



The Mariner's Daughter

Maria Louisa Swinchatt

transported for life to Van Diemen's Land in 1831

by Sue Swinchatt

On 12th May 1831, young Maria Williams stood in the dock at the Old Bailey accused of stealing a dress worth seven shillings, roughly £26 today, from a pawnbrokers shop in Old Street Road, Shoreditch in the East End of London. The case, heard by the Court Recorder William Tayler Copeland in front of a jury of twelve men, was just one of hundreds during a regular four day session. Each hearing lasted only a matter of minutes but the sentences handed down usually affected lives forever.

William Bird was called as a witness: "I am in the employ of Mr. John Burgess, a pawnbroker, in Old Street. I was behind the counter on the 9th of April - I came round and saw the prisoner... putting this gown into her apron". Now Maria's version of events: "I met my sister; we were both at the door and my sister took this gown and looked at it; when she saw him coming, she threw it on my arm and ran away".

Then the testimony that sealed her fate; George Osterman stood up in court and said: "I have a certificate of the conviction of Maria Swinchatt, on the 8th of July last. I attended and know the prisoner is the person who was convicted by that name".

What happened to young Maria in the years leading up to this court case? It seems many of this branch of the Swinchatt family led lives of un-remitting poverty in Georgian London. The men remain rather shadowy figures; the detail mostly revolves around the lives of three women, Hannah who married a Thomas Swinchatt, Susannah who married his son also named Thomas and their daughter Maria Louisa destined to have a very different life.

In 1780 Thomas Swinchatt married Hannah Cossham¹ in Bristol and had two sons, Edward and Thomas Helier, but where they were born is not known. It seems likely Thomas senior (c1755-1790) was London born and had gone to sea to earn a living. There were other Swinchatts living in London at this time, one named Job was a linen draper in the Strand until he went bankrupt in 1786². Perhaps his son, another Job Swinchatt had a florist business in Lambeth on the south bank of the river Thames operating under the name of Thomas Gerrard³. When he died in 1821 aged 60 he left a small legacy of £10 to his nephew Thomas Gerrard Swinchatt and to his niece Mary Ann Swinchatt he bequeathed his house and contents. How they were all related is difficult to say, but Maria's parents certainly knew the family in Lambeth, as is seen later.

Maria's grandfather died on 23 March 1790 at the age of only thirty-five leaving his wife Hannah and young sons living in a small house just east of the Tower of London. That October Hannah was a victim of theft; items of clothing had gone missing from her home and she accused a young woman, Mary Cook, who was lodging with her at the time. At the Old Bailey⁴ the defendant defiantly declared that Hannah owed her the clothing because: "She gave me a shilling a week, and if I did not bring home a man with me every night, I might as well be buried alive: she keeps a bad house, and turned out three girls as naked as they were born: she gave me the things to pick up men in, and I thought I had a good right to them."

¹ IGI record shows her surname as 'Crossham' but her grandson and several other descendants were given the middle name Cossham or Cossum

² London Gazette 25th July 1786 p336

³ Ref. PROB 11/1654

⁴ Trial no. t17901027-8

Hannah responded in a way she knew would play to the jury's sympathy: "I am a widow in St. Catherine's Lane: I keep a small house there. On the 21st of July I lost the things in the indictment part of which were found on the prisoner. She came to my door lame, a stranger to me; she lived with me three weeks and three days; I took compassion on her because she had sprained her foot. I hired her at a shilling a week, and she robbed me". The jury found the girl guilty and she was put aboard one of the ships of the Third Fleet of convicts to be transported to New South Wales in October 1791.

Hannah's sons both went to sea to make a living; Edward gained his Master's ticket, but Thomas Helier seems to have remained an ordinary seaman. It is not known if Edward married, but in 1809 he died in



Liverpool leaving a moderate bequest of £300 to his mother. His brother Thomas Helier Swinchatt took up with a girl from Portland on the south coast of England, probably one of his regular ports of call. Susannah seems to have travelled with him in the early days of their marriage and in 1814 at the age of eighteen gave birth at sea to their first daughter Ann Elizabeth⁵. Maria Louisa was born a year later on the island of Guernsey⁶, one of the Channel Islands. Thomas may well have worked aboard one of the many coastal vessels delivering goods to London from other ports around the British Isles.

