

## Discovering an Ancestor's Tragic Life

*researched by Lynne Morley, England*

When I started researching my family tree I couldn't believe my luck when I discovered that I actually had an ancestor who was transported to Australia, but in the pre-internet age I found it almost impossible to find out anything else about him. The only information was that once freed he was "*a hut keeper and a miner and went to SA*". Now after fourteen years of searching I have had the most amazing journey to uncover his remarkable story.

Thomas Dames was born in 1835 in Nottingham, to Patrick and Ann Dames who were both from Ireland. They lived in overcrowded tenement buildings in the industrial part of Nottingham, working in the growing lace and textile industry. Their second son Robert was born two years later and as the boys grew, the whole family would have been involved in helping Patrick, who was a Framework Knitter – even though they would only have made a meagre living. Life was hard in this expanding part of Nottingham; new industries were flourishing – as was crime! It wasn't long before Thomas and Robert were drawn into a life of petty crime, stealing various items like a valve, a handkerchief, a tea-urn, a jacket; but despite being caught and sentenced to being whipped and locked up several times – they didn't learn their lesson-or perhaps they had no choice and were stealing out of desperation. They carried on with their misdemeanours, and in 1851 the judge had, had enough of Thomas's crimes and sentenced him to be transported for seven years. He was never actually sent overseas though, just down to Parkhurst Prison on the Isle of Wight. After six years he was released and returned to Nottingham, finding most of his family now destitute and in the Workhouse. He quickly slipped back into his old ways. I found Thomas's crimes and trials reported on The British Newspaper Archive site and built up quite a story on him. After being arrested for stealing a shirt, and later a pair of boots, the judge called him "*an incorrigible thief and vagabond*" and sentenced him to another ten years transportation but this time he was actually sent further than Parkhurst he was sent all the way to Western Australia, on-board the convict ship *Lincelles*.

This is where my investigations came to a halt, but last year I discovered some websites in Australia that kick-started my research. The Fremantle Prison site was where I started, and this led me to getting help from several ladies in Australia (who I can't thank enough), helping me follow Thomas's life as Convict 5939. He spent the first year in Australia working in and around Fremantle, returning to his cell in the prison each night. After only sixteen months of continued good behaviour, he was awarded a Ticket of Leave and sent up the coast to Champion Bay (Geraldton). This meant that he could now be employed, earn money and work out the rest of his sentence with some degree of freedom and in the open air! I enquired at the WA State Records Office and was sent a copy of a page showing Thomas's employers, earnings and re-convictions. Armed with this single page, I researched everyone he worked for, every place he lived and put together a comprehensive story of Thomas's time in Champion Bay. Life was so different for him there; he worked in copper mines, he was a shepherd and hut-keeper, a teamster, a grubber (clearing land) as well as a general labourer. Thomas did occasionally get into trouble - he was drunk a few times, he was out later (past curfew) than he should have been and he stole a horse blanket, for which he was locked up in Geraldton Gaol. But on the whole, I think he must have worked hard and kept his head down, as for the last few years of his sentence – he didn't appear to do anything else wrong. In May 1870 he was given his Certificate of Freedom, was now known as an Expiree and he was free to go wherever he wanted. That is when I hit a brickwall again – again! I had originally been told that he went to South Australia, but they didn't accept ex-convicts; so knowing the main form of travel at that time was by ship those were the records that I needed to check next.

Ancestry had just put some Australian shipping records online and I found a few references to Thomas; firstly he appeared to go to SA, but he wasn't allowed off the ship – the authorities sent him back to WA. Then he left WA again only a few days later, this time heading for New South Wales. The shipping report made me think that this was not my man, as it stated that this Thomas was blind! But upon

checking the WA Register of Expirees leaving the colony – it really was my Thomas Dames Convict 5939. I had no idea how he had gone blind, perhaps it was the work he had done in the hot desert or a disease he had caught – I never thought I would find an answer to that question. My next discovery was a newspaper article on Trove, stating that Thomas Dams was in a robbery – that sounded like my Thomas but how wrong could I have been! He had been robbed! There were several reports and they all said slightly different things.

