

South Brisbane Dry Dock

412 Stanley Street, South Brisbane

The South Brisbane Dry Dock was designed in 1875 by William David Nisbet, chief engineer for the Colony of Queensland, Department of Harbours and Rivers, and constructed between 1876 and 1881. Until its closure in 1972, the dock served a major role in Queensland's shipping industry and is one of the oldest surviving, substantially intact dry docks in Australia.

Navigational hint: at the river bend between the Goodwill Bridge and the Captain Cook Bridge, look for the red channel marker on a wall marking the Queensland Maritime Museum site at Southbank. The HMAS Diamantina can be seen in the dry dock.

Shipping played a significant role in the development of Brisbane and Queensland during the 19th Century. Brisbane was declared a port of entry in 1846, a warehousing port in 1849, and Customs House was erected in 1850. Following Queensland's separation from New South Wales in 1859, the economy boomed on the back of agriculture and gold discoveries and the number of ships passing through Brisbane surged. It had become a more accessible port after the Upper Flats near the river mouth were cleared in 1871, enabling large vessels to access the Town Reach.

The busy Brisbane port required a substantial facility for the maintenance, repair and refitting of commercial and government ships. A site for dry docking, or graving, was chosen on government-owned land between Stanley Street and the river at South Brisbane. Nisbet's design comprised a 32 ft (9.75 m) high, 313 ft (95 m) long dock, with a possible extension to 450 ft (137 m). Ships would float into the dock where a caisson (dock gate) closed across the sill (or cill) at the entrance, and the dock would be pumped dry. Once the vessel was repaired, sluice gates in the dock opened to let in river water before the caisson opened, and the ship floated out.

The dock served as Queensland's only graving dock until the mid-20th Century. It also served an interesting social function after 1902 as a venue for swimming carnivals when not being used for ships. During the Second World War the dry dock was used as a ship repair base for naval vessels. A United States Navy submarine base was also established at the dock in April 1942, necessitating additional wharfage and facilities. It was a vital

piece of infrastructure during the Second World War, docking and repairing 298 American, Australian, British and French vessels.

In 1944, the substantial Cairncross Graving Dock opened downstream and catered for large vessels that the South Brisbane Dry Dock had previously been unable to dock. The South Brisbane Dry Dock became primarily a repair shop for Queensland government vessels, but changes in shipyard practices, the dominance of large bulk carriers, construction of the Captain Cook Bridge and the need for a major rehabilitation of the dock led to its closure in September 1972. The South Brisbane Dry Dock has operated as part of the Queensland Maritime Museum since 1979.