

## ***Husband & Wife Convicts - James and Lydia Rackham***

by Joanne Hyland

“Extensive Shoplifting at Harwich” - The February 1848 Essex trial of Lydia and James Rackham excited great local interest. Lydia Rackham (39) was tried for several shoplifting cases and convicted on three counts. Her husband, James (45), was found guilty of receiving the stolen goods as most were found in their home and the judge and jury could not perceive that he was unaware of where the items had come from. Lydia's persistent shoplifting would have added to their income, used to support themselves and their children; James, Francis, Emmeline, William and baby Eliza. The two eldest, Charles and Lydia Ann (known as Anna), were in service and the others were sent to the Tendring Union Workhouse.

James had some support from local people however a petition on his behalf only delayed his transportation. He served the initial part of his sentence in Wakefield and Portland Prisons before being transported to Western Australia as *Scindian* convict #43. Lydia had already been transported to Van Diemen's Land via *Cadet* arriving 12 April 1849. Accompanying her were her three remaining children, James (12), William (7) and Emmeline (5). Francis (10) and Eliza (2) sadly died during the voyage in December, three weeks apart, of typhus and dysentery respectively.

The correspondence files of Western Australian Governor, Charles Fitzgerald, hold twelve letters from early 1851 relating to James Rackham and his efforts to have his wife Lydia and their three youngest children join him in the Swan River Colony. Permission was initially given for his wife to be brought to W.A., however, on further consideration this was ruled out as her ticket of leave was not due until 1855 and, of more particular concern, the colony had no suitable facility to hold her should she re-offend.

Lydia was incarcerated in the Cascades Female Factory in Hobart and on 17 April 1849 her three children were sent to the Queen's Orphan School in New Town about ten kms away. Her physical appearance was described as being 5 ft 3 ½ inches tall, with a brown complexion, dark brown hair, blue eyes, a thick nose, a large chin and a pockmarked face. Her occupation was farm servant and she could read. Her first employment in August 1851 was with Sarah Heffernan in Melville Street, Hobart, who with her husband in the 1840s, is listed as operating a shop selling bonnets and hats.

By February 1853 Lydia was working for William Campbell in Elizabeth Street, Hobart. Unfortunately, records indicate that she had fallen back into her old habits. She was convicted in April 1853 with her lover, John McKew, for stealing items from a previous employer John Guthrie. John McKew was a police constable (and former convict) at the Sandy Bay Police Station and according to his testimony the two were planning to marry. John was found guilty of receiving stolen goods – exactly the same fate as befell James Rackham five years earlier!

Lydia was sentenced to 18 months' imprisonment with hard labour. At the Cascades Female Factory this punishment would almost certainly have included a period of solitary confinement. Hard labour was often heavy and monotonous laundry work most of which was for the convict establishment itself.

Their eldest daughter Lydia Ann came out to Western Australia as a single female emigrant aboard the *Fornose* in September 1852, aged 20 years. On 30 January 1854 she married *Hashemy* convict #100, George Powling. The pair emigrated to Van Diemen's Land shortly after George received his Conditional Pardon in February 1854 and they collected Lydia's siblings William and Emmeline from the Orphan School on 17 October 1854. The couple went on to have a large family of nine children.

James Rackham received his ticket-of-leave on 22 August 1851 and was issued with his Conditional Pardon on 10 April 1854. James appears to have departed Western Australia on 21 March 1855 aboard the brig *Fergus* which sailed to Melbourne via Adelaide, arriving 10 May 1855. Did James disembark in Melbourne or perhaps continue on in the *Fergus* to Wellington, New Zealand? A James Rackham was convicted of an assault and robbery charge on a 'digger' in Melbourne in 1861. At this point, James' ultimate fate remains unknown.



Lydia was granted her Conditional Pardon on 9 June 1857 and earning her freedom through servitude, received a Certificate of Freedom on 18 February 1862. Lydia died on 15 June 1875, from old age and general debility, a widow, aged about 67 years. She was buried in the Queenborough Cemetery in Sandy Bay, Hobart, along with her youngest son William who died five weeks later. William was injured when very young and had lived life as a cripple and according to the coroner's report he died from a blood vessel

bursting in his brain. Today the Queenborough Cemetery site is a small Memorial Reserve on Peel Street, Hobart opposite the University of Tasmania Campus. Some headstones remain but nothing was found for Lydia or William.

Photograph Joanne Hyland January 2019

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