

RACHEL CHAMBERLAIN

(*Mary Ann*, 1822)

by

Don Bradmore (FCRC Member)

Rachael CHAMBERLAIN is reputed to have been one of the most notorious women ever transported to Van Diemens Land (VDL).¹

Chamberlain (nee BERRY) was born at Bristol, England, about 1796.² Nothing is known of her early life. At the age of eighteen, she married a 32-year old widower, Abraham CHAMBERLAIN (aka CHAMBERLYN, CHAMBERLAYNE, CHAMBERLYNE), at St Mary's, Newington, London.³ Two years later, her husband was convicted of larceny and transported for seven years. He arrived at Hobart on 11 June 1818.⁴

In 1821, Rachael, who had been supporting herself through prostitution since her husband's conviction and transportation, was herself convicted of larceny.⁵ She had stolen a quantity of bedding, valued at forty shillings, from a room in which she had been lodging with a man by the name of Joseph NIXON.

At her Old Bailey trial, Rachael told the judge that Nixon had left her before the articles were taken. Nixon was acquitted but she was found guilty and sentenced to transportation for seven years.⁶ She arrived in VDL aboard *Mary Ann* 1 (2) which sailed from Portsmouth on Christmas Day 1821 and reached Hobart on 2 May 1822.⁷

With Henry WARINGTON as master and James HALL as surgeon-superintendent, *Mary Ann* carried 108 female prisoners, 45 of whom were to be disembarked at Hobart and the remainder at Sydney.⁸ The voyage was relatively uneventful. Nevertheless, Surgeon Hall's report on it made it clear that he had not enjoyed it. While this was not his first voyage as surgeon-superintendent on

¹ Tardiff, Philip. (1990). *Notorious Strumpets and Dangerous Girls: Convict Women in Van Diemen's Land*. North Ryde: Angus and Robertson; *Hobart Town Gazette and Van Diemen's Land Advertiser (HTG)*, 11 May 1822, p.2.

² Year of birth calculated from age 28 given on arrival at Hobart.

³ Marriage Entry No. 858 in "London, England, Church of England Marriages and Banns, 1754-1921, Southwark, St Mary, Newington, 1814", via 'Ancestry.com', accessed 18 January 2017.

⁴ CON31/1/6, Image 44 (name shown as 'CHAMBERLYN').

⁵ Chamberlain's convict documents mention that she had been 'on the town'.

⁶ <https://www.oldbaileyonline.org>; reference t18210718-018.

⁷ <http://members.iinet.net.au/~perthdps/convicts/shipsTAS.html>

⁸ *Hobart Town Gazette (HTG)*, 4 May 1822, p.2.

a convict vessel, it was the first time he had had responsibility for female prisoners and he had found the task extremely taxing.⁹

Since the earliest days of transportation, the authorities had struggled with the problem of prostitution at sea. Various ways of preventing contact between the sexes had been tried but none had met with much success. In the early 1820s, the problem was perceived to be worsening and surgeon-superintendents were coming under increasing pressure to be more vigilant in keeping crew members from the women and vice versa. While the master was nominally in command of all aspects of ship-board behaviour, his prime responsibility was for the safe arrival of the vessel at its destination. The prime responsibility of the surgeon-superintendent was for the well-being - moral as well as physical - of the prisoners.¹⁰

Hall took this responsibility very seriously but the task of keeping the men and women apart proved to be beyond him. The report he wrote as *Mary Anne* approached Hobart lists a number of women whom he had found necessary to punish for having sexual relations with members of the crew - usually by locking them for days at a time in a small, dark hold in the bowels of the ship, sometimes in chains, and feeding them on a diet of bread and water. These extracts from his report give evidence of his frustration at a situation he could not control:

