

HARRIET MUNSLow

[*Tasmania* (1) 1844]

by

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Harriet Munslow arrived in Van Diemens Land (VDL) as a convict per *Tasmania* (1) in 1844.¹ She was twenty-one years old. Her life in England had been a troubled one.

Two years later Harriet married a former convict, William Kingsbury and, shortly afterwards, had settled down with him on his small leased farm on the big ‘Adelphi’ estate near Westbury. But it was not a happy marriage and, when Kingsbury, an alcoholic, died in 1855, Harriet soon remarried. Her second husband was Thomas Wildgust, also a former convict, a young labourer on a neighbouring property. This time, Harriet found the happiness that had eluded her for so long. By the time they passed away - Harriet in 1890 and Thomas a decade or so later – they had not only achieved financial security but had become highly respected members of their community. Seemingly, their convict pasts had been quite forgotten.

This is Harriet’s story:

Harriet was born at Ludlow, Shropshire, England, in 1823. Her parents, Thomas Munslow and Sarah Harper, had married in 1822. Thomas is described on Harriet's baptismal records as a ‘flax draper’ and it is probable that the family was in relatively comfortable circumstances. Undoubtedly, they rejoiced at the birth of their daughter and welcomed the arrival of their second child, Joseph, when he was born in 1827.²

But, then tragedy struck! On 19 May 1829, Thomas passed away and Sarah was left with two young children and a third due in December.³ When Sarah herself died in 1833, the children - Harriet, 10, Joseph, 6, and the baby, whom they had called Jane, now 4 years old - were orphans.⁴ Harriet was sent to live with a grandmother.⁵ The 1841 England Census shows

¹ Conduct record: CON41-1-4, Image 121; Description List: CON19-1-4, Image 156; Indent: CON15-1-3, Image 78.

² Harriet’s birth: England Births and Christenings, 1538-1975," (<https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/N5XP-7N5>); marriage of Thomas Munslow and Sarah Harper: England Marriages, 1538–1973, (<https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/NNQ6-7XZ>).

³ Birth of siblings Joseph and Jane: England Births and Christenings, 1538-1975, (<https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/JWNF-N8R>)

⁴ Thomas, death, 1829: England Deaths and Burials, 1538-1991, (<https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/J8JK-Q2G>); Sarah, death, 1833: England Deaths and Burials, 1538-1991,

(<https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/J8JK-WJH>)

⁵ CON41-1-4, Image 121.

Joseph, 14, working as an agricultural labourer and Jane, 11, living with a family by the name of Davis.⁶

On 5 March 1844, Harriet was convicted at the Shrewsbury Quarter Sessions at Salop, Shropshire, of stealing a purse containing nine sovereigns and a shilling and sentenced to transportation for ten years. It was not the first time she had been in trouble. She had been imprisoned for six months previously for stealing a watch. Before that, she had served a term for assault. It was also known that she had been ‘on the town’ – that is, working as a prostitute – for four years.⁷

Harriet left England aboard the vessel *Tasmania* on 8 September 1844 and arrived at Hobart on 20 December that year.⁸ At Hobart, Harriet was described as being twenty-one years old, four feet eleven and three-quarter inches (about 152 cms) tall, with a dark, swarthy complexion, brown hair and grey eyes. She was single, a Catholic and a nursery maid by trade.⁹ The ship’s surgeon, Thomas Seaton, had noted in his journal that Harriet’s health throughout the voyage had been ‘good’ but that she was an ‘irritable’ woman.¹⁰

In VDL, however, Harriet was a changed person. She committed no new offences and her record as a convict was without blemish.¹¹

In early March 1846, William Kingsbury (also seen as Kingsberry), a former convict (*Earl St Vincent*, 1826), applied for permission to marry Harriet.¹² He was forty-five and had married Ann Rice in England in 1821. A daughter had been born to the couple in the following year. But, four years later, he was found guilty of stealing a sheep and had been sentenced to transportation for life. In VDL, he had served his time without further trouble and was granted his ticket of leave in 1834, a conditional pardon in 1839 and a full pardon in 1842.¹³

Approval to marry was granted on 28 March 1846 but there is no record of the marriage ever having taken place. Nevertheless, the couple settled down together in the north of the colony where Harriet was known as ‘Mrs. Kingsbury’.¹⁴

At about the time of the marriage, William had applied successfully for the lease of a small farm on a big estate, near Westbury, owned by the very wealthy Charles Robert Prinsep. Nearly twenty years earlier, while holidaying in VDL from his home at Calcutta, India, Prinsep had been granted 2,330 acres of land and, later, had purchased an adjoining 2,450

⁶ England 1841 census: Joseph <http://search.findmypast.com/record?id=gbc%2f1841%2f0008773098>; Jane: <http://search.findmypast.com/record?id=gbc%2f1841%2f0008776158>

⁷ CON41-1-4, Image 121.

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

⁹ CON19-1-4, Image 156

¹⁰ [http://www.femaleconvicts.org.au/;](http://www.femaleconvicts.org.au/)

¹¹ CON41-1-4, Image 121.

