

# ELIZABETH DYER

[*Royal Admiral* (4), 1842]

by

Don Bradmore

One of the most appealing stories among those of the 13,500 (approx.) women who were transported to Van Diemens Land (VDL) as convicts between the years 1812 and 1853 is that of Elizabeth DYER.<sup>1</sup>

Probably not yet twenty years old when she arrived at Hobart aboard *Royal Admiral* in 1842, Elizabeth led a quiet, modest life but a seemingly happy one in the colony. There, her conduct was utterly without blemish. In 1856, she married a good man with whom she appeared to live happily until his death in 1874. Together, they had four children. When she passed away at the age of fifty-nine in 1883, it could be said of her that her life had been exemplary.

But that had not always been the case. At the trial in England which led to her conviction and transportation, Elizabeth was described as a loose woman. In her teenage years she had been troublesome.

This is her story ...

According to family sources, Elizabeth was born at Bath, Somerset, England, the daughter of John and Elizabeth (nee HICKS) DYER, on 29 March 1824.<sup>2</sup> Nothing is known about her childhood but it is apparent that, from about the age of fifteen at least, she had been wayward.<sup>3</sup>

She was seventeen years old when, on 25 October 1841, she was charged at the Bristol Quarter Sessions with 'stealing thirty shillings from the person'. With her in the dock was her accomplice in the crime, nineteen year-old John OLLIS. The man from whom the pair had stolen the money was William EVANS, a farmer. Evans told the court that he had been drinking in a public-house and that Elizabeth had induced him to go home with her. When they had arrived at her dwelling, Ollis had entered the room and the two of them had wrestled his money from him and fled.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Conduct record: CON40/1/4, Image 54; Description list: CON19/1/3, Image 181; Indent: CON15/1/2, Image 12.

<sup>2</sup> [www.ancestry-com.au](http://www.ancestry-com.au). Elizabeth's birth date and the names of her parents have not been verified.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth's 'waywardness': see description of events that led to her conviction at her trial on 25 October 1841.

<sup>4</sup> *Bristol Times and Mirror* (Bristol, England), 30 October 1841, p.4, available online at <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/search/results/1841-01-01/1841-12->

Arrested shortly afterwards, Elizabeth and John were sent to trial. On 25 October 1841, both were found guilty and sentenced to transportation for ten years. In handing down their sentences, the judge made it clear that he had lost patience with the number of crimes of this nature that had come before him in recent times. He remarked that the practice of loose women alluring countrymen and others to houses of ill-fame and then robbing them was becoming very frequent and that he should on all occasions punish offenders of this class with the utmost severity.<sup>5</sup>

Was Elizabeth, at seventeen, a 'loose woman'? Was she living at a 'house of ill-fame' at that time? Perhaps the answers to these questions will never be known – but what is certain is that Elizabeth was already in a relationship with John Ollis. Later, in VDL, Elizabeth said that they had lived together as man and wife 'for two or three years'. For quite some years after she had arrived VDL she was known both as 'Elizabeth Dyer' and 'Elizabeth OLLIS'.<sup>6</sup>

John Ollis departed England aboard the convict ship *Isabella* (2) on 19 January 1842. He was disembarked at Hobart on 21 May that year. In VDL, he managed to avoid serious trouble and was granted a ticket of leave on 25 May 1847 and a conditional pardon on 10 July 1849. He died from tetanus on 5 October 1860. He was still only thirty-eight years old. There is no evidence that he had had any contact with Elizabeth again.<sup>7</sup>

Elizabeth, however, spent six or seven months in an English gaol before she was put aboard *Royal Admiral* which, with its cargo of 204 female prisoners, left Woolwich bound for the distant colony of VDL on 5 May 1842.<sup>8</sup> The voyage was to be a long and very troubled one.

The trouble started, in fact, even before the ship had left port. In his medical journal, the ship's surgeon, Dr. John ROBERTS, who had gone aboard as early as 22 February that year, describes the dramatic events which occurred aboard *Royal Admiral* in the days before its departure:

*The ship shortly after my joining was placed under peculiar circumstances, the first mate (Bell) was drunk excessively for five days and the Master (Weakner) not on board, and early on the second morning following his return, he jumped out from his cabin window and was drowned. The mate after this attempted to destroy*

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[31?basicsearch=ollis&exactsearch=false&retrievecountrycounts=false&newspapertitle=bristol%20times%20and%20mirror](http://www.brisolmirror.com.au/basicsearch=ollis&exactsearch=false&retrievecountrycounts=false&newspapertitle=bristol%20times%20and%20mirror)

<sup>5</sup> *Bristol Times and Mirror* (Bristol, England), 30 October 1841, p.4.