By the time their son Job Cossham was born in 1820, Susannah was on dry land at lodgings in Whitechapel. Her husband had a brief brush with the law in 1821, but was found not guilty of theft in the court at Clerkenwell. When he died in August 1825 aged only 38, Susannah was pregnant with her sixth child. She and eleven year old Ann, nine year old Maria Louisa, Job Cossham, Hannah and little Thomas John were all now presumably destitute. Baby Robert Swinchatt was baptised on Christmas Day 1825 in St Mary's Church in Lambeth, and Susannah gave their address as Gerrard's Cottage, Lambeth Walk; the home of Mary Ann Swinchatt. Mary Ann had inherited this leasehold property in 1821 from her uncle Job, the florist and later lived there with Henry Heath her artist husband and their children. Lambeth, situated south of the river Thames, was still partly rural but also where the famous Royal Doulton pottery was established in 1815. This became Britain's leading manufacturer of industrial ceramics and a major producer of ornamental pottery and tableware. Unfortunately for the local residents the production of pottery and glass caused major air pollution from smoke and fumes; Lambeth cannot have been a very pleasant place to live.

The 1820's was a period of severe economic depression in England, when certain areas of east London in particular declined fast into squalid slums. Ann and Maria were more than likely now expected to fend for themselves, especially after their mother gave birth to yet another child, Elizabeth⁷ in 1829. In July 1830, fourteen year old Maria Swinchatt was found guilty of pick-pocketing. Her family had been in lodgings at the home of George Osterman. Mr and Mrs William Smith also lived there and it was they who accused Maria of stealing a bead necklace from their baby

⁵ 1851 UK Census

⁶ CON19/1/13 p536

⁷ Elizabeth used the surname Swinchatt, but clearly her father cannot have been Thomas as he was long dead.

daughter, valued at two shillings. She was fortunate on that occasion when two witnesses spoke up on her behalf telling the court she was of previous good character, so she was let off lightly.

A note preserved in the ledgers of the Refuge for the Destitute in Hackney gives us more information: "Saw Maria Swinchatt - is 14 next October, her Father is dead - her mother is married again and lives with her husband whose name is Chalon⁸ a baker at 15 Phipps St. opposite Holloway Mount Chapel - was in Newgate gaol for stealing a necklace from a little girl in New St. Had been living with her mother.... was 5 weeks in Newgate (Gaol)- tried and found guilty. Can read a little but not write." The court decided she was to spend six months at the refuge, but she apparently ran away.

And now here was Maria Louisa Swinchatt at the age of only fifteen facing the incredibly harsh sentence of being transported for life to Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania). It was unusual for a woman let alone a young girl to be given a life sentence, most only received a seven year term. Under the name she will be known by for the next twelve years as a convict, Maria "Williams" was among one hundred and fifty one women from all over England who sailed on the ship Mary from Woolwich on 9th June 1831. The First Fleet of convict ships had sailed to Botany Bay in 1787, and as far as the English establishment was concerned this was the solution to their problem of where to contain the undesirable 'criminal classes'. No large prisons existed then, so if you were convicted of even a very minor crime it was a case of "out of sight, out of mind" and off you went to Australia. Eventually changes in attitude during the 1840's led to the end of transportation, but it took a long time to stop completely and convicts were still arriving in Tasmania up to 1853. Very few ever stood the chance of returning to their homeland but many felt their lives had actually improved in the long run, once they received their 'tickets of leave' and pardons and were given the chance to buy some land and make a living for themselves and their families.

Maria's ship took one hundred and thirty days, arriving in Hobart on 19th October. Despite the cramped and unsanitary conditions only two women died during the long journey. Thanks to the extensive record keeping insisted upon by the governor of Van Diemen's Land at that time, Maria's name can be seen on the list of female convicts sent to the Cascades Female Factory in Hobart.⁹ The factory was a prison in all but name, built on the site of an old distillery. On arrival the women were divided into three "classes", 1st, 2nd or 3rd (Criminal), depending on their conduct and what type of offence they had committed. The conditions were pretty dire even though the 'factory' had only been open a couple of years. Maria was placed in the 1st Class and 'assigned' to domestic duties with a succession of settler families. For some convicts this was virtually a form of legalised slavery. Others were lucky in finding fair treatment and conditions at the hands of their assigned masters.

