

'I am still keeping the same house as when I last wrote I am keeping out of debt but saving no money'

Thus wrote Olive Dormer to Charles Leake, in a letter penned in her home in Grey Street, Auckland on 27 May 1868, on black-edged paper, to offer her condolences on the death of his father.¹ But Olive's key reason for writing was economic. She had been expecting to receive a deed from Charles' father, John Leake. This deed was mentioned in Leake's account book but unfortunately no more is known of its contents, scope or importance.²

The Grey Street dwelling was a boarding house. It appears from the words 'keeping the same house' that it may have belonged to Olive but that is unlikely. The possibility of ownership was remote for a woman, at that point aged about 46, simply due to the circumstances of her life. But to be out of debt, after years of hotel and boarding house life in Launceston, Dunedin and Auckland, was a fine accomplishment.

There are always questions of identity when doing research of this nature: the greatest being has one the 'right person'. The story might have been one of steady improvement had it not been for my colleague Jai Patterson who generously shared information about Olive from her own work. Following these leads required me to entirely rethink my view of Olive. Her up and down fortunes were writ large in the newspapers: not in the columns of social news but in the court reports. They present a picture of a determined woman holding her ground in a rough and often violent world of men.

Olive's phrase 'keeping the same house' also suggests transience, and pub or boarding house life could be fraught. Olive had had to deal with the lot. One measure of success was that she was able to survive the threats of life. When crossed she sought the redress of the courts. The justice dispensed was quite unpredictable. Crimes perpetrated against her included theft, assault, intimidation and threats. She was also taken to court: for outstanding debts.

Olive was the daughter of Ann and John Bloor of Mill Street, Wolstanton in Staffordshire.³ She was born in about 1822 and made her living as a house servant. Her father and older brother were both potters. In July 1843 she was found guilty of highway robbery on a Mr Smith and his friend at a trial at Derby. Three men were tried with Olive for this felony. Each was sentenced to 15 years transportation. Olive was a diminutive woman with a small face, hazel eyes and brown hair. Her body showed the scars of burns and lameness in her left leg hindered her agility. It is difficult to imagine her committing this crime. Nonetheless she arrived in Hobart Town aboard the *Emma Eugenia* in April of 1844 aged 22. Olive served her probation on the *Anson*, graduating 3rd class, and was then contracted out to work, most likely as a housemaid, although there seems no record of to whom she went.⁴

It is not known how she met her future husband William Dormer. William, about six years her senior, stood a foot taller than Olive and, from his description, could well have been a handsome man, or brooding, with dark complexion and hair, deep hazel eyes, and a low forehead with dark brows. He too was a convict, transported for life for sheep stealing. Dormer had arrived in 1838, aged 20, with the trade of blacksmith. His gaol report was 'bad' and his convict record indicates a disobedient and disorderly man. He was admonished for drunkenness, sentenced to solitary confinement for neglect of duty, given hard labour on the gang for absence without leave, and flogged for disobedience, indecent language and absconding.⁵ Dormer was awarded a ticket of leave in 1846 but the record is silent on other

indulgences. That year William and Olive Bloor were married at St Luke's in Campbell Town by the chaplain, Rev William Bedford.⁶

It appears that the early years of this marriage were successful: personally and economically. Olive was likely contracted to her husband as a servant, as was often the case for convict women. She did not receive the indulgence of conditional pardon until the mid 1850s.

The couple had an adopted daughter who Olive referred to as Betsy. By 1858 the Dormers lived on a dairy near Cullenswood, owned by Robert Cameron of Clairville who possessed vast acreages leased to tenant farmers.⁷ William worked as a shearer and general hand at Rosedale from time to time. It seems that Olive, too, worked there, likely as the dairy maid for over the years of the late 1850s Leake was both paying Olive occasional wages and receiving money from her for him to remit to her mother in Staffordshire.⁸ He had fulfilled this banker role for her several times over the preceding years and this was likely one of the contributors to a relationship between Olive and the Leake family that lasted more than two decades. To be financially secure enough to send money to others was a mark of Olive's tenacity.

Olive's life in the decade of the 1860s became tumultuous. William Dormer moved off the land and became the licensee of the Angel Inn, a Launceston hotel in January 1862.⁹ It was not plain sailing. A snippet from the local press indicates that the front bar could be a place of deception.¹⁰

On 18 October, a bad cheque was passed over the bar of the Angel Inn. When uncovered, a case of forgery and uttering was brought against one George Gregory M'cair [McCair]. It seems that M'cair had drawn a cheque for 4 pounds 2 shillings in favour of George Davis purported to be signed by another man, Richard Pitt of Mona Vale. Pitt was the manager of Mona Vale, a grand Midlands estate, and he was able to prove the cheque to be a forgery. All the Dormer family gave evidence for the defence. Olive and Betsy claimed the man who 'uttered' the cheque was not the man in the dock, but another who had been with him and who had presented the cheque in payment for 'drink they had obtained'. Dormer's evidence suggested he had accepted the cheque as sound, but he did admit his eyesight was poor. Despite evidence demonstrating the hand writing on the cheque was that of the accused, the jury returned a verdict of not guilty.

