

Deaths at the New Norfolk Hospital for the Insane

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In 1827, here in Van Diemen's Land, Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur, was concerned about the condition of the colony's aged and chronically ill residents, so he instructed that invalids in Hobart Town were to be transferred to the barracks at New Norfolk under the charge of Dr Robert Officer.

The following year Dr Officer complained of poor housing and the prevalence of diseases in the barracks and deemed it 'absolutely necessary' that 'comfortable habitation' be found for the affected residents. A new hospital, the New Norfolk hospital, was begun three years later, in 1830 – it was partly occupied during 1831, and by 1833 it was finished and capable of holding 110 male and 20 female sick and invalid patients – as well as some patients who were mentally ill. The new arrangement was a great improvement on 'old rather haphazard methods'.

Over time, conditions in the New Norfolk Hospital were the subject of criticism, and the main treatment of the patients was generally one of 'coercion'. A problem of overcrowding also existed, and by 1846 the increase in numbers had become such a problem that many insane patients were sleeping on the floor, so some of the invalids were transferred to the Colonial Hospital while others were sent to the convict invalid station at Impression Bay on the Tasman Peninsular.

In December 1847 the then Superintendent, Dr John Meyer, was concerned that: 'As regards the insane' patients, 'no attempt is made to cure' them. The patient is 'merely imprisoned there, and many from mental derangement become confirmed maniacs in consequence of the imprisonment and harsh treatment'. New laws permitted any person to be incarcerated in the hospital upon the certificate from one medical man. Much of the patient accommodation was 'dark, comfortless, and quite unfit for the treatment of the insane. The bathrooms and lavatories were so defective that it was difficult to secure the personal cleanliness of the patients', and the absence of proper stores and pantries rendered the 'proper management of the Institution difficult, if not impossible'. Other doctors were even less impressed with the 'staff quality and staffing policy', and with some exceptions, the attendants and nurses were 'ill fitted, by either, bodily or other qualifications for dealing with the insane patients'.

In October 1855 the British government handed the New Norfolk asylum over to the colonial government. Conditions were found to be 'far behind' similar institutions in the UK – internal accommodation was small, badly constructed, ill ventilated, dark and dismal. The day rooms were inadequate for their intended purpose, and the yards and grounds were of the 'most limited character'. Such was the situation when female convicts who had been sentenced to Van Diemen's Land were admitted.

Surviving information on these convicts and ex-convicts is limited, but I have found 23 who died in the Hospital for the Insane, ten of whom were buried at the nearby St Matthew's Church of England burial ground in Stephen Street – which was the first burial ground in the area. Although it officially closed in 1875, burials continued at Stephen Street until 30 December 1883.

Rosetta Oliver, convict per *Emma Eugenia* 1844, who married 32-year-old George Hill at St George's Church, Battery Point in May 1845, was admitted to the asylum in 1860 from the General Hospital at Hobart, at which time she was described as 'Muttering. Talking nonsense. Laughing and crying without cause' and having a 'Vacant and idiotic expression'. Rosetta died in the Hospital for the Insane in November 1876 aged 66 from 'Softening of the brain with heart disease'. She is the only convict I have so far found who died in the Hospital for the Insane and was buried at Cornelian Bay Cemetery. She was buried in the pauper section as 'Rosetta Cleves ux Hill'. Apart from Rosetta and the ten buried at New Norfolk, I have been unable to find the location of the remaining twelve.

The ages on admission into the Hospital for the Insane of these 23 ex-convicts who died there, ranged from 33 to 78 years old. The youngest two were aged 33: Sarah Robinson, per *Lord Auckland* 1849, who was born in Ireland, was admitted in November 1859, and the other 33-year-old was Julia Daley, per *Gilbert Henderson* 1840, who was admitted in November 1854. Sarah Robinson was in the asylum for fifteen years, where she died in December 1874 aged 48, from disease of the lungs. She was buried at St Matthew's Church of England burial ground. Julia Daley, from Cork, Ireland, who was described as inclined to destroy her clothes and having an unsound mind, was admitted with *amentia* – a type of severe mental retardation characterized by subnormal development of intellectual capacity – and after 21 years in the institution, she died of *apoplexy* (stroke) in January 1875 aged 55. Susan Johnson, wife of Robert Goldspink was admitted, at the age of 78 in October 1876, and died just two months later of 'natural decay'.

The length of residence in the asylum ranged from only a few weeks for two women to 28 years. Ellen Reason, convict per *Garland Grove* 1843, who married Thomas Prouse in March 1845 in Launceston, was admitted into the asylum on 16 August 1878 and died of 'natural decay' just three weeks later, at the age of fifty. The other one to reside in the asylum less than one month was Anne Kerr, per *John Calvin* 1848. Admitted in May 1877, Anne, a pauper, died aged 76 of 'natural decay' on 4 June. The ex-convict to spend the most time in the asylum was Eleanor/Ellen Sullivan per *Nautilus* 1838. Eleanor and Robert Elliston had married in Launceston in April 1844, and Ellen was admitted into the asylum in May 1846, where she was until her death in the hospital aged 63 from 'disease of the brain and liver' 28 years later, in July 1874.

