

"Bound for Van Diemen's land, brave boys,
Far, far across the sea"

Lydia Rackham: A Trimley woman
Part 1



If you have lived in the Trimley area for any length of time you may be aware of a well-known historical women, a certain Margaret Catchpole, whose story was told by the Rev. Richard Cobbold in 1845, some 40 odd years after her transportation to Australia. Transportation as a method of punishing criminal activities originated in the early 1600s and involved the deportation of criminals to one of the emerging British colonies. Initially, the convicts were despatched to America until it became an independent country in 1776. As a consequence of America's new sovereignty, Great Britain was no longer able to send its prisoners there and instead the focus switched to the vast continent of Australia and neighbouring Van Diemen's Land. If you look at a map, Van Diemen's Land appears as a teardrop to Australia. Between 1803 and 1853 the latter country, now known as Tasmania, became an important destination for convicts. For fifty years nearly 12, 500 women were punished by being transported to this emerging country in order to complete their penal sentences.

One of these was a Trimley woman by the name of Lydia Rackham, who was subject to all the hard times of Old England as well as the many harsh penalties dispensed to the Convict classes of Van Diemen's Land. Details of her life would probably be unobtainable and forgotten but for the fact the administrators of the penal system kept diligent records. These are accessible today through digitisation and together with contemporary newspapers are the source of my information.

This is Lydia's story.



It is often impossible to find out information about ordinary working people beyond the bookmarks which define the lives of us all. Birth or Baptism, marriage and death are usually the only skeletal details we can discover about the long dead. Were it not for her actions, Lydia Rackham would be barely visible. All we might discover is that she was born and lived in St. Martin's in about 1810, that her mother was called Ann and her father was

probably called John. Where exactly she lived in St. Martins is yet to be discovered. It is reasonable to speculate it was here she met James Rackham who was to be her future husband. He also was originally from Trimley, having been baptised in St. Mary's church on 28th November 1802, the son of William and Rose Rackham. In a pre-photography age images of ordinary working people were rarely produced and usually there is no clue individuals' appearance. If there were any photographs of Lydia and James, they have yet to surface.

However, despite this we do have some notion of their appearances as mature adults. Lydia was 5 feet 3½, with blue eyes, dark brown hair and eyebrows. In 1848, she was described as, "lady-like" in appearance, albeit with a slightly pock marked face. James was a slightly taller at 5 feet 6½, with brown hair and dark hazel eyes. In 1848 he was described as, "middling stout" but this was nearly 20 years after his wedding day and a slight gain in weight is not perhaps unexpected. By the time of their marriage James was living and working in Dovercourt and we can make an intelligent guess that his courtship of Lydia was conducted in Trimley. Their wedding took place on the 27th July 1829 in St. Martin's church. They would probably have entered through the west door of the church and taken their marriage vows in front of the altar where, according to the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, they each promised, "...to love and to cherish, till death do us part...". After the service, then as now, the register was signed. One of the witnesses, John Lewis, signed his own name but the other, Lucy Chapman, as well as Lydia and James simply made their own marks "X". It is unlikely there was much more to the wedding day other than to set off to Lydia's new marital home. Trimley to Dovercourt by road is 30 miles but only a short passage by boat across the confluence of the Stour and Orwell. I like to imagine they crossed the water together anticipating children, happiness and a degree of prosperity. Maybe their only regrets centred upon their departure from family and friends, although as they had proved it was not difficult to retain their family connections in the Trimleys.

It is impossible to know how the marriage progressed as a relationship but when I located Lydia and James in Dovercourt in the 1841 Census, it had obviously been fruitful. They had four children: Charles, James, Francis and Lydia. Three more were to follow and by 1848 they had seven children around the table including William, Emmeline and Eliza. Their father, James was working as an agricultural labourer in 1841 and although no occupation is recorded for Lydia, it is clear her time would have revolved around the house, the washing and children. Any paid work by her may not have been recorded as James would have been viewed as the principle bread winner. However, by the start of 1848, Lydia was supposedly involved in additional employment as a farm servant, with all the back-breaking drudgery this entailed. In whatever manner she was occupied, her life would have been one of relentless domestic work. But in the blink of an eye and the misappropriation of a pair of boot stockings, all this changed irrevocably and forever.



One wintry night, on the 10th January 1848, a knock upon Lydia and James's door caused it to be opened. In front of them stood a Policeman, Superintendent George Colman, demanding admission for himself and other men. The house was searched; goods were seized; they were seized. On the same night, according to newspaper reports, they were both cast into the local gaol and imprisoned in "durance vile" before both being committed to Colchester Gaol the following day, pending their appearance before the local Magistrates' Court. Did James and Lydia have any sleep on this long and desperate night? For Lydia it was doubtless a tearful, sleepless and fearful one. It is harder to assess how James must have felt, as will become apparent. Maybe he

was incredulous, angry or terrified. At the very least, both of them would have experienced shame and disgrace. What was to become of them? Did they both deserve to be there? We can only speculate how shocked the neighbours may have been at this turn of events? Three days later, on January 13th, the story of the crime and arrest became public property appearing as it did in The Suffolk Chronicle:

"Harwich, Jan. 13.