*... Sarah FENTON, as desperate and depraved a character as has ever been transported; capable of doing murder; reprobate;... Sarah APPLETON, very sly, of a silent demure habit; has committed prostitution on board and has been punished ... Sarah FLETCHER, a dangerous woman to man; under a fair face and simplicity of manners lie a lustful heart, a lying tongue and great hypocrisy in religion, a prostitute ... Ellen ELLERBECK, reprobate, hypocrite, has committed prostitution on board and has been punished ... Hannah WHITELY has been found to be a vile dissembler and prostitute ... Hannah READING, a dirty reprobate and vile prostitute; very abandoned depraved girl ... Elizabeth BOUCHER, dirty, prostitute and thief ... Mary DAVIS, a dirty reprobate, vile prostitute, a very depraved, abandoned girl ... Sarah HELLIWELL, a very sly abandoned prostitute ... Ann WILLIAMS, has been impregnated by one of the sailors ... and is now threatened with a miscarriage which she may have excited; a bad woman, has borne children; swearer; disorderly, a prostitute ...*¹¹

Hall also made scathing remarks about a number of other *Mary Anne* women, referring variously to Mary LOYD, Jane BUCKINGHAM, Martha BURGESS, Catherine FLANAGAN, Mary Ann GRIFFIN, Isabella HAMILL, Mary HART, Catherine HILTON, Eleanor PHILLIPS, Catherine TAYLOR, Louise VAUGHAN, Elizabeth WORRAL and two women by the name of Mary

⁹ Hall was surgeon-superintendent aboard *Agememnon* which landed 178 male prisoners at Sydney in September 1820: <http://members.iinet.net.au/~perthdps/convicts/shipNSW2.html>

¹⁰ Damousi, J. (1997). *Depraved and Disorderly: Female Convicts, Sexuality and Gender in Colonial Australia*. Melbourne: Cambridge U.P; Bateson, C. (1983). *The Convict Ships, 1787-1868*. Sydney: Library of Australian History.

¹¹ James Hall: *Medical and surgical journal of the female convict ship Mary Ann for 27 October 1821 to 25 May 1822*. The National Archives (U.K.) Reference: ADM 101/52/1.

ROBINSON as 'vile', 'dirty', 'depraved', 'abandoned', 'refractory', 'loose', 'idle', 'insolent' and/or 'disorderly'.¹²

But Hall saved some of his most vitriolic comments for Rachel Chamberlain whom he saw as the ring-leader of this troublesome group. Of her he wrote:

*... a most infamous character, a confirmed thief and vile prostitute, a sly woman, hypocrite, blasphemer, drunkard, revengeful, reprobate, refractory, insolent; her husband [a convict] at Sydney and her brother [a convict] at VDL.*¹³

Was Hall accurate in his assessment of Chamberlain? Lending support to his opinion is her gaol report while in England awaiting shipment to VDL. The report states that she had been in 'thirteen different gaols' previously and was well-known to the authorities.¹⁴

According to Philip TARDIFF in his authoritative *Notorious Strumpets and Dangerous Girls* (1990), Chamberlain and Sarah Fenton were shipped off to the harsh penal settlement on Sarah Island in Macquarie Harbour on the western side of the island on 4 May 1822, just two days after their arrival at Hobart.¹⁵ The decision to remove them immediately must have been influenced by Hall's report.

But were these two women ever at Macquarie Harbour? Recent research has failed to find any documentary evidence of them ever being there.¹⁶ However, on Saturday, 11 May 1822, this announcement appeared in the *Hobart Town Gazette*:

*Sailed on Sunday last for Macquarie Harbour, H.M.C.B. 'Duke of York', Mr CHASE, Commander; having 35 male and 2 female convicts on board, under sentence of transportation to that Settlement ...*¹⁷

Given the date of the arrival at Hobart of *Mary Anne* (2 May) and the date of departure for Macquarie Harbour of *Duke of York* (4 May), as well as what is already known about the relatively few women who spent time at Sarah Island, could the '2 female convicts on board' have been anyone else but Chamberlain and Fenton?

If, as Tardiff asserted, Chamberlain was shipped off to Sarah Island immediately after her arrival in VDL, she must have remained there for only a very short time. Her conduct record shows

¹² James Hall: *Medical and surgical journal of the female convict ship Mary Ann for 27 October 1821 to 25 May 1822*. The National Archives (U.K.) Reference: ADM 101/52/1.

¹³ James Hall: *Medical and surgical journal of the female convict ship Mary Ann for 27 October 1821 to 25 May 1822*. The National Archives (U.K.) Reference: ADM 101/52/1.

