

## THE WOMEN WHO DIED ON THE *MARGARET* IN 1843

By Jan Westerink, 2018

The *Margaret* was a ship, built at Chepstow in 1829 and was rated by the Admiralty as class A1. That rating was given to vessels which had not passed a prescribed age, had complied with the standard laid down for this class, and been kept in the highest state of repair and equipment.<sup>1</sup> However, the records of surgeons McAvoy and Mould on the journey in 1843 show that the standards must have been low.

Bateson writes that it is impossible to determine the standard of professional ability of the naval surgeons who accepted employment as superintendents in convict ships and believes that the probability is that those of outstanding ability were exceptional.<sup>2</sup> Most surgeons found employment in the convict service unattractive: the work was exacting, the conditions unpleasant, and the pay poor.<sup>3</sup> Around this time, surgeons were ordered not to embark any convict suffering an infectious disease, or who was unfit to undertake the voyage. However, many convicts sickened by their confinement in unhealthy gaols, concealed their disabilities or lied about their health in order to be able to embark.<sup>4</sup> Added to that, the state of medical knowledge at the time was poor – the only infectious disease which could be controlled was smallpox and very little was known about the transmission of infections or the causes of such diseases as dysentery, typhus and cholera. There was not even general acceptance that consumption was contagious.<sup>5</sup>

The *Margaret* made a protracted voyage by way of the Cape and lost four women on the passage. Her voyage took 164 days, much longer than the *John Renwick* which took only 124 days (arriving April 1843) and the *Asiatic* at 118 days (arriving September). Given the poor conditions on board, that journey must have seemed interminable. However, after Surgeon Mould took over, there were no more deaths and overall, her mortality was only one death to every 39 convicts whereas the *Garland Grove* arrived at Hobart in 1843 with eight deaths – a mortality rate of one death to every 23.3 convicts. The *East London*, also in 1843, had 31 deaths – a mortality rate of one death to every 7.8 prisoners.

I tried to imagine the atmosphere in the hospital and it can't have been good. It was so noisy that McAvoy could not check the lungs and breathing of patient Jean Agnew. The boat leaked and bedding was wet; waves and wind would have made it hard to maintain balance. Among those admitted to the ward were women who were coughing and spitting up mucous; others were moaning with pain due to what he called rheumatism; some had fever and would

be restless; and finally, there was Mary Lynch giving birth whilst others were dying. The nurse was without his presence from the end of March, when he took to his bed (also wet) suffering from rheumatism. Nurse and patients must have felt deserted.

The four women who died on board were all under the care of surgeon, Dr B McAvoy. He left the ship at the Cape of Good Hope and was replaced by Dr J Mould. There is some discrepancy in tallies of the number of women on board because the *Courier* in Hobart reported that there were 160 convicts there to celebrate Christmas in London in 1842,<sup>6</sup> yet only 152 landed in Hobart, which indicates that perhaps only 156 sailed and that is the number cited by Bateson. I wondered if four of those celebrating Christmas were off-loaded by the surgeon because of poor health. This was the *Margaret's* fourth trip as a transport. The ship sailed on 5 February but had to return for repairs before recommencing the trip. They arrived in Hobart in July 1843. The women who died were: Jane Biggerstaff, hospitalised 7 February – 15 April; Jean Agnew, hospitalised 8 March – 7 May; Grace Schofield, hospitalised 2 April – 10 April; Mary Lynch, hospitalised 10 April – 18 April.

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#### JANE BIGGERSTAFF

Jane was brought to court at the Old Bailey on 28 November 1843. She was 17 and she described herself as single and said that she was an upper house maid. She faced two charges. She was lucky with the first one – she was indicted for stealing (‘pocketpicking’) on 26 July and the items were a purse, value 6*d.* and 4 shillings which were the property of ‘Elizabeth Horton, the younger’. Because Elizabeth was only eight years old, the court decided that she was too young to understand what it meant to give an oath. The judge, Mr Barron Parke, ordered the case dismissed and Jane was acquitted.

But that was only the first charge she faced and in the next one she was not so lucky. Still at the Old Bailey and on the same day, before Lord Chief Justice Denman, she was charged with stealing, on 3 October, 1 cloak, value 2*l* and 1 printed book, value 1*s*, which belonged to the Reverend James William Minshull Worthington, from James William Minshull Worthington junior. Apparently young James, although younger than Elizabeth Horton, was able to take the oath.