<sup>6</sup> *De facto*: CON15/1/2, Image 12; CON40-1-4, Image 54. Elizabeth's conduct record lists her alias as 'Elizabeth OLLIS'.

<sup>7</sup> CON33-1-20, Image 171; Ollis, death: 35/276/1860, Launceston. For more on Ollis, see *Colonial Times*, 14 April 1848, p.4; *Launceston Examiner*, 11 May 1850; *The Cornwall Chronicle*, 8 June 1853, p.4.

<sup>8</sup> <http://members.iinet.net.au/~perthdps/convicts/shipsTAS.html>

*himself in the steward's berth, and he was obliged to be confined with a guard over him, until the arrival of the owner, when he was discharged. A [new] Master was put in temporary command [but] when the crew refused duty, another Master (Captain. T. Fell) was permanently appointed and before leaving England he discharged the second mate ... A new first mate that had joined us and others were appointed. Some of the crew returned to their duty and others procured.<sup>9</sup>*

This was certainly not a good start – but much worse was still to come! Continuing, Roberts writes that all went well until the vessel had crossed the equator. Then, one morning, all the men who had supposedly been on watch the previous night were discovered to be drunk. It was soon discovered that a young, slightly-built apprentice had managed to crawl through a small aperture near his bunk and get into a hold where the ship's provisions of rum were stored. He had then brought out a quantity of the rum and had handed it to members of the crew. Of course, the ship's officers had taken measures immediately to prevent this from happening again – and when a deputation of the men came forward to beg forgiveness from the captain, all seemed to have returned to normal.

However, when the ship docked at the Cape of Good Hope to replenish its supplies of food, Captain Fell had dismissed the first mate, a man by the name of BARKER, charging him with 'mutinous behavior at sea' a few days earlier. Fell also suspended from duty several men whom he suspected of being involved in the rum affair and had others confined to their quarters.

According to Roberts, the remaining members of the crew took grave exception to Fell's actions and, as the voyage progressed, became more insubordinate and troublesome. On 8 September, a crewman by the name of KELLY refused an order from one of the ship's officers. Captain Fell had then gone towards Kelly with a loaded pistol and, when Kelly continued to defy him, he had fired directly towards him. Fortunately (for Kelly), the pistol misfired. Kelly was then put in handcuffs. But, again, the crew had taken exception to Fell's actions and refused to work for the remainder of the voyage. Roberts writes that, until the ship reached Hobart, it had had to be worked by the officers and the few crewmen who had remained loyal to them.

Eventually, on 24 February 1841, the ship reached Hobart. The voyage had taken 142 days – one of the longest passages recorded for a convict ship from England to VDL during the past two or three decades.<sup>10</sup> Upon arrival, thirteen crewmen were taken to prison in handcuffs by the local police. All were sentenced to spend three months on the tread mill.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.femaleconvicts.org.au/convict-ships/convict-ship-records>

<sup>10</sup> <http://members.iinet.net.au/~perthdps/convicts/shipsTAS.html>

Roberts finished his report with words of praise for the behavior of the women prisoners during the voyage. He wrote: ‘... *all the women behaved extremely praiseworthy and orderly during it.*’<sup>11</sup>

At Hobart, Elizabeth was allocated Police Number 346. She was described as being twenty years old, five feet six inches (abt. 168 cms.) tall, of a fair complexion, with light brown hair, blue eyes and a small nose and chin. She said she was a dressmaker by trade and that she could read and write.<sup>12</sup>

Curiously, there is no information on Elizabeth’s conduct record about where or how she was employed in VDL except for one brief note saying that she was in Swansea in 1845. On 26 March 1845, she was granted a ticket of leave.<sup>13</sup>

As it happens, however, in that same year – 1845 – Elizabeth was to receive a stroke of well-deserved good fortune.

For at least thirty years before Elizabeth’s arrival in VDL, as more and more convicts had arrived, the concern of the government and free settlers with a growing lawlessness in the colony had been apparent. Since the early days, ravaging bands of armed bushrangers, many of whom were absconders from the gaols at Macquarie Harbour and Maria Island, had spread terror throughout the island in desperate bids for freedom and survival. Of equal concern had been the ‘native blacks’ who were seen by most as ‘a savage and vindictive race’ with murder and theft their only intent.<sup>14</sup>

In the face of such threats, some individuals had distinguished themselves by their courage in defending themselves, their families and their property from attacks. The deeds of these individuals were often heroic. When the attacks had occurred in regions where the assistance of police was not available, the heroes had earned the heartfelt thanks of their neighbours and the appreciation of the population of the colony in general.