Eighty-three-year-old Elizabeth Adam, convict per *Mary* 1823 was the oldest known female ex-convict to die in the hospital. Elizabeth, who married Aaron Shepherd/Sheppard in 1842 at Longford, was admitted into the asylum in February 1856 at the age of 67 as a convict pauper suffering from *amentia* and intemperance and having been feeble for three years. Elizabeth who lived in the asylum for 19 years, died of 'natural decay' in January 1875 at the age of 63, and was buried in St Matthew's Church burial ground.

The youngest ex-convict to die in the Hospital for the Insane was 42-year-old Dublin-born Mary Ann Rowan, per *Blackfriar* 1851, who, on admission in January 1868, was described as having an 'unsound mind' and wanting to kill her husband. Mary aged 21, and 22-year-old John Clay married in the New Norfolk Catholic Chapel in January 1856. Mary, as a pauper, died of 'Manition (debility)' in September 1870 after two years and eight months in the asylum.

Life was very sad for many of the patients, and was particularly so for Mary Holmes, per *Maria* 1849. Mary, despite claiming she was married to William Dunn who was in America, married Francis Fenwick at *Snake Banks*, the property of William Gibson Esq on 3 October 1851. In November 1878, just two years after her marriage to Francis, Mary was admitted to the hospital, and reported to have a form of 'paralysis agitans' [Parkinson's Disease]. Mary also had an 'unsound mind' and was 'not under proper care and control'. Aged sixty, the widow, who had previously been a patient in the Launceston Invalid Depot, was incoherent and made use of the 'most filthy terms'. She was 'dirty in her habits and very excitable when spoken to'. She did not appear to know where she was, who she was, or anything of her previous life, and according to the gaol warder Mr O'Keefe, she was 'constantly muttering ... unable to wash herself, and often refused to eat her food'. Mary died as 'Maria Fenwick or Dunn' in January 1881 aged 76, from 'Brain Disease & natural Decay'.

Perhaps indicative of conditions in the Hospital for the Insane around this time and affecting some of the ex-convicts was a male patient who, reported to be suffering from paralysis, was also 'smothered' in vermin. Vermin were in 'his head, beard, under his arms and lower person', his condition

was 'favourable to their rapid propagation' and he was suffering 'perfect torture'. It was no wonder he 'tears himself about'.

At least one convict was admitted into the Hospital for the Insane twice. Ann Cobley, *Gilbert Henderson* 1840, was first admitted in May 1840 aged 34 after a diagnosis of *amentia* and being 'incoherent' and 'sometimes violent'. Her second admission in 1859 as Ann Coblin, was after 19 years of suffering from mania. Ann was 'constantly employed at her needle', and her looks and manner were an 'indication of insanity'. She spoke in a 'loud incoherent manner' and 'answered with a loud voice and peculiar smile'. Ann, a pauper, died from 'Diarrhoea and natural decay' aged 68 in April 1874, and was buried at St Matthew's Church of England burial ground.

The years of admission of the known convicts and ex-convicts ranged from 1840 until 1884. The year with the most admissions was 1883 with three, while deaths occurred between 1860 and 1890, the highest number being four in 1877, with none between 1885 and 1889.

The main reason given for admission into the Hospital for the Insane was Amentia, while the cause of seven deaths was 'natural decay'. Five patients died from disease or softening of the brain, and some of these deaths were also attributed to both causes. Other deaths were due to bronchitis; thoracic effusion and general disability; disease of the lungs [tuberculosis]; diarrhoea; rupture of the liver; paralysis and epilepsy, while Margaret Connors, per *John William Dare* 1852, described as 'A person of unsound mind', was admitted to the asylum from the Invalid depot in March 1877. She was observed to have 'an entire absence of intelligence': – and was 'in a state of hopeless imbecility'. 'She cannot be got out of bed and takes very little food: – seldom speaks: – is quite imbecile and harmless'. Margaret aged 65, died in July 1877 from 'Diarhea and disease of the Heart and Brain'.

IN SUMMARY

The ages of the female convicts at the time of their admission ranged from 33 to 78, the 78-year-old died just two months after admission. The length of stay in the asylum ranged from three weeks to 28 years, and their ages at the time of death ranged from 42 to an 83-year-old who was in the asylum for 19 years.

I do have names and details of the 23 female convicts known to have died at the Hospital for the Insane with me today. If anyone would like to see these – and these 23 were just a few of the many women who were patients for part of their lives in the New Norfolk Hospital for the Insane, and are some of the many hundreds who were admitted into the New Norfolk Asylum. The lives of these women, who were transported across the world, and who suffered mental illness are only a small part of the history of Tasmania and deserve to be remembered and recognised for their lives before current treatment methods for mental health were available.

Thank you.