



HM Prison Pentridge

Working together to preserve our history



James Smith

Pentridge warder

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Pentridge warder James Smith and his descendants lived in a bluestone and slate roofed cottage on Bell Street, Coburg for over a hundred years until it was sold to Coburg Council in 1978 and became the Coburg Historical Society Museum.

Smith was born in Daingean, Ireland in about 1823. He married Maria Dunne in Ireland. The couple and their first child travelled to Liverpool to board the Runnymede for Portland as assisted migrants. They arrived in 1852. Smith worked as an indentured agricultural labourer for a year before moving to Melbourne to become a Pentridge Stockade warder. Although he was required to work twelve hour sentry shifts in variable weather and ran the risk of catching the inmates' parasites and skin infections, it was a secure job with a pension. He worked as a warder for over thirty years and rose to the rank of locker in charge of the South (Elm Street) Gate.

The family's first home was on the south side of Bell Street near Rodda Street. This small timber dwelling was accidentally set alight and destroyed in 1857. They then lived in an Urquhart Street 'shanty'. Smith supplemented his income by land speculation, which paid for the construction of the solid home for his family of eleven children. Their Bell Street cottage was constructed in 1864 and was within 400 yards of the prison, so he could hear the prison bell, a requirement for all warders.

Smith died in 1904, nine years after his wife. The couple and all their children are buried in the Roman Catholic section of Coburg Cemetery.