

*"They chained us two by two and whipped and lashed along
They cut off our provisions if we did the least thing wrong
They march us in the burning sun until our feet are sore
So hard's our lot now we are got to Van Diemen's shore"*

Lydia Rackham: A Trimley woman in Van Diemen's Land

Part 2



Hard by Vauxhall Bridge on the north side of the Thames stands the site of a beautiful art gallery, Tate Britain. Now visited by five or six million people a year I doubt if few people pause to reflect on which building preceded the Tate. Those who visited this site in the 19th century would not have done so for pleasure, as it is the former site of Millbank Penitentiary and in 1848 it was regarded as a dark and fearful place. Dank from its close proximity to the river, it was a building offering little but confinement, sensory deprivation and hardship. Millbank was the convict transit point for all Antipodean destinations and Prisoners were held there while they were assessed by staff as to where they should be sent for their punishment. The design of the building allowed the guards to view the prisoners from the upper part of the prison, whilst they remained unseen. After assessment, many prisoners may then have been transferred to a Hulk, most likely an unseaworthy ship converted into a river-borne prison. From there, at a time appropriate time to the authorities, they were sent down the river, perhaps to Gravesend or Woolwich, where they would board a convict ship for the long sea journey to Australia.



During the course of their lives, Lydia and James Rackham had already travelled far from Trimley to Dovercourt, Harwich, Chelmsford and Millbank but the full extent of their journeys had scarcely begun after their conviction as Shoplifter and Receiver of Stolen Goods respectively. In Lydia's case, she was sent from Chelmsford Gaol to Millbank on 15th July 1848, some five months after her trial. There

Lydia appears to have remained until she was transferred on 4th November 1848 to the 'Cadet' which was berthed at Woolwich and bound for Van Diemen's land. The ship set sail on or around the 5th November, first stopping at Dover and Plymouth Sound, where it seems as if her sister Anna met her although the records are rather ambiguous at this point. However, what is clear is that she had been joined by five of her seven children after an absence of about 9 months. The two oldest children, Charles age 18 and Lydia, known as Anna, 17, were in service and therefore not available to join their mother. Lydia could read and I think it is probable her daughter may have remained in contact with her. Certainly, there must have been some communication for Anna is to re-enter the story later. The remaining children, James, 10, Francis, 8, William, 6, Emmeline, 4, and Eliza, the 18-month-old baby, had been removed from Tending Union Workhouse and taken to be re-united with their mother. At a certain point along the line it had been decided they would accompany their mother to Van Diemen's Land as well, thereby relieving the Tending Rate Payers of the costly burden of maintaining the children in the Workhouse. They, together with Lydia and 169 other female convicts, left English shores on a sea passage which was to last over five months. No male convicts joined the ship. James remained in England; he and Lydia were even further apart.



Why was James still in England? Although he would not have been included on this women-only vessel, why wasn't he transported at the same time? I believe the answer rests in a legal procedure he chose to pursue. He had protested innocence or lack of knowledge concerning his wife's activities throughout their arrest, imprisonment and trial. He had been acquitted on one charge of receiving stolen goods, although found guilty of two other charges. The record of his time in Millbank notes he received a visit from four unnamed friends by permission of the Governor. The names of the friends were not documented and no record survives as to the content of any discussion during this visit but it may have related to the organisation of a Petition, which was completed on October 21st 1848. Petitions were the only option open to the convicted during the 19th century if they wished to appeal against their sentence. No further evidence was presented in James Rackham's petition, which said:

"To the Right Honorable the Secretary of State for the Home Department. The Petition of James Rackham late of Harwich in the County of Essex Labourer now in prison in her Majesty's Gaol at Springfield in the County of Essex now under Sentence of 14 years Transportation. Sheweth that your Petitioner was tried and convicted at the Adjourned Quarter Sessions holden at Chelmsford on the 15th February last before Charles Ford Round Esquire with having feloniously received a quantity of Shoes and other articles from his wife Lydia Rackham. Now under sentence of 14 years transportation for the like offence, the property of Charles Trundle and Charles Thomas Waights and others knowing them to be stolen.

That your Petitioner most humbly begs leave to declare leave to declare the innocence of the offences of which he has been convicted of and not having money to employ counsel to enable him to prepare his defence. That your petitioner hath further borne a good character and never been in custody on any charge whatever before.

Your unhappy Petitioner most humbly and earnestly prays that Her Majesty may be recommended to commute the sentence of transportation. And your Petitioner will ever pray etc etc.

We the undersigned beg leave to recommission the prayer of the above named James Rackham

Signed: ..."

