission from the Lieutenant-Governor to take a land grant and then they would...

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5 Governor Macquarie to Captain Ritchie or Officer commanding at Port Dalrymple, 6 February 1813, HRA III (ii), 27.
7 G.W. Evans, A Geographical, Historical, and Topographical Description of Van Diemen’s Land (John Souter, 1822), 114–21.
be allowed to go into the Country to examine the Different situations or to
come to me to see what were to be disposed of. And...the Lt. Govr. wd exercise
a Discretion in allowing the Settler to fix himself in such Land as he had
selected, after conferring with me.  

This system only started with the growth of free settler emigration to the colony from
1817. Before this, the specifics of the system remain vague. Somehow, the settlers would
end up grouped together, following the rules and located on a river-edge with a 3:1 ratio.
Free settlers, who had more freedom in their land choices, also adhered to this pattern,
revealing that it conferred advantages to all in an infant colony. This was especially
apparent because as occupants of a penal colony, all Europeans in Van Diemen's Land
were under various forms of control by the colonial powers. Not only were the areas they
could settle in tightly controlled, this layout also ensured that the ability of landholders to
expand sideways was curtailed. With neighbours close on either side, the only direction to
expand was back onto the Crown land at the back of the acreages. Use of this land was
common practice, with settlers using the extra Crown land around their holding to graze
livestock. As more land was alienated, however, the pressure on these Crown acres
increased, and the individuals were pushed back onto their own grant. Free settlers could
get away with looser interpretations of the regulations, and took advantage of every extra
acre they could grab.

The History of the Pattern

Before this pattern was brought to Van Diemen's Land (and New South Wales), however,
it had been employed in a range of situations across the world. The British had used
something very similar in other colonies, with the exact phrasing used in Virginia and
Georgia half a century earlier. Figure 4 shows a chart of New Jersey in 1685, where

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8 Examination of G.W. Evans, 22 March 1820, HRA III (iii), 319. See also descriptions of districts
with 'located' or 'unlocated' (claimed and unclaimed) land in the first chapter of E. Curr, An Account of the
Colony of Van Diemen's Land: Principally Designed for the Use of Emigrants, Reprint (George Cowie and Company,
1824).
9 'Miscellany, Original and Select', Hobart Town Gazette, 2 December 1826.
plots of land follow this long-lot style. They are larger than the allowances initially permitted in Van Diemen’s Land, but serve to demonstrate the flexibility of this layout. They follow the same principles, with the thin end of the plot on the river-edge, stretching back into the land.

When we look at a chart such as Buckingham 4 (Figure 1) of the Sandy Bay grants given to former convicts, a similar layout is immediately identifiable, albeit adapted to different circumstances and on a much smaller scale. This is a pattern still visible in the landscape today, although it utilises different mechanisms – instead of rivers, modern quarter-acre blocks are located on the edges of roads, stretching back from them. To misquote the regulations sent out with the First Fleet, each person today has a ‘convenient share of what accommodation the road may afford for navigation.’

Until relatively recently, exploration and expansion have been largely reliant on ocean routes. Rivers were both the means of long-distance transport between towns, and a key marker in the landscape. Without planes, or trains, journeys were made by foot, horse, or ship. The last of these was particularly important for long journeys, especially those that were quests to find uncharted lands over the seas. European methods of exploring ‘new’ lands were reliant on waterways to take them through the unknown.

Waterways were, however, also central to the global exploration and empire expansion of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By creating permanent British harbours in the Pacific and Southern Oceans, the British government was ensuring it was able to supply ships, and thus continue their journeys further into uncharted waters. Individuals receiving land grants were provisioned for several years, during which time they were expected to establish their own farms. The excess produce from these farms would then be fed back into the colonial stores, for use by both the colony and the ships stopping in port.

Waterways and the Settlement of Van Diemen’s Land

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12 Meehan and Evans, ‘Buckingham 4A’.
At a local level, waterways were equally significant. Figure 5 shows the River Derwent around the area of today’s Wayatinah.\textsuperscript{14} This region was largely unknown to the Europeans, and this chart was made from an 1828 expedition, one of their first forays into it. The river gave the explorers a reliable point of bearing in the bush, scrub, and steep hills. By following rivers, they were less likely to get lost, and could retrace their steps if necessary.

Once an area had been explored, and the land put under European use, the rivers took on a new importance. Settlements follow the rivers for very practical reasons – they allow for the movement of people and goods. When Oxley explored the new settlement of New Norfolk, he praised the ‘number of small rivulets, intersecting the country in every direction, the main river being navigable for boats for a considerable distance, affords an easy communication with the principal settlement.’\textsuperscript{15} In a time before telegram, fax, phone, or Snapchat, messages often only travelled as fast as the human carrying it. This meant finding the quickest routes of communication.

