

Ellen's gravestone and those of some of her family dominate the cemetery of St James Church Ranelagh in the Huon Valley. Entrance via a side gate leads to a well-maintained last resting place. An air of calm and stillness prevails as your gaze cannot help but to be drawn to a group of memorials, prominent and bold, that are the backdrop to the graves of so many of the early settlers of the district. Ellen's beautifully carved head stone of elegant ribbon bows is one of those memorials. A simple inscription reads:

*In Loving Memory of*

**Ellen Bell**

*Died 28<sup>th</sup> July 1861*

*Aged 42 years*

This is the last resting place and memorial to a young mother having had the misfortune to have been caught for petty theft and transported for seven years. Ellen Talbot (McDarley, McDarby, McDermott) was an illiterate farm servant from County Queen's, Ireland. She sailed, accompanied by her three and a half year old son William, on the convict ship *Waverley*, with 148 other convicts and 39 of their children<sup>i</sup>, arriving in Van Diemen's Land ten days before Christmas 1842. Upon arrival Ellen was sent to the Brickfields Hiring Depot, where, as far as can be ascertained, she hired out immediately.<sup>ii</sup> Ellen also had to say goodbye to young William when he was admitted to the Queen's Orphanage, whilst his mother was under sentence.

Ellen was well behaved during the voyage and her only crime once in the colony was for neglect of duty and absconding in 1844. On 21 December 1844 the Convict Department posted in the *Colonial Times* Ellen's Ticket of Leave<sup>iii</sup> and just under a year later her son William was discharged into her care.<sup>iv</sup> From here she disappears briefly from the records, her whereabouts unknown, until she appears as the wife of farmer John Bell of *Woodstock*. No certification of marriage has been found to date, but to have had the means to look after William it is most likely that she was in a relationship with John at the time of collecting her son from the Orphan School.

Well located on the banks of the Huon River, *Woodstock* was an estate of some seventeen hundred acres belonging to a Mr John Kellaway, who employed tenant farmers and ran a dairy farm, the produce from which was sent to Hobart Town.<sup>v</sup> It was in this picturesque setting on the Huon River that John and Ellen Bell and young William, began their lives together along with almost 37 other, mostly tenant farmers.<sup>vi</sup>

The Huon Valley was fast developing into a thriving area, gaining notoriety, especially, for farming and logging. Ellen's future lay amid a community, where the population of this small township south of Hobart Town, then known as Victoria, was on the increase. A Special Correspondent for the *Mercury* newspaper expressed his enthusiasm, when he wrote that Victoria was:

'Within easy distance to the capital [Hobart Town], approached by a road which, for grandeur and variety of scenery, is, perhaps, excelled by none in the colony...If Victoria was not the original home of the apple, it ought

to have been. Apple trees thrive on the banks of the Upper Huon as vigorously as gum trees...'<sup>vii</sup>

Ellen now had an opportunity to start over and raise her son amid a community set to prosper. The area also thronged with numerous sawmills each turning out thousands of feet of timber weekly, not the least of it being the famous Huon Pine, endemic to area. 'In the mid 1800s Huon Pine logging was extensive in the Upper Huon and Picton Rivers.'<sup>viii</sup> Stock raising, dairy farms, sheep, raspberries, blackcurrants, hop production, the manufacture of agricultural implements and more; all combined to create employment and feed a community.

Ellen would have worked hard both in the home and out on the farm. I wonder what she thought of living in an area, so sparsely populated, in comparison to her homeland. The 1848 Tasmanian population census of the Huon Police District recorded 2988 souls living in the area, made up of 2069 men and 919 women. In that same year 926 children were born in the district.<sup>ix</sup> Whereas, in a stark contrast to Ellen's homeland, in 1841 Queen's County, Ireland had a population count of 154,000, albeit on the decrease.<sup>x</sup>

Ellen's life and life style had changed forever. Moreover, where she was Roman Catholic, inhabitants of the Huon were predominately Church of England<sup>xi</sup>, as was her husband. Ellen's last resting place is at the Church of England, Ranelagh,<sup>xii</sup> so, it is most likely this was the church she and her family attended. Ellen was not the only emancipated lady living in the area. Caroline Vantieur was a native of Bordeaux (France). In 1834 she married Robert Meredith (also

an ex-convict)<sup>xiii</sup> and become a mother, whilst they were living near the Huon River, making Ellen and Caroline both young mothers at the same time.<sup>xiv</sup>

Elizabeth Foreman was another former convict who resided in the area and married John Burgess in 1847<sup>xv</sup>. In 1850 their daughter Elizabeth was born in Franklin. It is also interesting to note that both Meredith and Burgess are still well known family names in the Huon. Convict women faced many a hardship before committing the petty crimes for which they were transported, and like Ellen, Caroline and Elizabeth no doubt had to quickly adapt to their new surroundings. Could these emancipated women have met and related their stories to each other at church?