Although they stood together as a family in defence of McCair, all was not well in the private rooms of the inn. Dormer failed to pay for the license to sell liquor and it was revoked on 3 February 1863.¹¹ Olive's later letter to Sarah Leake suggested she had become fearful of William and left him. Olive departed Launceston for Dunedin on the *Ziska*, as a steerage passenger with her daughter Betsy, on 21 February 1863.

It was 5 March 1863 when Olive, Betsy and 51 other passengers disembarked the *Ziska* in Port Chalmers.¹² Dunedin, also known as Mud-edin, was on the move. Almost overnight gold had transformed the struggling settlement into a vibrant town. In the last six months of 1861 Dunedin's population had doubled and numbered in the thousands. It was no longer the New Edinburgh, as Scottish as Scotland itself. The influx of miners shifted the balance of culture away from restrained Scots Presbyterian to 'a boisterous and cosmopolitan democracy.'¹³ The new population was mostly male, mostly younger, and mostly British. Men set their tents and shelters against the mud and the rain, the stench of open privies and cesspools, the filth of fish gutted in the street, and the rampant vermin.¹⁴ All sought the rewards of hard digging.

Olive established herself as a boarding house keeper. Boarding houses ranged in civility from exclusive to bleak. As shelters went, a good boarding house gave the lodger a home, connection with other newcomers, a street address that signified their place in 'society' and, for women, a respectable abode. For the owner, or in many cases, the lessee, boarding houses were an endless and exhausting round of domestic service and financial management. Boarding houses were often run by married or widowed women who needed a respectable income. Taking in boarders was often the best of the bad choices available for women: working in a tavern or bar, domestic service, prostitution.

Olive's bunk was not, as I first thought, a midnight flit from a violent man. The Leake Papers include letters regarding the payment of expenses for Dormer's medical treatment and for his later accommodation at the Ship's Hotel in Launceston.¹⁵ The original account shows that Dormer had been an inpatient at the Cornwall Hospital and Infirmary in Launceston for over three months during 1863, a long stint for any patient. Charles Leake paid Dormer's outstanding account which had been sent to him by the hospital administrator, Mr Miller. Separately, Joseph Ozanne, MD, had provided professional medical services to Dormer. The account for these was also paid by Charles Leake. Miller's letter to Leake suggests that Olive, rather than fleeing in the night, had openly planned her departure to Dunedin, for when she departed William was in the hospital: held there not because he was sick or injured, because he was insane and often unmanageable.

But Dormer followed Olive to Dunedin after being discharged from hospital and a period of rest at the Ship Hotel in Launceston. The proprietor, Dormer's friend John Mason, billed Leake in excess of 20 pounds for that accommodation.¹⁶ Dormer's arrival in Dunedin in July 1863 created chaos in Olive's life. If it were not for the people in the lodging house that she ran, she would have feared for her safety. In a letter written in 1863 to Sarah Leake, from whom Olive had received a gift of money, she described him as especially troublesome:

... he is very sly and cunning and it takes all my time to watch him and he worries the very life out of me I did not know of his coming till he walked in the house, and he leaped and jumped about just like a kangaroo.¹⁷

It got worse. On 21 September 1863, Joseph Hanley came to the boarding house in a state of intoxication. He wanted a man named York, ostensibly a boarder. After Olive tried to get him to go he pulled a pistol attempted to shoot her. Another lodger, carpenter Frederick George Silvain, rushed for the police who came and found Hanley concealed in the boarding house pantry.¹⁸ The judge directed the jury that asking a person to leave was not sufficient excuse for them to attempt murder.¹⁹ But Hanley was acquitted of the charge brought by Olive, ostensibly because he had not actually fired the gun. Hanley was held on the charge of common assault for he had attempted to shoot the constable as he was arrested. Evidence in the trial implied that Olive ran the boarding house on behalf of her husband but it is more plausible that social convention required the ruse.

Life did not improve. William Dormer was committed to the Seacliff Lunatic Asylum on 24 February 1864. He would remain there until his death, from asphyxiation the result of choking on a piece of gristle, in July 1891.²⁰ But perhaps Olive was not all that miserable. She had formed a relationship with George Silvain, the noble lodger. But business was not doing well. In May 1864 William Hooper took Olive to court over unpaid rent of 4 pounds 10 shillings – underscoring that she did not own the lodging house.²¹ Perhaps this was the last

straw for life in Dunedin. When next heard of Olive was living in Auckland: she decamped with George Silvain and Betsy to Grey Street where she again ran a boarding house.