Detailed records of the physical characteristics of every convict were noted; Maria was tiny by today's standards. At only 4ft 9ins tall she was small even for that time, possibly the result of malnutrition during her early life. She had brown hair and dark grey eyes. Her complexion was described as swarthy, perhaps today we would say "olive-skinned", her face was small and she had a scar on her upper lip.

In September 1832 for some reason Maria was given three months punishment for "gross improper and indecent conduct." She would have been fed on bread and soup three times a day, and worked from six in the morning until eight in the evening within the confines of the prison. Her conduct record shows she was frequently considered insolent and punished for disobeying orders. Glancing through other conduct records it seems this was by no means unusual for convict women. She was noted several times as being "out after hours", but unlike many others she was never found to be "drunk and disorderly".

Free settlers¹⁰ had begun arriving in Tasmania from Britain in the 1820's, but there were still very few women so convict women were actively encouraged to get married to reduce the cost to the Crown for their keep. Maria sought permission to marry a George Powell in April 1832, but for

⁸His name was John Shayler, a baker. Maria's mother Susannah did not actually marry him until May 1831, just a few days before Maria's second trial.

⁹This is a now Heritage Site, but I did not visit it during my stay in Tasmania in 1996 - I did not then know of Maria's existence.

¹⁰"Free" settlers were those who had never been convicts

some reason it never happened. Three years later she again asked if she could marry, this time to Daniel Sullivan a free settler living at New Norfolk. They married in September 1835 (12 October 1835) but things went badly; the local newspaper reports Daniel being found guilty of assaulting his wife in January 1838. She stood up for herself at a time when women were very much second class citizens and often treated badly. This gives some idea as to her character; clearly she was not going to suffer in silence. At one point Maria was under threat of having her "ticket of leave" cancelled, after being accused of "keeping a disorderly house, and harbouring prisoners of the Crown". However, she did receive her Conditional Pardon on 15th July 1845, meaning she was now free but had to remain within the Australian Colony and would never be allowed to go back to England. All this before she had even reached her thirtieth birthday!

Maria and Daniel parted company; in 1847 using her real surname she married again, this time in Launceston. Her new husband John Bowater was also a convict from England who had arrived in Hobart in 1833 and given his freedom after serving six years. John was born in Birmingham in 1810 and had worked as a brass caster. He was not the only member of his family to have served time in Tasmania; his brother Isaac was also in the colony as was his uncle Daniel Bowater.¹¹ John's conduct record shows he was put to work on a chain gang after "representing himself as free" and he also received several punishment whippings. As time went by he seems to become worn down by the harsh treatment; he was punished for "laziness" on more than one occasion.

The Bowater brothers seem to have been related by marriage to another resident of Tasmania, Mrs. Mary Smith. Born Mary Bagley in Rowley Regis, Staffordshire around 1765 her first husband George Bowater had died when Mary was in her late thirties. In 1802 she was convicted of stealing a coat and sentenced to seven years transportation, by a roundabout route ending up in Tasmania. She bred horses and was much respected in the male dominated horse-racing circles. John's brother Isaac, who never married, was part of Mary's household and in charge of the other workers according to the census of Perth Parish in 1842. But life went badly wrong for Isaac; he committed suicide by hanging himself in early September 1847¹². In his Will he left a small farm in Norfolk Plains to his brother John. Two years later when Mary Smith died, it was Daniel Bowater¹³ who informed the authorities.

A Mr. and Mrs. Bowater boarded the ship *Mariposa* bound for Melbourne out of Launceston on 17th May 1851. The record stated Mrs Bowater had arrived in Australia on the ship 'Mary', the same one that brought Maria to the colony, so this could very well be our couple. There was a good reason so many people were heading north to the mainland. February that year saw the start of the Gold Rush, which began at Bathurst in the Blue Mountains inland from Sydney, spreading a few months later when larger finds were made in Ballarat and Bendigo. By May many thousands of people had just dropped whatever they were doing and decided to try their hand at gold-prospecting. Businesses were abandoned, and the big landowners could find no-one to work for them.