Ellen and John had five children from 1844 to 1853. Their daughters Ellen, Mary, Sarah Ann and sons John and James, between them, added some 30 more children to the community. Details of their lives and fortunes are well documented within the numerous family histories. But of note for his contribution to the local area is their eldest son John. Born in 1851, he married Matilda Newman in 1869;<sup>xvi</sup> they lived and raised their family at Oakley Farm, Bakers Creek, Ranelagh.

John Henry Bell was referred to in the local papers and thus we have an opportunity to gain an insight into his life. John was only 10 years old when his mother Ellen passed away, but how proud she would have been, when upon his death in 1913 the *Huon Times* reported that he had:

‘started up a nursery business and earned a great reputation for apple trees and consequently commanded considerable support, and attained a

large measure of success in his business. His sons intend to continue the business having been associated with their late father, and receiving the benefit of his practical experience there should be no doubt of their qualifications.<sup>xvii</sup>

The *Daily Post* (Hobart) also reported John's death in its *Country News* in July 1913, making mention not only of his nursery business, but also his small fruit and orcharding:

He was the leading young fruit tree grower of the Huon, and always had a big demand owing to his promptness and honesty in business, as well as in every other sphere of life in which he took part [he] settled here in the early days, when he was engaged chiefly in the milling and timber industry [he was] very highly respected and his death is deeply regretted.<sup>xviii</sup>

His wife Matilda died five years later, and the *Huon Times* reported that she was also a respected resident of the area.<sup>xix</sup> John and Matilda's seven sons and five daughters followed in their parent's footsteps, both in business and raising their respective families as they are said to have lived by the traditional values of the time, where the men were in the field and the women took on the domestic routine, raising the children and also working beside their husbands. Life was especially busy when the fruit was in season. A routine that was no doubt only too familiar to Ellen. The stories of each of John and Matilda's children, Ellen's grandchildren, have also been well researched. Accordingly, it is only the story of their son John (3) that I will continue with.

John and Matilda's son John was born in 1871<sup>xx</sup> and married Laura Stanton in 1896<sup>xxi</sup>. Sadly Laura passed away three years later of scarlet fever just one week after giving birth to their second child,<sup>xxii</sup>. John married again; this time to Laura's sister Elizabeth and they had seven children between them, Ellen's great grand children.

John did very well as a farmer. His apples were shipped to England and his jam making expertise is well remembered. Wooden tubs of raspberries were initially pulled along on a sledge by horsepower, the berries pulped and put into a large cauldron over the fire. His grand children looked on as John stood on an apple case to put dollops of butter in the mix to stop the jam from spitting. But, he is also remembered for having his arms covered in scold marks! The raspberries were later put into kerosene tins and sealed ready for sale. Elizabeth became very well known in the district as a midwife when the doctor called on her to assist with delivering babies.

Ellen's descendants thus far had not only contributed to the population of the Huon area, but also through hard work, can be credited with advances in horticultural techniques surrounding the growth of the apple industry.

Bush fires were a constant threat. On one such occasion in 1853, Ellen and her young family faced uncertain times, when bush fires ravaged the Huon area. The *Courier* reported on Friday 13 January 1854, 'stories of individual suffering... heartbreaking in the extreme.'<sup>xxiii</sup> And, there were times of food shortages due

to 'unseasonal weather and crop failure [the early pioneers] ... [they] cooked thistles, nettles, watercress and dandelions [and the] eye of potato [was] scraped out and used for further planting.'<sup>xxiv</sup> How this practice must have stirred Ellen's heart and reminded her of Ireland. Wallaby [and], kangaroo provided a good feed and pelts were sold. Rugs were made from possum skins.<sup>xxv</sup>

And what of Ellen's young son, who travelled across the seas with his mother. William remained in the Huon and married Mary Ann Stanton in 1867<sup>xxvi</sup>, just six years after his mother's death. He not only became the proud father of eight children but also contributed to the community.

Upon William's death of a heart attack, in his 85<sup>th</sup> year, the *Huon Times* reported that he 'was a councilor of the Huon Municipality from its inception in 1906 to 1921 and was a J. P. for 15 years'; going on to describe his commitment to community and 'very kindly disposition [and] by his many acts of kindness, even to the sacrifice of his own personal advantage, he won many friends in all parts of the district'.<sup>xxvii</sup> Grand sentiments indeed, but certainly no mention of his journey across the seas with Ellen; and William's last resting place was not with his mother, but with many of the Talbot family, where the graves are almost lost amid the overgrowth of grass and bracken.

Sadly, Ellen died before the birth of her first grandchild, and, before she could stand proud of William's successful career in service to his adopted homeland.

Her husband John died 15 years later, but during that time, he at least, was able to enjoy watching their children and grandchildren grow into capable adults.