In Van Diemen’s Land, creating a road was often a matter of turning a thin track into a wider path by usage, rather than intentional development. These were not guaranteed to be quick or reliable routes. In fact, they could be downright dangerous. In 1816, a man was thrown from his cart and killed, after he drove over a ‘small stump of tree standing’ on the New Town road.\textsuperscript{16} By this time, this was a well-established road, but it was still in apparently rudimentary condition. In the same year, Mr Thomas Richardson was swept from his horse as he attempted to ford a flood-swollen river near Port Dalrymple. He survived to tell the tale, but he was ‘obliged to walk barefoot twenty-two miles’ to safety.\textsuperscript{17} Of course, river travel would also be affected by floods and drought, but when considered along all the other advantages of a river-based settlement, it makes sense that colonial explorers focussed their attention on riparian land.

\textsuperscript{15} J. Oxley, Report on Settlement, 1810, HRA III (ii), 574.
\textsuperscript{16} The Hobart Town Gazette and Southern Reporter, 9 November 1816.
\textsuperscript{17} The Hobart Town Gazette and Southern Reporter, 10 August 1816.
These were all considerations relevant to every settlement – look at the oldest part of almost any western town, and it will be connected to the waterways. A settlement cannot survive without drinking water, and in Tasmania it is crucial for irrigation. But waterways were also a conduit for another mechanism specific to penal colonies – for surveillance.

The first convict grants were kept separate from the free settlers. Their locations included Sandy Bay, New Norfolk, and Norfolk Plains, while the first large free settler grants were at Stainforth’s Cove, today Lutana. These expanded out into New Town and Glenorchy, and the area could still feel isolated; the three-mile walk to New Town was remembered as ‘lonely’. Although the convict grants were given to convicts who had finished their sentences, there was still a concern to keep them under informal control as they started new lives. By grouping them together in the middle of the bush, with all its strange noises and unknown terrain, they were effectively contained within a manageable area. This arrangement was beneficial to the landholders, as it allowed them to share resources and help each other when need arose.

These grants kept the convicts within a space, but also within the grasp of the government. Having them on a reliable road, whether that was overland or by water, kept them within eyesight of colonial governance, as they were not further than a day’s travel away. Giving these grants to convicts was not intended to be a reward for enduring their transportation, it was a controlling mechanism.

In the initial years, all land grants followed this layout. Everyone, not only the emancipists, needed to travel to and from their properties. Given all that has already been discussed, it is perhaps not surprising that the earliest grants in any given area followed some version of the prescribed layout, with their shortest edge tied to the river. Moreover, that river often operated as the focal point for the dwellings on the property. Scattered around Tasmania are the remnants of original houses on old land grants. Some have been preserved, while many others slowly crumble by their river edges. Many of these buildings are located close

18 Charles Rowcroft, *Tales of the Colonies; Or, The Adventures of an Emigrant* (Smith, Elder, 1845), 17.  
19 Examination of G.W. Evans, 22 March 1820, *HR*4 III (iii), 319.
to the waterways, and there are unmistakeable signs that they were focussed on those rivers.

Figure 6 shows the former farm house on a property north of Campania. All of the windows and doors of this house face west, onto White Kangaroo Rivulet. This first house follows a tradition still recognisable today – it faces the route of approach, just as our front doors open onto the main road. Further downstream there was a mill, indicating that this river, although small, had sufficient flow to move a small rowboat. Either way the orientation of this house reveals which direction was the most important to its occupants. Later buildings on this land were built further up the hills, where they could see further across the farm, but the homestead was also then closer to the road that today runs through the area.

Whether or not a waterway was navigable, there were other advantages to having land on the river’s edge. The final one to discuss here is encapsulated in the wording of the regulations discussed at the beginning of this article – ‘profitable and unprofitable’ acres were to be shared among the grantees. Flood waters bring alluvial soils onto the farm land, a fact well-known to many of the Europeans in the Australian colonies. Grace Karskens has argued that former convicts stayed at the Hawkesbury settlement in New South Wales despite regular flooding (and urging by the government) because of two advantages of the area. The emancipists found they had some independence from the government, as the area was was several days travel from Sydney Cove, but the floods that swept through the settlement every few years also replenished the soil. The farmers there would return to their ‘sodden huts’ after a flood, and ‘hoed and planted again, learned the river’s rhythms and signs, and hoped they would be spared next time.’ Van Diemonian emancipists were often located on soils with moderate drainage, that would allow floodwaters to drain while depositing their nutrients into the soils.