For some time many tradesmen here have had their suspicions that their shops have been daily robbed. Mr Trundle, shopkeeper, in Market-street, took Superintendent Colman to the lodgings of a Mrs. Lydia Rackham, where they commenced a search, and found brooches, rings, shoes, clogs, gown pieces, dresses, hats, caps, wearing apparel, &. The police took charge of the goods and that night, January 10th. committed Mr. and Mrs. Rackham to durance vile; on the 11th, the Magistrates committed the parties to Colchester Castle, there to await the next Quarter Sessions at Chelmsford. The first charge was brought by Mr. Trundle, who identified three brooches, one mug, clogs, shoes, a tassel and slides. The next charge was by Mr. Grice, a draper, &, who identified a pair of boot stockings and a pair of trowsers. The next charge was by Mr. Wm. Nalborough, draper, who identified a gown piece. The next charge by Mr. Bellamy, tailor, who identified two caps. The next charge by Mr. Waights, draper, who could not identify some umbrellas, etc., but fully believed they were stolen from his shop, having recently detected the female prisoner of purloining a 21s. boa. The utmost vigilance will be prosecuted by the police force to detect the various receivers of property which have been stolen for many months past: one tradesman has had some articles, but the receivers have intreated the same to take them, fearing the consequence. The female prisoner seems to be the guilty party, and to have carried on for some long time this wholesale peculation unknown to her husband, he not knowing such goods were concealed in his house. They leave six children chargeable to the parish."

It was swiftly followed a week later on 21st January by a similar article in the Chelmsford Chronicle. As we all know, bad news tends to travel quickly. The astonishment of the neighbours would have been nothing to the dismay felt by the families. As for the children, "...chargeable to the parish...", they were sent to the Tending Union Workhouse, at Great Clacton. Their distress amidst the harsh conditions does not bears contemplation.



Lydia and James remained incarcerated for about a month until 15th February 1848 when they were brought to trial in front of the Magistrates; the Chairman of the Board was a Mr. Round. It was he who was to direct and inform the Jurors. Since their arrest, the authorities had been vigorous in interviewing the injured parties and obtaining evidence. The newspaper report of the Trial gives the names of five shopkeepers whose goods had been stolen. Charles Trundle, a dealer in fancy goods; Mr. Grice, a draper; Mr. Nalborough; Mr. Waights. The cases of two of these people, Mr. Bellamy and Mr. Waights, were not pursued and therefore both suspects stood accused of three crimes. Mr. Waights, Charles Trundle and Mr. Grice will return at a later point in this story.

Both Lydia and James were undefended, which is hardly surprising as they lacked the wherewithal for a lawyer. Lydia was accused of shoplifting, James was indicted for receiving stolen goods. Mr. Grice stated he knew the female prisoner and had found goods with his mark on them in her house. Neither he or his assistant, Mr. Lee had sold these goods. Mr. Lee identified the socks because of the peculiar colour of the worsted wool. Superintendent George Coleman had similarly searched the house and reported James as denying he had

anything to do with these goods. In court, Lydia denied stealing the socks, which she said she had knitted them herself. She had “found” trousers by the door or under the window. The Chairman intervened after James gave evidence and said that James was likely to have knowledge of the goods as they were seized in his house.

The second charge concerned the theft of a gown piece from Mr. Nalborough. He too had searched the house and found his property in a box in the bedroom. When he gave evidence, he recounted how the prisoner, Lydia, had come into his shop many times a day. Lydia fudged her reply by repeating the excuse she had previously declared concerning Mr. Grice’s goods. She had found the item under Mr. Nalborough’s window. On this charge, James was declared ‘Not Guilty’.

The third charge related to the goods of Charles Trundle, the dealer in Fancy Goods. In this newspaper report the goods included a glass and a quart jug. When it came to Superintendent George Colman’s turn to give evidence for this charge, he said Lydia had confessed to taking the mug, shoes, slides and tassels whilst imprisoned.

The Jurors were despatched to make their decision and having made it, they returned their verdict.



The Chairman summed up by saying,

“Lydia Rackham, you stand convicted of three charges on which you have been found guilty on the evidence of which no man could doubt; You, James Rackham are convicted on two charges of receiving and in another the case the Jury brought a different verdict...it is next...to impossible to suppose that...(you)...know nothing about them...the sentence is that each of you be transported for 14 years”

The nature of this sentence was harsh and brutal, both culprits receiving two 7-year sentences back to back. Husband and wife were despatched to Millbank in London next to the Thames. Crime and conviction were now done. What awaited them next was the act of Transportation.

But this story is not yet played out and at this point you may be asking yourself several questions.

Why had Lydia taken to shoplifting? Was it financial necessity? Was her shoplifting the symptom of a wider malaise? Was she suffering from an undiagnosed and unrecognised mental illness?

Was James aware of his wife’s pilfering? Had he coerced her into criminal activity? Was James innocent *“not knowing such goods were concealed in his house”*?



If you are interested in Margaret Catchpole, you may care to read:

Richard Cobbold & Pip Harris, editor

A Picture History of Margaret Catchpole: A Reduced Text Version of the Book with 33 Illustrations by the Author
2009. (Available from Suffolk Libraries)

Carol Birch

Scapegallows. 2008.

This is a fictionalised account of Margaret's life in England and Australia