James Worthington probably stood proud with the importance of the occasion as he said, ‘I am seven years old and am the son of the Reverend Dr Worthington of Mecklenburgh

Street. I was walking in Holborn at around half past ten o'clock in the morning, with a book and cloak on my arm. I was coming home from school. The prisoner met me and said, "How do you do?" I said, "Quite well." Then she asked if I knew Dr Worthington, to which I replied "Yes".'

James told of the deception that Jane used to steal his book and cloak. He claimed that, 'She said, "If you go down to 15 Chancery Lane you will see a boy named John, who will give you a bat and ball". But when I said I couldn't because I had my cloak and book, she told me that she was going to my mother and she would take them home for me. So she took them.' James went on to explain that when he went to 15 Chancery Lane but couldn't find a boy there, so he went to number 16 and there spoke to a gentleman who kindly wrote a note to his father after discovering what had happened. James probably finished his evidence with a firm voice when he said, 'I am quite sure she is the person.'

Next the court heard from James Davis who was eleven years old and lived with his father at Finsbury market. He described seeing Jane in late October near Gray's Inn with a book and he said that she gave him the book and told him to take it to his mother 'because she would know what to do with it'. He identified the book that was in evidence before the court as the book that Jane had given him. James Worthington junior was then recalled and he identified the book as the one that was stolen from him. He recognised it as one that his father, the Reverend Worthington had given him.

The court was told of other charges against her and the judge didn't take long to declare that Jane Biggerstaff was guilty and that she should be transported for 10 years. Considering the details of both cases, it seems that Jane was adept at conning children into giving up their valuables. It is not clear when Jane was sent to the *Margaret*, but she would have been there for the Christmas celebrations. The ship sailed on 5 February and two days later she was admitted to the hospital – never to leave. The surgeon diagnosed her as suffering from *Phthisis and Rheum*.<sup>7</sup>

Although he kept a journal, McAvoy was ill, suffering from rheumatism, and unable to personally attend the hospital from 30 March. He wrote that he was confined to his bed and was receiving reports from the nurse. That nurse may have been Louisa La Grange, a French woman deported for stealing in London.<sup>8</sup> The surgeon for the second part of the journey wrote that she was helpful with the sick. Louisa was a remarkable woman who managed to obtain high levels of freedom once in Hobart. If her memoir can be believed, she dined with the Governor and associated with members of society, before leaving Van Diemen's Land,

travelling to the United States and finally back to Paris. She does not appear to have had any medical training, but how many ‘nurses’ did at that time? McAvoy wrote:

Indisposition prevented me filling this Journal, but, I have given the most prominent diseases, and it is a cause of regret that in the cases which terminated fatally I was not able to pay them the attention required. They were aggravated if not called into action by the wet and leaky state of the Ship. The Patients who died of Phthisis require no comment it was fully developed previous to leaving the Channel. The passage to the Cape of Good Hope was long & protracted the wind unfavourable added to the wet & leaky state of the Ship made it anything but comfortable.

It was busy in the hospital around the time of the deaths in April: Jane Biggerstaff was a long-term patient, dying 15 April; Jean Agnew (*Phthisis*) had been hospitalised on 8 March and suffered for three months until 7 May; Grace Schofield (*Febres*) had a brief illness – from 2 April, dying on 10 April, which was the day that Mary Lynch was hospitalised, only to die on 18 April. The terminally ill were not the only ones in the ward. There were others: Mary Cunningham (*Catarrh*) and Mary Harkin (*Rheumales*) both from 10 to 18 April; Ann Scott (*Rheumales*) from 13 to 18 April. The nurse must have been run off her feet. Tending to the sick would have been difficult with the ship rolling, waves buffeting, sails and chains clanking, damp bedding, drinking vessels and bed pans possibly sliding around the ward and no surgeon in attendance – just a nurse and possibly a convict or two to care for patients.