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20 In the nineteenth century, this rivulet was described as a ‘never-failing Rivulet of excellent Water’, and it had a water mill located further down river from this property. ‘Advertising’, Colonist and Van Diemen’s Land Commercial and Agricultural Advertiser, 6 July 1852; ‘Advertising’, The Mercury, 11 April 1874.


These advantages were appreciated by everyone starting out in the colony, not only the former convicts. The shape and situation of these land grants was well-suited for all the settlers who only had one property, as it covered some of the crucial land variations required for successful polycultural farming. Bothwell, or the Clyde Settlement as it was originally known by the Europeans, did not have water carriage to Hobart, but it was a popular area that expanded quickly. The earliest grants, however, were almost all long – stretching back from the river’s edge in a now-familiar pattern (Figure 7). They were significantly larger than the grants given to former convicts, by the early 1820s grantees would receive a minimum of 320 acres, but they were taking advantage of the Clyde River frontage for pastoral and arable use.

Over time, many free settlers would accumulate multiple properties, scattered across the island. Some would be riparian, some on hill-sides, and some a mixture of the two. The land would be used for pasture, timber, crops, and anything else the landholders dabbled in. Before they could amass these micro-empires, however, they would start with one or two properties, and use them for many purposes. They were, however, aware of the limitations environmental conditions placed on their farming expansion. In July 1816 the Hobart Town Gazette advised farmers to ‘take particular care’ in pasturing sheep, with all low lands to be ‘strictly shuned [sic] and avoided’. The high lands might not have as much pasture, but the risks of foot rot and other disease in the lower flooded pastures were too high to be worth the gain. After all, ‘sheep require the protecting hand of man, more than any other of his domestic cattle’. This same article berated farmers who had not yet sown their seeds – after only twelve winters on the island, understandings of the antipodean climate were varied and incomplete.

By concentrating on the rivers, the British hooked into a system that opened the land to their explorative and expansive agenda. Nothing in history demonstrates the adaptability of a reliable system quite as well as the early colonial land grants. This pattern provided

23 Arthur to Bathurst, 9 June 1824, HRA III (iv), 147.
24 Wegman, ‘Profitable and Unprofitable Acres’.
26 The Hobart Town Gazette and Southern Reporter, 20 July 1816.
equitable water access for polycultural irrigation and fertilisation, transportation routes for people, goods and ideas, and a mechanism for watching over emancipist settlers. The centrality of rivers can be found still reflected in the landscape today, with properties orientated towards the rivers rather than the roads. Similar patterns can be found in atlases from around the world and throughout the ages, but in a penal colony governed by the dual priorities of surplus agriculture and convict surveillance, the waterways formed a soggy road to success.
Figure 1 Plots given to former convicts in Sandy Bay, 1814 (Buckingham 4a, TAHO, AF396/1/5)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Governor Phillip’s Instructions</th>
<th>...to any of the said convicts so emancipated... To every male shall be granted 30 acres of land, and in case he shall be married, 20 acres more; and for every child who may be with them at the settlement at the time of making the said grant, a further quantity of 10 acres...</th>
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<th>Grenville to Phillip, 22 August 1789</th>
<th>To every non-commission officer one hundred acres, and to every private man fifty acres, over and above the quantity directed by Our General Instructions to You to be granted to such convicts as may hereafter be emancipated or discharged from their servitude...</th>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Convicts</th>
<th>Non-Commission Officer</th>
<th>Private Man</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>150?</td>
<td>200?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra per child present (on top of other allowance)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>110?</td>
<td>160?</td>
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Figure 2 Acres of land granted to settlers in New South Wales, 1789 (Source: Governor Phillip’s instructions, HRA 1, i, p. 14; Grenville to Phillip, 22 August 1789, HRA 1, I, p.125)
Figure 3 Plots given to former convicts at Norfolk Plains, 1814 (Cornwall and Westmoreland c, TAHO, AF396/1/1329)
Figure 4 Long-lots at Rariton River (New Jersey, USA), 1685 (A Mapp of Rariton River, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/97683564/)
Figure 5 Exploration of the Upper Derwent, 1828 (Exploration Chart 5, TAHO, AF395/1/17)
Figure 6 Original farm cottage facing White Kangaroo Rivulet (Imogen Wegman, 2017)
Figure 7 Timeline of properties granted in Bothwell. (Imogen Wegman, 2017)