¹² Permission to marry: CON59/1/2, p.99; Kingsbury, birth: conduct record CON31/1/7, Image 29.

¹³ Marriage Kingsbury and Rice, 1821: England Marriages, 1538–1973, (<https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/NLMC-82G>; see Kingsbury’s conduct record: CON31/1/7, Image 29.

¹⁴ Harriet’s surname is shown as ‘Kingsbury’ when she married for the second time.

acres. But, thinking of the property, which he had called 'Adelphi', only as an investment, he had rarely visited it and had left its day-to-day management to paid overseers. In the mid-late 1840s, however, Prinsep had decided to change the management strategy of the estate. Henceforth, he had decided, 'Adelphi' would not be farmed as a single entity but broken down into more manageable units, each leased to a tenant who would pay an annual rent for his or her parcel of land. Prinsep was happy to make the leases, which varied in size from about forty to a thousand acres, available to a wide variety of applicants, many of whom were of humble origins. A paid manager was appointed to oversee the productivity of the estate as a whole.¹⁵

The lease secured by William Kingsbury was one of the smallest on the estate. In fact, at just thirty-nine acres, it was possibly too small to produce a good living even for one man and his wife.¹⁶

For that reason, Harriet appears to have had to look for other work. In early 1849, during a court case in which she was called as a witness, Harriet said that she was working as a washerwoman for a man by the name of Thomas Wildgust, a ticket-of-leave labourer on a neighbouring property. In its report of the case, *The Cornwall Chronicle* said that a woman by the name of Emma Walton had told the court that her home had been burgled in the previous August and that some of her clothing had been stolen. Some months later, she had seen ex-convict Frances Fillmore wearing one of her dresses in the street. Promptly arrested, Fillmore had claimed that she had bought the gown from Harriet Kingsbury. Called to testify, Harriet confirmed that she had sold the gown to Fillmore but said that she had bought it from a ticket-of-leave man named John Brown. Brown had then been charged with the burglary. Harriet had also mentioned in court that Brown had shown her a roll of calico which she had so admired that Wildgust, the man for whom she worked, had bought it for her, paying Brown seven shillings and sixpence.¹⁷

But is it likely that a young man, single, would buy a gift worth that considerable sum for his *washerwoman*? Was 'washerwoman' a euphemism for a closer relationship? The questions are good ones because, as events were about to prove, all was not happy in the Kingsbury household.

In March 1855, Kingsbury died. He was fifty-four years old. At the inquest which followed his death, Harriet, now thirty-two, revealed that his alcoholism had been a serious concern for some time and that she had lived apart from him for the previous six months. She told the coroner that every time her husband left the house 'he came home tipsy'. The jury returned a verdict of death from natural causes brought on by excessive alcohol consumption.¹⁸

¹⁵ See Ivan C. Heazlewood. (2002). *They Sowed, We Reap* (Whitemore: Whitemore Historical Group) for a full account of Prinsep and the 'Adelphi' estate.

¹⁶ Heazlewood. (2002), *op. cit.*

¹⁷ *The Cornwall Chronicle*, 7 March 1849, p.418.

¹⁸ Kingsbury's death, not located; see Inquest, 10 March 1855: SC195/1/36, No: 3482.

Within months of Kingsbury's death, Harriet, who had received her ticket of leave in 1850 and her conditional pardon in 1852, had married her erstwhile employer and obvious admirer, Thomas Wildgust.¹⁹

Born in Nottingham, England, and baptised there on 17 August 1823, Wildgust was the son of honest and industrious parents, George Wildgust, a frame-work knitter, and his wife Elizabeth Bonser, a seamstress. But, while young Thomas had a trade as a needle-maker, he was idle and dishonest and he kept bad company. In 1841, at the age of eighteen, he spent five months in gaol after being charged with larceny and a year later he was imprisoned again for six months for a similar offence. When, on 3 January 1843, he was charged with larceny for the third time – he and one of his friends had stolen twenty pairs of women's stays - he was sentenced to seven years transportation. After spending a little time on the hulk *Justitia*, he was transferred to the vessel *Henrietta* which left England on 13 July 1843 and arrived at Hobart on 19 November that year.²⁰

It took Thomas a year or two to settle down in VDL. His conduct record shows that, in the early years of his servitude, three charges were brought against him for minor thefts while assigned as a labourer to properties in the Fingal and East Coast areas but all were dismissed. In 1847, he was granted a ticket of leave and in 1850 he was free by servitude. The last property at which he worked as a convict was 'Adelphi', where he was assigned to the overseer, Mr John Burt.²¹ It was at 'Adelphi' that he met Harriet, of course.

From the start, the marriage appears to have been a good one and the Wildgusts prospered. Neither of them was ever in trouble with the law again.