There then follows a list of 60 people, including the Mayor of Harwich, the clergy and, "...most of the respectable Inhabitants of the Borough of Harwich..."

Leading the signatories are the names of Waights, Bellamy, Trundle and Grice. You may recall these were the people from whom Lydia had filched the shoes, stockings, brooches and other "fancy goods". What had persuaded these sinned-against people to fight for James's cause? We don't know but their signatory presence indicates the belief in his innocence. The petition was forwarded to the Secretary for the Home Department, The Right Honorable Mr George Grey, accompanied by an endorsing letter from the Prison Official, Mr Dennes. It then became a waiting game for James during which he was transferred to Wakefield House of Correction to continue his sentence pending the outcome of his Appeal.

The response, when it came back from the Home Department, was negative. James was to be transported and in February 1850, some two years after his arrest, he was removed from Wakefield and brought to 'The Scindian'. The ship set sail on 27th February 1850, stopped at Portsmouth on 4th March and then finally departed for Fremantle, Western Australia. The voyage was to last 89 days, finally reaching the Swan River Colony on 1st June 1850. James was a least two and a half thousand miles from Van Diemen's Land. Rather like an ill-informed party hotel, the Colony didn't know the prisoners were coming, had nowhere to put them and resorted to keeping the convicted in a converted warehouse. Subsequently, the new prison was constructed using the prisoners and locally quarried stone. This exercise may have bypassed James for on Friday 25th October 1850, an article in the Perth Gazette and Independent Journal advertised prisoners who had been granted a 'Ticket of Leave'. James was included on the list quoting his occupation as a Farm Labourer, suggesting he was of a suitably good character not requiring incarceration.



But now we return to return to Lydia and her children. Her voyage in 1849 resulted in yet more hardship and sorrow. I am unclear how Lydia managed the care of her children on board the ship, or indeed if she did, but there are records of their experience. Sadly, it was not to be a happy one, neither in transit nor when they reached their destination. A daily Sick Book was kept on board to record the health of the convicts and other passengers and the Rackham family were to figure quite

significantly. These documents appear to record the names and ages of the children in a rather cavalier and casual manner and don't appear to be written by a reliable or caring witness, so some interpretation has been necessary. But the following short, terse entries require no interpretation as they baldly state;

"...Rackum's child, aged 4; (this was Emmeline) sick or hurt, scalded legs; put on sick list 14 November 1848, discharged 28 November 1848 cured"

"Emily (Emmeline) Rackum, aged 3; sick or hurt, psora; put on sick list 22 December 1848, discharged 3 January 1849 cured"

"J [James?] Rackum, aged 10; sick or hurt, psora; put on sick list 22 December 1848, discharged 3 January 1849 cured"

Lydia herself was sent to the Sick Bay with *"Colica"* at the end of December but had recovered by 29th January, although quite how well she was is questionable. Being ill at sea is never comfortable at the best of times and there would have been little respite on offer for the women and children. The most punishing aspect of the voyage for Lydia and the children is explained in a further note which bleakly declares;

"Eliza Rackum, aged 2, convict's child, taken ill in Plymouth Sound, sick or hurt, tabes mesenterica, frequent diarrhoea of offensive matter, she was of a very scrofulous rickety appearance and has also malformation of the bones of the chest, the appetite good but the abdomen turmid: put on sick list 1 December 1848, died 6th December 1848."

Shortly to be followed by another cheerless statement:

"Francis Rackum, aged 12, convict's son, taken ill at sea; sick or hurt, typhus fever, tongue brown and furred, skin dry, pulse very fast, countenance febrile; put on sick list 23^d December 1848, died 27th December 1848"

The 'Cadet' finally landed in Van Diemen's Land on 12th April 1849, reporting the deaths of 7 women during the voyage. The dead children do not appear to be further mentioned.

After disembarkation Lydia would have been taken to a Prison hulk to be trained in the household skills deemed suitable for becoming a Domestic Help. The children, whom you may think had suffered enough by this time, were removed from their mother and in April 1849 were placed in an Orphan School. Convicts' children were deemed to be effectively without parents, although of course, they were not technically Orphans. The fate of such 'orphans' was to remain in the school until they were 18 or old enough to become servants themselves. As it was obligatory for all Prisoners to attend Church on a Sunday, this may have been the only opportunity for Lydia to espy James, William and Emmeline. But then again, it is quite likely they attended different services. The Orphanages have

been described as, "Children's prisons" and any education they received was below the standard of other local schools. The children were trained in practical skills; little learning occurred and their levels of literacy did not approach those of their local peer group. They were effectively contained rather than educated.