McAvoy notes on Jan Biggerstaff include:

This girl when she just came on board was labouring under syphilis infect[ion] which I did not find out for some time. ... She now complains of pains in the shoulders & knees. Skin hot, thirsty. Tongue white. Bowels confined [3 February]; Complains of severe pain in the lumbar region, feet & knees swollen. Pulse quick, tongue white [6 February]; Her bed has been wet for some days from the leaking of the Ship. Rheumatic pains have returned [13 February]; rheumatic pains continue, tongue white, bowels confined. Pulse quick [16 February]; Purged, pains less, tongue moist debility [20 February]; No complaint except for torpidity of the bowels [3 March]; Has been ill for the last two days it is said with severe pains in different parts. Hot skin & headache. As I am confined to bed I only get the report from the nurse [6 April]; Report that she is much better although lying in wet beds. Complains of want of appetite [15 April]; Was suddenly seized this morning with pain in chest and difficulty in breathing. A mustard plaster was applied but in shifting out of her bed which was wet she suddenly expired [7 May].

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## JEAN AGNEW

There are few records available to tell more about Jean Agnew. The little we know: she came from Glasgow; may have used the alias ‘Jane’; she was single and aged 46 or 47 years and there are no relatives listed on her records. Being Scottish and at her age I wondered if she had hair that was grey with hints of ginger in her eyebrows. Due to her illness, she was

probably wheezing and coughing during the court hearing. Her appetite was poor on the *Margaret*, so it is likely that she was undernourished and of slight build and probably looking older than her years.

She was tried in Glasgow at the High Court of Justiciary on 15 September 1842, which is Scotland's supreme criminal court. This court hears the most serious criminal cases, such as murder and rape. A single judge hears cases with a jury of 15 people. Usually the court sits in cities and larger towns around Scotland, but as an appeal court, it sits mostly in Edinburgh.<sup>9</sup>

Jean had been convicted before but those crimes are not listed in the records. In this instance she was found guilty of theft and sentenced to transportation for seven years. It is interesting to note that she was tried in early September but it took some time for her to be put on board ship. McAvoy, who was the surgeon, only kept records from 8 November 1842, so it is likely that Jean sat in a prison or on a hulk somewhere from 15 September until that date, whereas several women tried at the Old Bailey on 28 November seem to have been promptly sent on board.

Because she never made it to Hobart we have no physical description of her other than her age and the surgeon's notes. Some his notes are:

For the last two months has complained at intervals of difficult respiration attended by cough & wheezing with a muco purulent expectoration which she says has been the case for several years. She has a presentiment that she will never reach the place of her destination. Bowels torpid, appetite good [8 March]; Cough troublesome during the night. Pulse quick. Respiration occasions pain. Expectoration muco purulent [10 March]; Had a severe paroxysm last night simulating asthma. Pulse quick, copious expectoration. Want of appetite & debility [16 March]; [similar report on 21, 26, 20 March]. Has been indisposed for the last two days and now complains of cough attended by expectoration pain in the chest and difficult respiration. Pulse quick. Bowels torpid [10 April]; Cough & expectoration which is muco purulent. Breast covered with pustules, want of appetite [14 April]; No alteration for the better ... pulse weak, cough severe, appetite better, Muco[us] purulent expectoration. Bowels torpid [April 20]; No alteration for the better. The noise of the ship has prevented either auscultation<sup>10</sup> or percussion. From the leaky state of the ship her bedding has been wet for some days. Paroxysms of wheezing and difficult respiration at intervals [30 April]; I have been confined to bed for the last month with Rheumatism the greater part of which time (like myself) she was lying in a wet bed from the leaking of the ship. She died this morning from phthisis [7 May].

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## GRACE SCHOFIELD

Grace was single and aged 26 when she was tried at Lancaster Preston General Sessions on 2 August 1842. At that time, Lancaster was only a county town in Lancashire, rather than the city it is today. It is situated on the Lune River and its history is linked with its port and canal.<sup>11</sup> The 1841 census lists several families named Schofield in Lancaster and Grace seems

to have been a popular name. One was recorded as born around 1821, with the occupation listed as 'F.S.' I could find no other information without paying one of the commercial web sites. There were two Schofield families where ages fitted with Grace: one family head was working with weaving and another was a waterman – but it is uncertain if either of these were related to Grace.

Grace was charged with stealing half-crowns and had been in prison three times before. Her sentence was seven years transportation. It is a shame that I couldn't find any record of the court session. But, as it was only local general sessions, the details might well be scant.