During the next couple of years some did find untold wealth and too many were said to have squandered it all on wine, women and song. Perhaps John and Maria were among those who were reasonably successful, because when they returned to Launceston in 1853 John was in a financial position to become the licensee of the Golden Lion Hotel in William Street. Shortly after this it was reported in the local newspaper that Daniel Harvey¹⁴, a customer at the Golden Lion pub gave a sovereign in payment for a glass of ale to the landlady, who he recognised as his ex-employer Mrs Bowater. He claimed she short-changed him, but she maintained he had only handed her a shilling. At the hearing Maria's defence stated Harvey "had received a sentence of 3 months from their employ, and had brought this charge in revenge".

¹¹ Launceston Examiner 25th Dec 1858 "...the property of John Bowater, of the Golden Lion.. It appeared that the prosecutor's uncle, Daniel Bowater.."

¹² Launceston Examiner, 11th September 1847

¹³ Irene Schaffer, "A most Remarkable Women - Mary Bowater"

¹⁴ Colonial Times, Hobart on 15th September 1853

John nearly lost the license in 1855 after complaints, but following improvements the pub was then said to offer excellent accommodation. That same year John and Maria are on the list of those contributing to the Patriotic Fund for widows and orphans of men fighting in the Crimea against Russia¹⁵. Their contribution was noted as £5, equivalent today to about £290. John's name appeared on the Electoral Register the following year, so life must have been going rather well for him and Maria.

Various newspaper reports indicate John regularly spent time away from Launceston on the mainland in Melbourne and even one trip to Adelaide. Possibly yet another member of the same family, Benjamin Bowater had been transported to Tasmania in 1838 at the age of 22. Later he seems to have settled in the State of Victoria with his wife Mary Ann, so perhaps John was visiting them during some of his absences. Benjamin clearly had troubles; in October 1862 *The Newcastle Chronicle* in New South Wales reported that a Benjamin Bowater had attempted suicide by trying to cut his throat. He had only recently arrived in the area with his wife and family.

In October 1859 the groom at the Golden Lion, William Hesketh took John Bowater to court for unpaid wages. John said he had agreed to pay him eight shillings a week while he, John, was away in Melbourne, but during his absence the man had been continually drunk and abused Mrs Bowater when she called the constable to have him removed from the premises. The Bench ordered John to pay £1 in back wages, plus costs of 9s. 6d. Some months later there was more trouble when John was accused of harbouring two prostitutes in his licensed house the Golden Lion. He had been instructed by the police to send the women away, but did not do so. The charge was proved and he was fined £10 and 8s 6d costs.

John Bowater was declared insolvent in December 1861, having left Launceston owing £600 to Mr Griffiths the owner of the Golden Lion. The following month Maria was in court accused by Mrs Griffiths of stealing money and a diamond ring. She was remanded for trial but nothing more was reported on this case. In March 1863 property and land belonging to John Bowater was auctioned off in Launceston by the Cohen Brothers, but less than two months later John tried to get the license of the Cross Keys pub in York Street in Launceston, this was turned down by the licensing magistrate. Maria and John seem to have left together for Melbourne soon after this, as John was for a time employed at the Vincent Hotel in Smith Street, Collingwood, one of the oldest suburbs in the city. Sadly after so long together now their marriage was "on the rocks", according to an article in *The Melbourne Argus*, dated 7th October 1865: "Maria Bowater summoned her husband, John Bowater, for maintenance. The couple had been married some eighteen years, but latterly the husband had become dissatisfied with his wife's conduct, and he now refused to keep her.he had recently discovered that the woman was married to a man named Sullivan, who was still living, before he married her. ...she admitted that she had lived for some seven or eight years with Sullivan, but denied he was her husband." The court ordered John to pay her ten shillings until the facts could be established, one way or the other.

Can Maria be blamed for lying to the court, considering the prevailing attitude towards women in general, let alone ex-convict women? John Bowater may have felt hard done-by but Maria was staring at a bleak future if he abandoned her. It appears he did just that, as six weeks later the *Argus* reported that Maria Bowater had been charged with stealing £11, the property of Michael McMahon of the Council Club Hotel. She and another woman were working at the hotel and both were charged with stealing cash. A couple of the coins had white marks on them and were identified by the proprietor's wife. Maria received a sentence of six months hard labour; the other woman was found not guilty for lack of evidence.