Life for Lydia does not appear to have been straightforward. As I researched this period of her life, I wanted to call across 170 years and shout, "Don't do it!" but I'm not sure Lydia would have listened even if such a fantasy were possible. Unlike James, she was not immediately granted a Ticket of Leave, which may have been due to her behaviour. On 29th June 1850 she received fourteen days in the cells for transgressing with a man. No reason is given for her behaviour and it is impossible to know whether she was motivated by the necessity for money or otherwise. Eventually in March 1853 Lydia had rallied herself sufficiently to be trusted to work as a domestic servant but in a series of actions which eerily mirrored those of five years earlier she found herself before the Magistrate's Bench again. On Friday 1st April 1853, The Hobart Courier reported the following case:

" A MODEL CONSTABLE,

John McKew, a constable, and Lydia Rackham were charged with larceny under £5, in stealing three waistcoat pieces, a coat and some books from Mr. John Guthrie, at Sandy Bay. The woman who was charged with stealing the things pleaded guilty, and McKew, charged with receiving them, not guilty. The evidence showed that the woman was a servant in the house in which Mr. Guthrie lived, and had stolen from time to time many things which she had presented to her lover, McKew; he had given the waistcoat pieces to a tailor to make up for him.

McKew, in his defence, said that the woman had given him the things at various times, stating that she had bought them: and as she had been a considerable time in the country, he thought it probable she might have put by a sum of money and so could afford to purchase the clothes; he had intended marrying her. The Bench sentenced Lydia Rackham to 18 months' imprisonment and hard labour, and McKew to have his original sentence of transportation increased 18 months; the whole time to be spent on probation."

John (McKew) McCue, a 22-year old sweep from England, had been convicted of burglary in 1849 and transported to Van Diemen's Land in 1850. He appears to have been a transitory relationship in Lydia's life despite his expressed intention to marry her. Marriage couldn't and didn't occur and from here on in he does not appear in her life. This is just as well because at more or less the same time Lydia was subjected to Hard Labour, James applied for permission to be re-united with his wife and three children; an indication he knew of the deaths of Eliza and Francis. This being granted he left

Fremantle on 21st March 1853. I have yet to unearth any documentary sources recording what happened to James next when he arrived in Van Diemen's Land.

We can only imagine.



It is safe to say the Rackham family had been through a fractured and distressing time. Parents separated; some children dead; some placed in orphanages. The situation in March 1853 looked dispiriting to say the least. But unexpected help was on its way. Crossing oceans and seas and avoiding continental land masses, Lydia's daughter Anna and her future husband George Powling, sped towards Van Diemen's Land bringing hope with them. Berthing in Fremantle in 1854, they took the opportunity to marry before carrying on to Hobart where they landed in October of the same year. Anna's spirit was to prevail. On the 17th October, George and Anna visited the Orphanage and removed the two youngest children, William and Emmeline, from its jurisdiction thereby providing the care and love these two benighted children had been deprived of for so long. They were to become part of the Powling household alongside the children of Anna and George. James, Lydia's eldest child in Van Diemen's Land, had already left the Orphanage by this time and was working for a Mr. Sharland in New Norfolk. I sincerely hope he eventually found his way to his sister Anna's home.

The story of Lydia Rackham, née Lewis, is nearly complete. The woman from Trimley St. Martin's was never to return her place of origin. She is reported to have received a conditional pardon by July 1856, the same year Van Diemen's land was renamed Tasmania. Her sentence finally ended in 1862, fourteen long years after the purloining of a pair of boot stockings. I could find no further details about herself or James other than her death in Hobart on 15th June 1876 when her cause of death was given as "Old age and general debility". I suspect the gruelling conditions and hard labour she endured cannot have enhanced her health. I have yet to discover when James died or where. Anna Powling née Rackham died in 1909 aged 78.

Like Lydia, I do not dispute her guilty plea but what motivated her actions remains a subject for debate. James's case also remains something of an enigma: it seems obvious the "respectable" people of Harwich regarded him as innocent. In the 21st century U.K. first offences in shoplifting crimes may be punished with a community order and possibly some investigation into the mental health of the offender. Imprisonment for the majority of offenders is unlikely.



I have been able to piece together this story using a range of digitised resources from Australia, Tasmania, The National Archives at Kew and a range of Shipping Records, as well as Suffolk Record

Office in Ipswich. If you have any comments or are interested in using these records and learning more about them, please email me and I will send you the relevant documentation or links. You may contact me at:

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Should you be interested in learning more about the extraordinary history of Van Diemen's Land, I strongly recommend:

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