Although the 'Adelphi' records for these early years are a little unclear, Thomas is believed to have been leasing a farm in his own right there by 1856.²² Newspapers of the day mentioned his name frequently as a well-respected member of the community, serving on juries and taking a leading role at meetings where road works and similar regional needs were discussed.²³

Around 1874, Thomas and Harriet appear to have surrendered their lease at 'Adelphi' and moved to nearby Cluan where they continued to prosper. They were still there when Harriet passed away at the age of sixty-four on 8 April 1890.²⁴ Because her parents were dead, and she could neither read nor write, she had probably lost touch with her siblings. It is likely that no one in England mourned her death.

¹⁹ Harriet, Tol: CON41-1-4, Image 121; Conditional Pardon, *Hobart Town Gazette*, 30 March 1852; Wildgust/Harriet Kingsbury marriage: RGD37/1016/1855, Longford; Wildgust's surname is shown as 'Wildgush' on the marriage entry.

²⁰ Wildgust, conduct record: CON33-1-46, Image 184.

²¹ CON33-1-46, Image 184.

²² Heazlewood. (2002), *op. cit.*

²³ See, for instance, *Launceston Examiner*, 7 January 1860, p.2; *The Cornwall Chronicle*, 21 October, 1872, p.3.

²⁴ Harriet's death: RGD35/1384/1890, Westbury.

Thomas stayed on at Cluan for a few years but found that, without Harriet, his toil and success had no meaning and so, in 1894, he sold up the farm and moved to Mathinna, near St Helens, to be closer to old friends.

The following extract from the *Daily Telegraph*, 31 August 1903, shows the deep respect in which Thomas was held by this time:

The many friends of Mr Thomas Wildgust will be sorry to learn that at the present time he is almost unable to get about by reason of the infirmities of old age. Mr Wildgust comes of a good old English family. He arrived in Tasmania in the year 1842. Being a farmer's son, and understanding agriculture, he elected to settle in the Westbury district, where he remained for over 50 years. Honest and thrifty habits enabled him to make a competency, but at about the time the goal of fortune was reached his wife died. This so unsettled the old gentleman that he decided to sell his farm, and live amongst relatives. For the past six years 'old uncle' (by which sobriquet he is generally known) has been living with Mr and Mrs Bottcher, of the Telegraph Hotel. His kindly and genial manner has made him very popular at Mathinna. He was generally conspicuous at political and other public meetings, and often was the cause of inserting a little harmless fun by a witty interjection. Honest Tom at the age of 80 is an evidence that there is truth in the old adage that the exercise of honesty and charity brings honour to old age.²⁵

Within a year of this, Thomas was dead. *The Mercury* (Hobart) of 14 July 1904 carried this touching tribute to him:

There passed away at the residence of Mr. O. Böttcher on Thursday morning an old colonist of some forty years' standing in the person of Mr. Thomas Wildgust. The deceased had reached the ripe age of eighty years, and had been ailing for some time, and since last week was gradually sinking, his medical advisor expressing no hope for recovery. Mr. Wildgust, or more familiarly known as "Uncle," was a native of England, and was on the Victorian gold-fields in the early days, subsequently following farming in the Westbury district. He eventually came to Mathinna with Mr. Böttcher some seven years ago, and resided there up till his death. Mr. Wildgust was deeply respected by everyone who knew him, and by the genial disposition made many friends. His remains were interred on Friday afternoon, when a large and representative gathering assembled to pay their last respects.²⁶

Thomas had made a good life with Harriet and had prospered.

²⁵ *Daily Telegraph*, 31 August 1903, p.3.

²⁶ *The Mercury*, 14 July 1904, p.8.

Of some interest to readers of this story, perhaps, will be the way both Harriet and Thomas seemed to have been able to keep hidden the fact that they had been transported to VDL as convicts. Did no one ever know of, or remember, their convict pasts?

How, for instance, was it possible for Thomas, a convicted thief, to be referred to as ‘Honest Tom’, for it to be said of him that ‘he comes from a good old English family’ and that he owed his success to ‘honest and thrifty habits’? Was the reference to his having spent some time on the Victorian goldfields in his early days a way of hiding the truth about his arrival in VDL?

In her book, *Tasmania’s Convicts: How Felons Built a Free Society*, Alexander (2014) provided a very convincing answer to questions such as these. She wrote:

Tasmanians as a community tried a variety of methods, both overt and instinctive, to repudiate the convict stain ... They banded together to defend themselves against outsiders. Within that community ... individuals tried to hide their past, for no matter how much the community was united against the stain, there was some stigma on individual ex-convicts and their families. But this was not said publicly; the general population supported people trying to hide their past – most of the population was in a similar situation anyway – because if hardly anybody was known to be a convict, everyone could see that Tasmania had nothing to do with them anymore. Everyone would be distanced from the convict stigma.²⁷

Thus, it is likely that there *were* people who knew the truth about the past of Harriet and Thomas but chose not to divulge it, either because they or members of their family were in the same position or because it did no favours to the state of Tasmania to do so.

²⁷ Alexander, A. (2014). *Tasmania’s Convicts: How Felons Built a Free Society*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.