Maria served her time, and yet again survived. On 7th April 1866 the *Argus* newspaper printed the following rather desperate notice: "I, MARIA LOUISA BOWATER, do hereby protest against any person or persons purchasing any lands or houses in the name of John Bowater, as all

¹⁵ Launceston Examiner 21 April 1855

belongs in that name to me by deed of gift, signed over to me in the year 1840, February 13". I fear this notice did not do her much good; John evidently returned alone to Tasmania where he acquired several plots of land in Launceston during the late 1860's. He died there in 1871 and in his Will he leaves all his estate to his sister Hannah Ravenhall and a nephew back in England with no mention of any children of his own, nor of his wife Maria.

And what became of Maria? The next eight years are unaccounted for until The Victorian Government Gazette states that Maria Louisa Bowater died "on or about" 9th October 1874 and left an estate of £4 19s 1d (worth about £340 now). She was then living in Dargo Flat, a small very remote gold-mining township about two hundred miles east of Melbourne in the mountainous area of Gippsland. Why she went to live there will remain a mystery, but from her death certificate, where her name was recorded as 'Louisa Boater,' we learn she accidentally drowned in the Dargo River.

She had apparently been employed as a nurse, which probably meant she was looking after some-one's child as she had in London all those years ago. Her age at death was estimated at forty-nine, although she was actually ten years older. She was buried in the cemetery at Dargo and it was pleasing to find a photograph of this graveyard on the internet. At least she lies in a very peaceful place.

So the daughter of a seafarer, who sailed as a baby with her father Thomas Swinchatt and later survived that terrible journey over the oceans to Tasmania as a convict, met her death in the waters of the Dargo River one October day after a very eventful life in a land as far as she could have been from her childhood in London.

The Cemetery at Dargo Flat, Gippsland, Victoria



Meanwhile, in London.....

Barely two weeks after Maria was put on the convict ship for Australia, her older sister Ann Elizabeth also had a brush with the law. In contrast to her sister she was only sentenced to one month's imprisonment for stealing four handkerchiefs. At this distance it may be unfair to judge her, but one cannot help feel it was she who led young Maria astray, abandoning her to her fate in that pawnbroker's shop. Ann went on to marry James Glanville in 1832 and her grandmother Hannah (now Mrs Seager) was a witness. Fairly soon he disappears from the scene and Ann marries for a second time in 1855 to George Pike, a "cabman". But these two had been a couple long before that date; in 1841 Ann and George 'Swinchatt' were living in Half Moon Street, Bishopsgate. They may well have been using her name because George Pike's can be seen in court records several times for petty theft. Ann seems to have died in 1859 in Lambeth, and there is no indication that she had any children.

Ann and Maria's little brother Thomas John Swinchatt died in February 1831 at the age of just eight in the Shoreditch Poorhouse. What happened to their sister Hannah is unclear; it seems inevitable she also died young. Their mother Susannah was already living with John Shayler when

she married him in May 1831, and during the next six years she had four more children with him while they were living in Kingsland Road, Hackney. Her former mother-in-law Hannah (Swinchatt/Seager) had been widowed for second time that year¹⁶ and sometime between 1837 and 1841 John and Susannah, plus several children and Hannah all ended up living at number 3 Nova Scotia Gardens in Bethnal Green.

This little row of three houses thought to have been built in the 1770's were probably originally silk weavers' cottages, set a little apart from the mass of other buildings around that area. The accommodation in each consisted of a small parlour eight feet by seven, and a vestibule where the stairs went up to two more rooms. There was a wash-house attached at the back. Each house had a "privy" at the end of the garden, but water for the three households had to be drawn from a well in the garden of number three. Nova Scotia Gardens was described as having a vast number of vile dwellings with a huge mountain of 'refuse' (a coy way of describing human excrement and animal dung) to one side and a total lack of drainage, so the stench was absolutely appalling and disease rampant. Hannah had survived to the ripe old age of eighty-four, but Nova Scotia Gardens proved too much for her and she died there on 15th February 1841.