The one that interested me the most said that this Thomas was “a gold miner” and “he had been blinded by an explosion of powder”! Oh my goodness, there was so much more to discover. I now had to find out where he had been a miner; did he find gold and make his fortune and what about the explosion?

There were no records anywhere to help me; the only thing I could do was continue to explore Trove. I found gold was discovered in 1870, close to where Thomas was given his Certificate of Freedom, but this gold-rush was short-lived and no-one made their fortunes – maybe this is where Thomas did his “gold-mining”! I knew Thomas could see in May 1870, when he signed his Certificate of Freedom, but he was blind by May 1874 – so I had four years to work through. I spent thousands of hours, putting various words into their search engine, and eventually I found what I was looking for! In 1873 just outside of Geraldton there was “an accident at Narra Tarra mine where two men were injured in an explosion of powder, they were disfigured and would probably lose their sight”. This was too much of a coincidence for it not to be my Thomas, and sometimes you just have to go with your hunches. Doctor Elliott, who helped out at the scene of the accident, took Thomas down the coast back to Fremantle later that year, and then Thomas had to make his own way around the coast to NSW. As if his life had not been hard enough, I cannot imagine how someone who couldn’t see, could travel all that way on sailing ship and then to arrive in NSW and to be robbed! A researcher in NSW found a letter from the Colonial Secretary in WA, to the NSW Police Department (delivered by the captain of the ship that Thomas sailed on), including Thomas’s “Free-Man Certificate” and an endorsement that he was indeed “blind and his face was much marked by gunpowder”.

I was so happy, there was my evidence, and everything that I thought was true was confirmed. The only death record I could find for a Thomas Dames stated that he died in 1894, at the Macquarie Street Asylum in Parramatta, just outside Sydney – a place that catered for infirm and blind men! Asylum records were my next project and through Ancestry I found that Thomas spent sometime in the nearby Liverpool Asylum just before he was robbed, and he was back in there again for over a year, just after the robbery. What he was doing for the next seventeen years is a mystery; he must have been behaving himself, as at the minute – there is no other record of him anywhere.

Apparently, many inmates in the Asylum worked there and were paid a small wage; many saved up and left the Asylum for the summer months. They would travel around the country doing odd jobs here and there, and then they returned to the comfort of the Asylum for the winter. I hope that Thomas found somewhere comfortable to live and work; he was never in the Liverpool Asylum again. Thomas was admitted into Macquarie Street Asylum just before his death on 7 April 1894. He had never married, no-one put an obituary in the newspaper about him – he must have died quite alone; but I think he was a remarkable man to have survived all he had gone through.

It has been the most fascinating story to research and even now I hope it isn’t the end – there is always something else to discover.



*Southwell House of Corrections Nottinghamshire England*

Thomas Dames spent time in the Southwell House of Corrections which is situated fourteen (14) miles from Nottingham. It was considered to be a clean, hygienic institution and free of “gaol fever” but the inmates were subjected to strict discipline and disorderly behaviour was not tolerated. Whippings were one of the main punishments. Some of the more well behaved inmates were sent to a local mill to learn a trade that they could use after release.

*Convict details:* Thomas Dames appears in the Convict records under several names:

DAINES Thomas, (DAMS, DAVIS), 1834 - Unm, lab. conv. Nottingham 1859, robbery 10 yrs; arr. "Lincelles" 29.1.1862 (5939) TL 30.5.1863, CF 10.5.1870 Champion Bay; miner, hutkeeper, lab. grubbing. Left for Adelaide 7.4.1874.

*Ref: Dictionary of Western Australians: Vol 2 Bond (book) 1850-1868. Compiled by Rica Erickson*



Lynne has kindly donated a copy of her book *Finding Thomas Dames* to the WAGS Library.