

MEDIA RELEASE

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Western Australians celebrate their convict ancestry

More than 75 people with family links to Western Australia's convict past were today presented with official certificates at Fremantle Prison's annual Descendants Day ceremony.

Fremantle Prison Executive Manager Mr Bevan Beaver said the event, which was now in its 19th year, acknowledged descendants of British convicts, enrolled pensioner guards and warders who were transported to WA from 1850 to 1868.

"In the past convict ancestry was a closely guarded secret for many Western Australians, but these days people are proud to celebrate and embrace their cultural heritage," Mr Beaver said.

This year's ceremony will see 15 year old Leeming resident Francis Raven become one of the youngest applicants to receive recognition for his links to convict number 6807 Henry Atwell and warder Henry Blinco, both of whom arrived on board the convict ship Merchantman.

Convict Henry Atwell arrived in WA on board the Merchantman's first journey in 1863 after being sentenced to life for 'uttering forged papers'. He went on to become a prominent Fremantle businessman and pillar of the community.

Mr Beaver said convicts and their keepers were crucial to the development of the fledgling Swan River colony, which may not have survived without the convict labour that constructed public buildings, bridges and roads, and supported the developing agricultural industry.

"Recognising the descendants of the convicts, pensioner guards and warders of the transportation era helps us remember the legacy of the convict system," Mr Beaver said.

"Many of today's descendants are from Perth and regional Western Australia but there are a few who have flown over especially from interstate to attend – a testament to the increasing interest in our State's rich cultural heritage."

In January 2008, Fremantle Prison was nominated for inscription on the World Heritage List as part of a serial listing of 11 Australian Convict sites under the theme of forced migration. The outcome is expected to be announced in late July 2010.

Visitors can experience Fremantle Prison on a range of Prison Day Tours, Tunnels Tours and Torchlight Tours. Convict History education resources can be downloaded from the Prison website.

Applications for Descendants Day 2011 are now open. For more information, visit www.fremantleprison.com.au.

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