For Susannah things went from bad to worse in October that year when John Shayler was sentenced to three months imprisonment for stealing a sixpence and some half pennies from his master John Allen Butler, a baker in the Hackney Road. He had worked for Butler for over a year, and must have been suspected of taking small amounts of money from the till for a while. Butler told the court he had noticed money was missing so he marked some coins, and these were later found in John Shayler's pocket. His boss asked the court for mercy for the sake of the four children.

A great deal has been written about 3, Nova Scotia Gardens; it was the setting for several notorious murders ten years earlier. In December 1831 James May, John Bishop and Thomas Williams were all convicted at the Old Bailey of murdering a fourteen year old boy and a middle aged woman at this very house. There was considerable suspicion that several more victims had been killed there too. What started out as a spree of grave robbing (known as 'burking') to sell bodies to hospitals for dissection, turned to cold blooded murder in November 1831. Bishop and Williams had confessed and were hanged, but James May who had not actually killed anyone, being only involved in the attempt to sell the bodies, had his sentence of death commuted to transportation for life.

So, by a very strange quirk of fate little Maria Louisa Swinchatt who stole because she was desperately poor and the body-snatcher James May both ended up in Tasmania within six months of each other; both given life sentences. On the voyage to Australia James May had apparently tried to incite mutiny amongst the crew of the ship. He was sent to Port Arthur Penitentiary, put to work on a chain gang and died there in 1834. Neither would have ever known of each other's existence nor that Maria's mother and grandmother would one day be living in the very house where his accomplices had lived and carried out those terrible murders; drowning drugged victims in the well in the garden.

Maria's younger brother Job Cossum Swinchatt became a cordwainer (shoemaker). He married Ann Burdge and in 1841 was living about a mile away from his mother in Collingwood Street, Hoxton. His younger brother Robert married Elizabeth Burdge, Ann's sister but that marriage did not last. He lived for many years with Charlotte Cook, with whom he had thirteen children. They eventually married in 1897 when he was seventy two and she sixty-six years old. Robert died at the great age of ninety-six years.

There is no evidence that any other member of this Swinchatt family got on the wrong side of the law from the next generation onwards, but how Hannah, Susannah and any of her offspring survived this grinding poverty is really quite amazing. But somehow most of them did, and Susannah despite being widowed again in 1846 lived to the age of seventy-six. She died in 1873 whilst living

¹⁶ Hannah Swinchatt had married again in 1806 to a widower Peter Seager. For some reason these two underwent a second wedding in Feb 1819 at St Dunstan's Church in Stepney.

with Job Cossum and his family in Hackney. Luckily she never knew that the following year her son by John Shayler, Edward Frederick was sent to prison for indecent assault.

Job Cossum's son Job, also a shoemaker, married Martha Duckrell and had ten children. Their son Job Robert Edward Swinchatt became a furniture manufacturer and had a son Frank Swinchatt in 1906. Frank retired to Highcliffe near Bournemouth where he died in 1992. We never met, but I telephoned him once years ago to ask if we might be related and he kindly sent me some information about his immediate family, but nothing that led me to believe I would one day find this extraordinary tale.

Footnote:

In 1852 the whole of Nova Scotia Gardens was bought by Baroness Angela Burdett-Coutts, grand-daughter of the founder of Coutts Bank. She was a very wealthy woman and friend of Charles Dickens and they were both horrified by the terrible living conditions they saw. She paid for the houses to be pulled down and replaced by a development known as Columbia Square, providing homes for some two hundred poor families until it was eventually pulled down in the 1960's.

Ironically, there were more Swinchatt's in London by 1891 than anywhere else in the country. My branch of the family is only very distantly related ; they moved away from their native Shropshire to London in the late 17th century. Two marriage records refer to a Thomas "Swinshaw" and one to a Job "Swinshaw" in London in the 1690's. This spelling of our surname also crops up in Edgmond, Shropshire at this time.

While researching the Swinchatt family in London I was astonished at the variety of records available from the archives - so many more than I could have ever imagined. It is now possible to view, over the internet, images of original baptism, marriage and burial records, as well as all the censuses. The London Gazette, in publication since 1665 has a free online archive, as does the Old Bailey where many famous trials took place and many more of ordinary people. From these, and from convict records and newspaper archives online in Australia, I found the information to put together this account.