On occasions, the bravery of these individuals had won them tangible rewards as well. For instance, in 1824, when a settler named George TAYLOR had managed to fight off an attack on his isolated home by a gang of bushrangers led by the notorious Matthew BRADY, he had been presented with ‘a Piece of (silver) Plate’, a gift purchased by neighbours who handed it to him

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.femaleconvicts.org.au/convict-ships/convict-ship-records>

<sup>12</sup> CON19/1/3, Image 181.

<sup>13</sup> CON40/1/4, Image 54.

<sup>14</sup> *Hobart Town Gazette*, 18 November 1826, p.2.

with this note: '[We] beg you to consider it as a token of our due sense of a conduct that is approved, and we trust will be imitated by the Colonists at large.'<sup>15</sup> In September 1825, a ticket-of-leave man by the name of WILKINSON was rewarded with 'emancipation and the pecuniary reward of £10' when he assisted a party of soldiers in the capture, near Jericho, of William PRIEST who, at that time, was 'the most dangerous and worst of the bushrangers'.<sup>16</sup> In 1829, Lieutenant-Governor George ARTHUR had granted conditional pardons to ticket-of-leave men, John ASHTON (*Guildford*, 1820) and Robert CALDWELL (*Malabar*, 1821), who, while serving with the Field Police, had been instrumental in the capture of convicts who had absconded from a property near Perth in the north of the colony.<sup>17</sup> In October 1830, Arthur saw fit to grant a conditional pardon to convict John BENFIELD (*Lady Ridley*, 1821) 'to mark in a special manner his high admiration for the intrepidity, firmness and coolness that he had displayed in the capture of three Aboriginal natives.' In announcing the reward, *The Hobart Town Courier* commented that:

*The manner in which Benfield succeeded in effecting the capture of these natives is so praiseworthy and in every respect completely in accordance with the views of Government, that His Excellency has directed the circumstances under which it took place to be made public in the hope that it may stimulate other prisoners to act with equal humanity and forbearance to any of these unfortunate people who may happen to fall in their way, in the firm reliance that such meritorious conduct will at all times meet with the reward which it so well deserves.*<sup>18</sup>

Rewards such as these were still being given out when Elizabeth Dyer arrived in the colony in 1842. It is not surprising that most of the recipients were men; at that time the male population of the colony far exceeded the female population. But women had not been overlooked.

In 1836, Lieutenant-Governor Arthur had granted a free pardon to convict Isabella RENSHAW (*Hydery*, 1832) for her heroic conduct in the capture of Henry HUNT, another violent bushranger. She had, in fact, saved her husband from certain death at Hunt's hands.<sup>19</sup> And in

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<sup>15</sup> See Matthew Brady in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*: <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/brady-matthew-1822>; *Hobart Town Gazette*, 6 August 1824, p. 2

<sup>16</sup> *Hobart Town Gazette*, 24 September 1825, p.2.

<sup>17</sup> *Colonial Times*, 9 October 1829, p.2.

<sup>18</sup> *The Hobart Town Courier*, 16 October 1830, p.1.

<sup>19</sup> *Launceston Advertiser*, 30 June 1836, p. 4; Renshaw CON40-1-7, Image 289.

May 1839, Lieutenant-Governor FRANKLIN granted seventeen year-old Esther Rebecca SOLOMON 'the means of purchasing one hundred acres of land' of her own choosing as a reward for her meritorious conduct when, in the previous year, the home of her father, David SOLOMON, an innkeeper at Antill's Ponds, had been attacked - and his life threatened - by a gang of bushrangers led by James ELY.<sup>20</sup>

By the beginning of the 1850s, more than four hundred rewards for such acts of courage had been announced in the colony's newspapers. Most frequently, the rewards were given for bravery related to the apprehension of bushrangers and armed absconders but others were presented for such acts of courage as the saving of people from drowning, the protection of property from fire and the provision of information leading to the apprehension of law-breakers.<sup>21</sup>

And so it happened, that on 3 May 1845, after Elizabeth Dyer had served only three years of her ten year sentence, she was granted a conditional pardon for the role she had played in rendering assistance to the Master of *Royal Admiral* and his officers when mutinous members of the crew had been preparing to take over the ship whilst at sea in 1842. The *Colonial Times* announcement of the award read as follows:

*CONVICT DEPARTMENT.*

*Comptroller-General's Office, April 24, 1845.*

*It is hereby notified to the under-mentioned individuals, that it is the Lieutenant-Governor's intention to recommend them to the gracious consideration of Her Majesty the Queen for Conditional Pardons, for their meritorious conduct on board the Royal Admiral Convict Ship, on her passage from England:-*

*Elizabeth Dyer, Royal Admiral  
Mary Harford, ditto.*

*M. Forster, Comptroller-General.*<sup>22</sup>

Mary HARFORD was a prisoner with Elizabeth on *Royal Admiral* during its voyage to VDL in 1842.

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<sup>20</sup> *The Hobart Town Courier and Van Diemen's Land Gazette*, 6 September 1839, p.2; *Colonial Times*, 24 April, 1838, p.7; *The Hobart Town Courier*, 27 April 1838, p.3; *Launceston Advertiser*, 25 June 1838, p.2.

<sup>21</sup> *Launceston Advertiser*, 21 January 1836, p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> *Colonial Times*, 3 May 1845, p.2; see also the report of J.R. Roberts, surgeon-superintendent, 'Royal Admiral', 1842, at [www.femaleconvicts.org.au/docs/ships/RoyalAdmiral1842\\_SJ.pdf](http://www.femaleconvicts.org.au/docs/ships/RoyalAdmiral1842_SJ.pdf);

The reason for the reward given to the two women was described in these terms:

*Having given information of the intention of some of the seamen of the vessel in which they arrived to set fire thereto and in the confusion to make their escape in the boats with certain of the female convicts; in consequence of which the project was defeated ...*<sup>23</sup>

Little more is known about Elizabeth's life. On 1 January 1856, she married Charles WILLS at Swanport, Tasmania.<sup>24</sup> The marriage entry is interesting. Charles, twenty-six years old, is described as a 'gardener'. Elizabeth, whose age is shown as thirty, is described as a 'widow' and her name is given as 'Elizabeth *Ellis* Dyer'. Obviously, the 'Ellis' is incorrect - it should have been 'Ollis'. But two things are evident: first, Elizabeth must have known that John Ollis had passed away and, second, she still thought of him as her first husband.<sup>25</sup>

In the years which followed, Elizabeth gave birth to George Herbert WILLS in 1857, Francis Charles WILLS in 1859, Clara Elizabeth WILLS in 1861 and Fanny Sarah WILLS in 1863.<sup>26</sup>

When Charles Wills passed away on 4 September 1874, the following announcement appeared in the *Launceston Examiner*: '*WILLS – On the 4<sup>th</sup> September, at Panshanger, after a short but severe illness, Charles Wills, gardener, upon the estate of the Hon. Joseph ARCHER, in his 40<sup>th</sup> year, leaving a sorrowing widow, two sons and two daughters, with many sincere friends.*'<sup>27</sup>

Elizabeth died on 8 June 1883. A short announcement in the *Launceston Examiner* marked her passing: '*WILLS – At midnight, on 8<sup>th</sup> June, at Hilston, Upper Piper, after a severe illness, Elizabeth Ollis, relict of the late Charles Wills, of Bovey Tracey, Devonshire, England, in the 60<sup>th</sup> year of her age.*'<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Colonial Times*, 3 May 1845, p.2; see also the report of J.R. Roberts, surgeon-superintendent, 'Royal Admiral', 1842, transcribed by Port Arthur Historic Site for Female Factory Research Group, at [www.femaleconvicts.org.au/docs/ships/RoyalAdmiral1842\\_SJ.pdf](http://www.femaleconvicts.org.au/docs/ships/RoyalAdmiral1842_SJ.pdf);

<sup>24</sup> Marriage: 37/91/1856, Great Swanport.

<sup>25</sup> Marriage, Dyer/Wills: 37/91/1856, Great Swanport.

<sup>26</sup> Children: George, 33/604/1857, Glamorgan; Francis, 33/668/1859, Glamorgan; Clara – birth not recorded?; Fanny, 33/954/1863, Longford.

<sup>27</sup> *Launceston Examiner*, 8 September 1874, p.2; Charles was probably forty-four.

<sup>28</sup> Death: 35/199/1883, Launceston; *Launceston Examiner*, 11 June 1883 p.1.

Even at the time of Elizabeth's death, the memories of her life with John Ollis and of the crime that had brought her to VDL all those years ago had still not been forgotten.