¹⁴ CON40/1/1, Image 257, page 23.

¹⁵ Tardiff, Philip. (1990). *Notorious Strumpets and Dangerous Girls: Convict Women in Van Diemen's Land*. North Ryde: Angus and Robertson; *Hobart Town Gazette and Van Diemen's Land Advertiser (HTG)*, 11 May 1822, p.2.

¹⁶ Irene Schaffer. 'The Forgotten Women Convicts at Macquarie Harbour, 1821-1826' at <http://www.tasfamily.net.au/~schafferi/index.php?file=kop28.php>

¹⁷ HTG, 11 May 1822, p.2.

that eighteen months later she was in Hobart. On 15 December 1823, while assigned to Hobart Hospital as a washerwoman, she was charged with co-habiting with convict George HARRIS (aka George KAYLOCK and KEYLOCK) and returned to the Female Factory.¹⁸ Harris/Kaylock was a 21 year-old shoemaker from London who had arrived in VDL two years earlier after being convicted of a felony and sentenced to transportation for life.¹⁹

Chamberlain's next assignment was to the influential Hobart merchant Anthony Fenn KEMP but, on 12 March 1824, she absconded from his residence. Soon apprehended, she was sent back to the Female Factory.²⁰ But even within the confines of the prison, she was a nuisance. On 1 May 1824, she was charged with insolence and disobedience, singing obscene songs and falsely accusing the keeper of the Factory with stealing government provisions.²¹ On this occasion she managed to escape with a reprimand but she was not so fortunate when, on 30 November of the same year, she was charged with disorderly conduct for fighting with fellow inmates in the prison barracks. This time she was locked in a cell and fed on bread and water for a week.²²

Soon after her release, Chamberlain took up with Harris/Kaylock again and, in April 1826, she gave birth to a son by him. But this relationship was to be relatively short-lived. On 17 June 1825, Harris/Kaylock absconded from the Public Works Department to which he had been assigned. For this offence he was banished to Norfolk Island.²³ As far as is known, Chamberlain never saw him again.

The removal of Harris/Kaylock from Hobart did nothing to improve Chamberlain's behaviour. In 1827, she was gaoled for stealing a pig. In 1828, she was gaoled again, this time for receiving stolen goods. In 1830, she was charged with causing an affray in Hobart's central business district and, in 1831, with assaulting a neighbour.²⁴

On 7 March 1829, she admitted her son, now three years old, to the Queen's Orphan School at Hobart. She gave his name as 'Richard George CHAMBERLAIN' and stated that his father was 'Abraham Chamberlain' but there is no evidence that she had ever met her former husband in VDL.²⁵ In adulthood, the child was always known as 'Richard George KAYLOCK', suggesting that he himself knew that his father was George Harris/Kaylock.²⁶

¹⁸ CON40/1/1, Image 257

¹⁹ CON31/1/18, Image 122

²⁰ CON40/1/1, Image 257.

²¹ CON40/1/1, Image 257; Female Convicts Research Centre (FCRC):

<http://www.femaleconvicts.org.au/docs/lists/Riots.pdf>

²² CON40/1/1, Image 257; FCRC: <http://www.femaleconvicts.org.au/docs/lists/Riots.pdf>

²³ CON31/1/18, Image 122; *HTG*, 17 June 1825, p.1; *HTG*, 12 August 1825, p.3.

²⁴ CON40/1/1, Image 257.

²⁵ http://www.orphanschool.org.au/showorphan.php?orphan_ID=890

²⁶ Richard George Kaylock, obituary: *Evelyn Observer and Bourke East Record*, 13 May 1910, p.2.