Auckland was buoyant as the commercial capital of New Zealand, with steady development around its busy port supported by trade related to movement of men and gold. It was yet to suffer the loss of the vice regal seat to Wellington. The sun shone more often than in Dunedin. But the relationship with Silvain soured: badly. George went on a rampage, breaking Olive possessions and threatening her.²² He was apprehended on a warrant having been charged by Olive of using threatening language to her: that he would ill use her so as no one would be able to recognize her again. It was during the trial that Olive admitted to having lived with Silvain for the previous two years. The record indicates they quarrelled over Betsy who, it seems, Silvain had taken a shine to. Olive found them at the Wynyard Hotel and a nasty argument ensued during which George threatened Olive. The Court did not find Silvain of very good character. The matter was settled and George was required to 'keep the peace' toward Olive.²³

The next time Olive's name appeared in the newspapers she was not with Silvain, nor was she a boarding house keeper. Was this the same Olive Dormer? If so, life had turned down a notch and she was back in the pub trade, working as barmaid in the London Hotel in Auckland's Queen Street. She lived in. Henry Kerson, a surveyor, also had a room there. He liberated several of Olive's possessions, from under her pillow. After a damning preliminary hearing in which Kerson was described attempting to pawn the watch, chains and other trinkets that were later proven to be Olive's, he pleaded guilty and was sentence to prison.²⁴

Then, there she was, back at Grey Street. What the letter to Charles Leake that she addressed as from Grey Street in 1868 did not say was that she was now Olive Anderson. Olive Dormer, ostensibly a widow, had married John Anderson at his home in Auckland on 2 April 1867. Elizabeth Dormer, presumably her daughter Betsy, was one of two witnesses. Anderson, a bachelor, was a Master Mariner.²⁵ It is likely he was unaware that William Dormer, Olive's deranged husband, remained incarcerated at Seacliff Lunatic Asylum. An extremely odd similarity in the certificates of each of Olive's marriages was that she, a clearly literate woman, marked her signature with a cross.

Olive did not mention John Anderson when she wrote to Charles Leake. She did not use his name or indicate that her status had changed from estranged wife to newly-remarried. She would not have wanted the upright Leakes, distant in geography and social strata as they were, to be aware of her private circumstances. They were among the few people in the world who could trouble her about the legalities of her status. Olive did not again appear in the news.

¹ Olive Dormer to Charles Leake, 27 May 1868, in *Leake Papers* (Hobart: University of Tasmania Library Special and Rare Materials Collection). L1 M96.

² John Leake, "Day Book from January 1849," in *Leake Papers* (Hobart: Special Collections, University of Tasmania Library, 1849). L1 B927,

³ English Census, 1841. www.ancestry.com

⁴ Olive Bloor per *Emma Eugenia*, CON 41/1/1

⁵ William Dormer per *Lord William Bentinck* CON 31/1/12

⁶ Register of Marriages, RGD37/485/1846

⁷ Trudy Mae Cowley, *1858 Valuation Rolls for Central and Eastern Tasmania* (Hobart: Trudy Mae Cowley, 2005). pp L1-27 and L2-17.

⁸ Leake, "Day Book from January 1849."

⁹ *Hobart Town Gazette*, 14 January 1862, p. 56

¹⁰ Reported in the *Cornwall Chronicle* 5 November 1862 p. 5, and at greater length in the *Launceston Examiner*, 13 November 1862, p. 3, amongst others.

¹¹ *Hobart Town Gazette*, 3 February 1863, p. 359

¹² <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nzbound/otago1863.htm>

¹³ Erik Olssen, "Dunedin: no mean city," in *Heartlands: New Zealand Historians Write About Where History Happened*, ed. Kynan Gentry and Gavin McLean (Auckland: Penguin books, 2006). P. 151. For a more general background on this period in New Zealand's history see Philippa Mein-Smith, *A Concise History of New Zealand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). and Michael King, *The Penguin History of New Zealand* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2003).

¹⁴ Olssen, "Dunedin: no mean city." P 151

¹⁵ *Leake Papers* (Hobart: University of Tasmania Archives) L1 C101b, L1 C101d

¹⁶ 'John Mason to Charles Leake, 30 June 1863', in *Leake Papers* (Hobart: University of Tasmania Archives, 1863) L1 C101c

¹⁷ Olive Dormer to Sarah Leake, 22 August 1863, . L1 H77,

¹⁸ *Otago Witness*, 25 September 1863, p. 5

¹⁹ *Otago Witness*, 12 December 1863, p. 3

²⁰ William Dormer's inquest was reported in the *Otago Witness*, 6 August 1891 p. 11

²¹ *Otago Daily Times*, 12 May 1864, p. 5

²² *New Zealand Herald*, 8 September 1864, p. 6

²³ *Daily Southern Cross*, 12 September 1864, p. 4

²⁴ *New Zealand Herald*, 31 July 1865, p. 4

²⁵ Register of Marriages, New Zealand, District of Auckland, 2 April 1867, No: 1867/4474