She is first listed as being in the hospital on 20 March. The surgeon notes that she 'says she has always been troubled with nyctalopia [night blindness]. At present there is inflammation of the conjunctive, intolerance of light with pain in the temples, bowels confined.' She continued much the same through until the end of March, complaining of intolerance of light with pain in her temples, although the symptoms lessened a little on 30 March. However, by 3 April he wrote:

I have not been able to visit her since the 30<sup>th</sup> instant. The nurse reports that she is hot & feverish, great thirst. Bowels confined [3 April]; Report this morning that she passed a bad night & was delirious. Unfortunately, I am not able to go into the hospital. To be sponged with tepid vinegar & water [4 April]; They say she continues delirious [6 April]; She continued without any medical advice till the 10<sup>th</sup> inst. When she died [10 April].

McAvoy listed her illness as 'ophthalmia' but, with the fever and intolerance of light, could it have been some brain inflammation? Perhaps meningitis.

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#### MARY LYNCH

On 28 November 1842, Mary Lynch, aged 22, was at the Old Bailey in London.<sup>12</sup> I found her case to be probably the saddest of the four deaths. We have no record of what she looked like, but I imagine her standing nervously in the dock and can see her as young, pale and of slight build. It is likely that she was not quite five-foot-tall and probably she had dark or brown hair and maybe blue eyes. Her clothes would have been rumpled and perhaps a bit grubby. Because she had stolen shoes and a petticoat, I wonder if she was barefoot and wearing prison garb. Perhaps she cried as she was charged, maybe hanging her head to avoid the stares of those in the court room.

She was indicted for stealing from Sarah Chandler, a laundress who lived in Steven Street, Tottenham Court Road. Steven Street runs off Tottenham Court Road and is just two blocks away from Oxford Street. This was not her first offence, but the court did not record her earlier offence other than to note that it was for a 'felony'.

When giving evidence, Sarah told the court that on the afternoon of the 25<sup>th</sup>, Mary had come to her door seeking lodging and that she said that she was a servant and was ‘out of place’. When Mary asked for a reference, Sarah was able, or bold enough, to name many trades people from the area, so Sarah let her stay. Mary was there from the evening of Friday 25 until Monday morning 28<sup>th</sup>.<sup>13</sup> The days of the week in the Old Bailey records are incorrect with the 25<sup>th</sup> stated as Monday and the 28<sup>th</sup> Friday – see below, where Mary argues that she would return the goods on Monday and the constable’s evidence that he took Mary to the police station on Saturday.

Sarah said that ‘Mary slept with me’ and it seems that they shared a room, because Sarah’s evidence clearly shows that the accused ‘got up first and was about the room for half an hour’, before going out with a bundle under her cloak. It must have been some bundle because the items stolen were: 2 shawls, value 24*s.*; 1 scarf, 1*s.*; 1 pair of stays, 2*s.*; 1 petticoat, 5*s.*; 1 pair of boots, 4*s.*; 1/2 lb. weight of tea, 2*s.* 6*d.*; 1 shilling, 12 pence, 24 halfpence, and 12 farthings. The last items were taken from a ‘child’s money box’.

As Mary left, Sarah called out, ‘Where are you going?’ Mary replied that she would be back. However, when Sarah looked around the room she discovered that her black scarf, which had been hanging over a chair, was missing. She then went looking for Mary but couldn’t find her. When she returned home she discovered that other items were also missing. Sarah called the police.

A constable, George John Restieaux, went to Monmouth Street<sup>14</sup> where he saw Mary going into a public house and he arrested her. Mary protested that she had pawned the items, but that Sarah would have them back again on the Monday. She also insisted that the shawl and boots were at her lodging at 34 Monmouth Street (so much for needing lodgings in Steven Street!) and that she had pawned other items in Frith Street, Soho. Constable Restieaux told the court that he went to Frith Street, but there was no pawnbroker. He found the items in Greek Street (also in Soho). He then went to Mary’s lodging and found some black tea, a handkerchief, a plaid shawl and a pair of boots. Mary must have walked a lot in those few hours (a challenge given her poor state of health): she left Steven Street, possibly went to Frith Street (or Wardour Street) and then on to Greek Street, then back to a public house in Monmouth Street.

While at the Police Station, Mary was subjected to a search by Honora Connell, a widow, who found 14*s.* 6*d.*, a flannel petticoat (Mary argued that the petticoat was hers), boots and a pawn ticket for a pair of stays. Sarah confronted Mary at the Police Station and, as she told

the court, Mary ‘begged me not to appear against her, and [said] she would give up my things.’

