

Surgeons Journal of the Female Convict Ship, "New Grove" between 24th November 1834 and 1st April 1835.

David Thomson – Surgeon.

General Remarks

I received appointment to join the *New Grove* at Scilly as there that vessel had put into port, in consequence of the dangerous illness of Mr. George Rowe, Surgeon Superintendent. I arrived on board on the 24th November and found that the female prisoners had been on board about five weeks. The *New Grove* was a vessel of 490 tons, almost new, the present being her second voyage. She was dry and her accommodations good, but there was no spare room, every berth being occupied. The number of prisoners amounted to one hundred and sixty five. There were five free women, and the number of children was twenty-eight. The state of discipline among the prisoners was as might have been expected I found rather lax. Mr. Rowe's illness having prevented him for some time paying the attention necessary, especially at the commencement of a voyage. Having now had charge of three female convict ships I may here detail the system of management generally pursued as that cannot fail to have influence on the health of the prisoners and consequently will not be out of place in a medical journal. Every morning as soon as the upper deck was washed and dried by swabbing etc the prison door was opened, and the names of the women called over. Every woman was then admitted on deck, only in her turn; bringing with her, her bed neatly lashed up, which she carried to the gangway nettings and delivered to a sailor appointed to stow them and where they remained during the day. No beds were allowed to remain in the prison during the day, except in wet or damp weather when of course all remained below. Between 8 & 9 o'clock breakfast was served out, and I invariably had a portion of each meal sent for my inspection to ascertain that the victuals were properly cooked, a point of great importance as regards the health of the prisoners. Immediately after breakfast the whole of the between decks was cleaned, under the superintendence of two women appointed to that duty after which I went round and minutely inspected every part. In male convict ships I would invariably prefer dry holystoning (only occasionally allowing them to be wetted when the weather was fine) as the damp state of the atmosphere arising from evaporation from the decks, as well as arising from the perspiration of many persons in a confined space imperfectly ventilated, must be a powerful cause of disease. But I found it almost impracticable to induce women to adopt this plan being so contrary to their normal mode of cleaning in situations to which they had been accustomed. With this therefore the lower decks were soaked and scrubbed with cloths using as little water as possible. Wind sails were much used when the atmosphere was dry, hanging stones occasionally. About 1 o'clock dinner was served out and at 4 tea. After each meal the deck of prison was swept, each mess taking that duty in rotation. At 5 p.m. beds were taken below & a short time before sunset all prisoners were called on deck, the list was called over, and as each answered to her name she was sent down and their prison was secured for the night. Thus twice a day at least every individual passed in review before me, those musters being invariably made by myself. A useful regulation, as I in a short time became familiar with the face of each, and from personal observation could detect any neglect in cleanliness of person or of dress. Medical Arrangements etc. The hospital in the *New Grove* was situated in the after part of the lower deck, a situation in every respect preferable to the Bows of the ship

where it was formerly placed. Ours occupied both sides, was large and airy & contained eight bed places and two cradles, a provision quite sufficient for the number of sick usually to be expected in a female convict ship. Three steady women were selected as nurses or attendants on the sick. I can suggest no alteration in the fitting of the hospital unless it be that the table supplied should be larger and have a rim or raised border around it to prevent articles from falling off from the motion of the ship, and that also the bulkhead, to which it is attached should be affixed to contain half a dozen quart bottles for containing mixtures in frequent use, but this alteration can be so easily done by the ship's carpenter on board that it is hardly necessary to notice it. I constantly visited the sick twice a day at least, & generally much oftener, seldom omitting to administer medicines prescribed myself, and directing diet etc, the convict nurses requiring a watchful superintendence, to prevent the sick being neglected, or their other duties being carelessly performed. The weather during the whole voyage was generally fine and dry, and there was hardly one day on which the prisoners were prevented coming on deck during some part of it. The number of persons daily applying for medical assistance is in general considerable, especially at the commencement of the voyage. The change in the diet, in the habits of life, as regards to exercise, sea sickness, depression and anxiety of mind arising from their situation see all tend to predispose the body to disease. The most common of these morbid affections are those arising from a disordered state of the *Prima Via*, indicated by headache, febrile affection, bowels either constipated or loose, sickness, foul tongue etc. An emetic followed by a brisk purgative in general readily removes these complaints, unless they pass into regular fever or dysentery. These are by far the most frequent complaints on board, and are met with during the whole of the voyage, and cause much the greater part of the expenditure of medicine that takes place. These cases are in general of a short duration seldom continuing beyond one, two, or three days that a detailed account in a medical journal would be superfluous. I shall proceed to give a short account of the cases recorded in this journal. Several cases of fever occurred, these altho' attended with considerable debility and emaciation partook more of the nature of inflammatory than Typhus fever, as delirium hardly appeared, and from intensity of headache and excited state of the circulation, bleeding was resorted to with decided benefit. Of dysentery, a considerable number of cases occurred. These are more common towards the end of the voyage when the weather becomes very cold, and appear to arise from the obstructed perspiration. I always confine patients with dysentery (however mild) to bed and trust to purgative and diaphoretic medicines with diluents and appropriate diet to effect a cure. The women delivered of children on board amounted to five, they all had easy labours and recovered in a very short time. Two of the infants were still born and having been dead some days before delivery, probably partial separation of the placenta occasioned by slipping the foot in going up or down the ladders was the cause of these accidents. Of pneumonic inflammation, a considerable number of cases occurred, but there was nothing unusual in the symptoms or treatment. Diarrhoea among the very young children is of common occurrence and is of difficult cure, and the danger to life not small. This disease may be ascribed to the want of attention to the diet by the mothers. Infants at the breast thrive well, but from the period of weaning till they are four or five years old, they are much subject to diarrhoea inducing great debility, emaciation, fever and consequent danger. These young children were allowed a portion of fresh food prepared for convalescents and other persons in a state of debility, from prescribed meals and medical comforts. Only one case of long duration, or great severity

occurred on this voyage and tho' the child in question was long in a state considered quite hopeless yet he ultimately recovered. With regard to diet or rations allowed for female prisoners, clothing or arrangements for their accommodation in the prison and on deck I have no suggestion to offer in the way of improvement and I consider the circumstance of so many prisoners being transported to such a distant region as the Australian colonies with so little serious sickness or loss of life as the best proof that these arrangements are brought as nearly to a state of perfection, as circumstances will admit. - And I March - April 2007 19 may take this opportunity of stating that the present voyage is the third in succession, in I have had charge and which no death has occurred.

Signed.....David Thomson

Transcribed by Greg Greenwood and Paul Davies