Statistics reveal that in 1867 the population of Victoria was around 96, where in Hobart the population had reached about 600.<sup>xxviii</sup> Taking into consideration that by 1861 Ellen and John had around 46 grandchildren, their family then, made up half the population of Victoria; certainly a significant contribution to the community.

During my research I have not only been able to discover a little more of Ellen's story, but have also met, quite by accident, new relatives. The photo of her gravestone has, you could say, gone viral. But what is of particular interest is the lack of knowledge among many of the descendants, of Ellen's past. So much so, that some have recorded Ellen's place of birth as Tasmania. Precious memories have been lost due to family taboos or a deliberate decision not to discuss the day-to-day life and social interactions of our convict ancestors, whose crimes were reflective of the necessity to take extreme measures in a daily struggle for survival. One relative has informed me that her mother stated, in no uncertain terms, there were 'no convicts in the Bell family'. Controversy also surrounds whether or not Ellen's husband was free settler or ex-convict. Ellen's past, her contribution to society, her own story has largely been forgotten.

So whilst the anonymity of so many quiet achievers of our past is palpable, Ellen's impressive memorial stands as a reminder to us all that whether born into nobility or destitution, no one can know or predict what their future holds.

She was a young mother with five children when the notorious bushranger John aka Rocky Whelan worked in the area for several months after absconding in 1854,<sup>xxix</sup> and Amy Sherwin, a soprano born near Huonville in 1855 became ‘the first Australian singer to make an overseas impact’.

Ellen and her peers would have had little time for recreation as they took on life’s challenges. Ellen contributed to her society with a determination to succeed, which she passed on to her children.

To end Ellen’s story, this quote from American born woman Ruth Ann Schabacker, is not only particularly poignant when considering the carved ribbons upon Ellen’s headstone, but perhaps sums up her perseverance and courage to make a difference:

Each day comes bearing its own gifts.

*Untie the ribbons.*

I am very proud of my great-great-great-grandmother Ellen Bell.

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<sup>i</sup> Waverly (1842), [www.female.convicts.org.au/docs/ships/Waverley1842\\_SJ.pdf](http://www.female.convicts.org.au/docs/ships/Waverley1842_SJ.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> Convict Conduct Record, Ellen McDarby, CON40/1/4.

<sup>iii</sup> *Colonial Times* and *Tasmanian*, 6 June 1848, *Hiring of Probation Passholders*, also on the FCRC web site.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> The *Mercury* 1860-1954, *The Huon District: Its condition and Wants*, from our special correspondent.

<sup>vi</sup> R. Woolley & W. Smith, *A History of the Huon and Far South*, Vol. 1, Huon City Council (Huonville, 2004), p. 111.

<sup>vii</sup> The *Mercury* 1860-1954, *The Huon District: Its condition and Wants*, from our special correspondent.

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- viii David Hammond & Anne Rushton Nuss, *Franklin – Settlement in the Huon*, Southern Holdings (Hobart, 1987), p. 26.
- ix Tasmanian population census 1848 <http://hccda.ada.edu/pages/TAS-1848-census-01>
- x James G. Ryan, *Irish Records, Sources for Family & Local History*, Flyleaf Press (Ireland, 1988), p. 277.
- xi Tasmanian population census 1848.
- xii R. Woolley & W. Smith, p. 111.
- xiii Marriage record Caroline Vantileur to Robert Meredith RGD37/1/3 no 501.
- xiv Birth record, Caroline Meredith, RGD32/1/2/6211, 27 December 1834.
- xv Marriage record, Elizabeth Forman to John Burgess RGD37/1/6 no 949, 21 March 1847.
- xvi Marriage John Bell (2) to Matilda Newman RDG37/1/28 no 96, 8 December 1969.
- xvii *The Huon Times* (Franklin) July 1913
- xviii *The Daily Post* (Hbt. Tas) July 1913.
- xix *The Huon Times*, Friday 28 February 1919, page 2.
- xx Birth record John Henry Bell (3) RDG33/1/50 no 1706.
- xxi Marriage record, John Bell (3) and Laura Stanton RGD37/1/55 no 287, 22 December 1896.
- xxii Death Record Laura Bell RGD35/1/68 no 1035, 1 November 1899.
- xxiii *The Courier*, Friday 13 January 1854, page 2.
- xxiv David Hammond & Anne Rushton Nuss, p. 20.
- xxv David Hammond & Anne Rushton Nuss, p.20
- xxvi Marriage Record, James Talbat to Mary Ann Stanton RGD37/1/26 no 80, 22 December 1867.
- xxvii Trove, *Huon Times*, Saturday 10 October 1924.
- xxviii Walch's Almanac, *Population of Victoria and Hobart Town, 1867*, p. 83.
- xxix R. Woolley & W. Smith, p. 184.