By 1828, Rachael was living with convict Charles BRADNOCK who had been sentenced to fourteen years transportation for larceny in England in 1818.²⁷ In 1830, she gave birth to his son, Charles Thomas BRADNOCK, and in 1833 to a second, Alfred Joseph BRADNOCK.²⁸ However, her relationship with Bradnock, a heavy drinker, was never easy. In 1833 and again in 1834, now calling herself 'Mary' Chamberlain, she took Bradnock to court claiming that he had beaten her violently, putting her in fear for her life.²⁹ Not surprisingly, the connection ended shortly afterwards. In August 1835, Bradnock was convicted of stealing and receiving and sentenced to transportation 'beyond the seas' for fourteen years. Reporting the trial, the *Hobart Town Courier* commented: "This is a happy riddance, for Bradnock has for years kept a notorious sly grog and receiving shop."³⁰ It is likely that Rachael had been involved in his criminal activities. In 1834, and again in 1835, she was gaoled for unspecified felonies.³¹

While Chamberlain might have been glad to see the last of Bradnock, her economic circumstances were probably precarious after his departure. In 1839, a police constable at New Norfolk was charged "with having been found in a disorderly house, kept by a woman named Chamberlaine (sic)".³² Was this Rachael? It seems likely that it was. Had she resorted to prostitution again to maintain herself and the two Bradnock children?

In October 1842, Chamberlain, now 46 years old, married a 39 year-old farmer and fisherman, William NEWTON. The marriage entry shows her name as 'Mary Rachael Chamberlain and her age as forty.'³³ Newton seems to have been a good man who readily accepted Rachael's sons and brought them up as his own. After the marriage Rachael lived quietly and avoided further trouble.

Rachel (Chamberlain) NEWTON passed away as 'Mary NEWTON' at Hobart in 1850. The record of her death shows her age as 47 but she was probably in her early fifties.³⁴

So, was Chamberlain *really* as bad as her reputation suggests? Does she deserve to be ranked amongst the more notorious of the female convicts transported to Van Diemen's Land? She was not a murderer or a violent thug and, when given the opportunity, seemed to try hard to be a good wife and mother.

²⁷ CON31/1/1, Image 165.

²⁸ Charles Thomas BRADNOCK: 3357/1830/RGD32; Alfred Joseph BRADNOCK: 4872/1833/RGD32.

²⁹ *The Tasmanian*, 8 February 1833, p.7.

³⁰ *The Hobart Town Courier*, 28 August 1835; *Colonial Times*, 1 September 1835, p.8.

³¹ 'Tasmania, Australia, Convict Court & Selected Records, 1800-1899', Gaol Record Book Reference No. GD135-2-1, December 1834 and April 1835, via 'Ancestry', accessed 10 March 2017.

³² *Colonial Times*, 30 July 1839, p.7.

³³ RGD37/77/1842, Hobart.

³⁴ RGD35/210/1850, Hobart.

That said, however, Chamberlain does not come across as a particularly likeable character. She was a rebellious, ill-tempered, sometimes violent nuisance. She was quite lacking in self-discipline. She was a prostitute and a common thief.

It must be acknowledged, of course, that these were incredibly difficult times for women - and even more so for women who were uneducated and poor. Without a man to provide for her and her children, Chamberlain may have had few options but to resort to crime to stay alive.

It must be acknowledged also that it was ill-fortune that saw Chamberlain put aboard *Mary Anne* with James Hall as the surgeon-superintendent. Subsequent events were to prove that Hall was a very strange man whose own behaviour might have incited much of the misconduct aboard. By all accounts he was a competent and conscientious doctor but tactless in his supervision of females. BATESON (1974) referred to him as a 'zealous, meddlesome and litigious individual', declaring that he was 'temperamentally unfitted for the post of surgeon-superintendent'.³⁵

Tellingly, on Hall's next voyage to the Australian colonies, on *Brothers* in 1824, he had similar problems with a group of female prisoners he could not control. After that, he seems to have had enough of convict ships and expressed the desire to settle permanently in New South Wales. The governor at the time, Sir Thomas BRISBANE, wrote to Earl BATHURST, Britain's secretary of state for the colonies, urging him not to allow Hall to reside in Sydney because of a doubt about his 'moral character'.³⁶ It is likely that Chamberlain, had she heard of it, would have applauded that decision.

³⁵ Bateson, C. (1974, 2nd ed.) *The Convict Ships, 1776-1869*. London: A.H. & A.W. Reed, pp.225-6.

³⁶ *Historical Records of Australia (HRA)*, Series 1, Vol, XI.