Mary’s appeal fell on deaf ears as Sarah did not withdraw the charge. When the pawnbrokers gave evidence, Mary was shown to be a liar and thief: John Ewell, a pawnbroker in Wardour Street told the court that Mary had pawned a scarf and shawl using the name ‘Ann Chandler’; then William Whittaker, a pawnbroker in Greek Street, stated that Mary had pledged a pair of stays in the name of ‘Ann Thorp’. Did the watchers in the court gallery feel sorry for Sarah who had been generous and let Mary stay? Did they hiss and boo when her guilt was proven?

The court found Mary guilty and sentenced her to transportation for seven years. Soon after that hearing Mary must have been hustled off to the docks and put on board the *Margaret*.

The next mention of Mary is in the journal of the ship’s surgeon, Dr B McAvoy. She became ill and was admitted to the ship’s hospital on 10 April 1843. At that time, the surgeon noted that she was aged 26, rather than 22 as listed at the Old Bailey. His records show that she was suffering from *Phthisis*. This was the first instance that she was reported ill. However, not only was she suffering from a ‘consumptive’ disease, but she also gave birth to a ‘poor underated thing unable to suck.’ If the infant was full term, Mary must have been pregnant when arrested. There is no record of a spouse, so I wondered if she had ‘been on the town’. Or, perhaps, as she said she was an ‘upper house servant’, she may have been the victim of the male householder’s advances and then thrown out when she became pregnant.

On the *Margaret*, Mary suffered – she complained of cough and pain in the chest, was spitting up purulent matter, her bowels were ‘confined’. McAvoy wrote:

Consumptive diagnosis [and] was confined ten days ago. Her infant is a poor underated thing not able to suck. Complains of cough & pain I the chest. Expecturant purulant matter, want of rest [10 April]; Severe cough with purulent discharge. Pain in the chest & emaciation. Pulse quick & feeble, her infant is dying [13 April]; she is not able to come to my cabin, her infant died last night [14 April]; the nurse reports that she is weak. Coughs all night & refuses food [16 April]; Report this day that she is no better. Cough severe with copious expectoration. Debility [17 April]; Died during the night [18 April].

The surgeon noted that Mary died on 18 April, but the baby’s death is not mentioned in his summary of deaths on board. Which left me wondering how many of the children the convict mothers took on board survived the journey, how many died, and would they have been recorded in McAvoy’s or Mould’s journals.



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<sup>1</sup> Bateson, p.89

<sup>2</sup> Bateson, p.56

<sup>3</sup> Bateson, p.40

<sup>4</sup> Bateson, p.60

<sup>5</sup> Bateson, p.56

<sup>6</sup> The *Courier* 21 April 1843, p.2. This was described as an item taken from 'an English journal'. They gave the number of convicts as 160 in April, but corrected to 152 in July 1843. The *Courier* 21 July 1843, p.2

<sup>7</sup> **phthisis** in British. ('θaɪsɪs, 'fθaɪ-, 'taɪ-) any disease that causes wasting of the body, esp pulmonary tuberculosis. Word origin of '**phthisis**' C16: via Latin from Greek: a wasting away, from phthinein to waste away. This diagnosis commonly referred to tuberculosis.

<sup>8</sup> Louisa la Grange wrote a diary and, after she received her ticket of leave, she travelled internationally. Eventually she returned to Paris where she was friendly with Alexandre Dumas. He edited that diary around 1855 and, when published, it became a best seller. She omitted any hint that she had been a convict, but her account of Hobart and a picnic in the mountains make interesting reading. See Dumas, A. 1945, *The Journal of Madame Giovanni*. (trans. ME Wilbur)

<sup>9</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/High Court of Justice](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/High_Court_of_Justice)

<sup>10</sup> Breathing sounds. – Google Search

<sup>11</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lancaster, Lancashire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lancaster,_Lancashire)

<sup>12</sup> The records can be seen at <https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/> (28 November 1842).

<sup>13</sup> This evidence is what is reported in the Old Bailey records, but the dates do not fit with the weekdays mentioned. See <https://www.timeanddate.com/calendar/?year=1842&country=9> as 25 November 1842 was a Friday and 28 November, a Monday. Perhaps the court reporter's shorthand was not up to scratch.

<sup>14</sup> Monmouth Street is some 6 or 7 blocks from Tottenham Court Road and number 34 appears to be close to Covent Garden, although the street may have been re-numbered since 1842