

FEMALE CONVICT RESEARCH CENTRE: AUTUMN CONFERENCE 2019

A Side-ways View of the Anson: People known to the Roman Catholic Chaplain

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POWERPOINT IMAGE 1

Fr Cotham's day began at seven o'clock in the morning with a horseback ride from Hobart to Risdon Ferry. Depending on the weather and the tide, he had a view of the shifting outline of the *Anson*. The brief comments he made in his diary at the end of the day give another view, of the cross section of women and men who inhabited that multi-layered space. Fr Cotham was not an enthusiastic journal writer but being interested in everything and everyone he simply noted the names of people he came across with a brief comment.

Between 1844 and 1850, James Ambrose Cotham was a Roman Catholic Chaplain in the convict department in Tasmania. Indeed, having come out to the colony in 1835 as a young, newly-ordained Benedictine priest, by 1844 he was Bishop William Willson's most experienced priest and the obvious, or perhaps only, choice as chaplain for the experimental system on the *Anson*.

Although it is fascinating, and poignant, to know more about the individual women who passed through the *Anson* in large numbers, by standing back to consider Ambrose Cotham's relatively few named contacts we see a sample of the mixed community that populated the station.

POWERPOINT IMAGE 2

His surviving journal starts abruptly in January 1846:

Thursday 1 January 1846: Prevented from boarding the Anson due to the stormy weather.

On days when he was able to go on board he was not always alone. Occasionally the Female Catechists accompanied him: sometimes it was Mrs Garrett, a Presbyterian widow, and her pretty daughters, Maria Henrietta and Elizabeth, but more often it was his colleague Mrs Montgomery, the official Catholic Female Catechist to the *Anson*. Whose company did he prefer? He could give instructions to Mrs Montgomery, telling her to quell the noise if his congregation became restless, but she also caused him considerable trouble. After alleging an assault on herself by Dr Bowden, Cotham spent precious time and was 'wearied out' pleading her case. The bad feelings escalated when Bowden called Cotham 'a lyer' and letters went back and forth between them and the Comptroller General's office. Eventually the two gentlemen made their peace, with apologies given and accepted. As for Mrs Montgomery, a few weeks later there is the terse comment in Fr Cotham's entry for Good Friday, 10 April 1846: 'Mrs Montgomery valde inebriatum [Mrs Montgomery very drunk].

POWERPOINT IMAGE 3

Coinciding with his efforts on Mrs Montgomery's behalf, Fr Cotham was also attending Fanny Doherty (*Tasmania 2*) who, during her four months on the *Anson* had been chronically sick with consumption and acutely ill with dysentery. At the inquest in March 1846 Margaret Power, the hospital warder, gave evidence about Dr Bowden's considerate care:

'We are not restricted in any way in the Hospital here under the direction of the Doctor, the patients obtain all they wish.

This included spiritual comfort. On the day of Fanny's death Fr Cotham noted

'Heavy rain continued. Sick Call to Anson: omnia sacramentum to Fanny Doherty. T. & converⁿ with Captain Cotterell and Lady' [Tea and conversation]

Then it was onto the ferry again and the ride back into Hobart.

Captain Cotterell was Commandant of the *Anson* with married living quarters on board the ship. It is unlikely he or his wife ever met Fanny Doherty but in a real sense she was a neighbour of theirs and Fr Cotham would have spoken to them about her after attending her deathbed, his social call briefly linking them all together.

Fr Cotham often complained about the wet and stormy weather he had to ride through, but at least he could put a physical and psychological distance between his personal life and his prison work. The civilian families on board had to negotiate the boundaries as best they could. The Anglican chaplain, the Revd George Giles, had sailed from England on the *Woodbridge* with his wife and two daughters; when their 10-year-old daughter Anna Martha died on the *Anson* a year later her parents must have wondered if bringing her on board had cost them all too dearly.

Dr Bowden's daughter Amelia was fourteen when she accompanied her father and step-mother. Her health was sound but she may have been irked by her parents' high moral tone and the lack of opportunities for a normal young girl's amusements. She took the chance to elope with William Carter when she was eighteen, and no doubt caused embarrassment to her stepmother when rumours, nods and winks circulated among the *Anson* community. After all, this was not the type of training for marriage the Bowdens advocated. Later in the same year, 1847, Dr Bowden died.

Clearly, the *Anson's* closed environment, with the objective of preparing the transported women for domestic duties and married life, could play havoc with the family life of the members of staff.

However, for some it did lay the groundwork for advancement. Phillipa Bowden took with her a core of loyal employees from Hanwell Asylum in London, some as married couples and others as single women. Two extra emigrants who attached themselves to the party were Matthew and Catherine Holdich, already in their mid-sixties and not colonial employees, but unwilling to be left behind when their three daughters sailed on the *Woodbridge*. At the end of their service on the *Anson* the three Holdich sisters – Martha, Susannah, and Jane – married and left government service, with useful pensions.

Susannah Holdich and her new husband Robert Harcourt moved to Victoria and opened the Hanbury Retreat House for the Insane on the strength of Susannah's experience as Phillipa Bowden's Assistant Superintendent. Robert, formerly in the fancy, furnishing, and heavy ironmongery trade, was now Proprietor and Superintendent of his own establishment, and not abashed to advertise himself as 'a gentleman well known in England for his experience in the treatment of mental and nervous diseases'.¹ His wife was prudently installed as Matron. The private asylum for upper and middle class patients

was based on the Hanwell system where the Bowdens had gained their professional expertise:

Mr. Harcourt's object will be to keep patients under no more restraint than is absolutely needed, and to have them so managed that all appearance of surveillance is so far as possible dispensed with ... Music, gardening, and such light amusements as tend to divert the mind from gloomy fancies will be provided for the inmates, and, in fact, they will be treated as visitors to a private house – all the obnoxious forms which tend to impress them with a sense of being inmates of an asylum will be done away with.ⁱⁱ

The asylum did not prosper and Robert wisely returned to England and his family's brass foundry business. But their efforts at least suggest that Susannah had not become hardened by her time on the *Anson* and she had imbibed from Mrs Bowden her belief that it was possible, and profitable, to operate a humane regime for inmates, whether criminal or mentally unwell.

A vital part of the *Anson* regime was the provision of meaningful work for the women, but it was not easy to find sufficient to keep them occupied. Fr Cotham added his small mite to the laundry, taking (and paying for) his personal linen to be washed on board: two shillings for a dozen pieces of laundry, a halfpenny for a collar. On 7 April 1846 he took six collars for washing; on 23 May he had twice as many pieces of laundry and twenty-six collars. He was not too proud to organise a personal delivery service for his clerical companions in Hobart if it benefitted the *Anson* women.

The journal does not tell us how well, or otherwise, Cotham and the Bowdens interacted on a daily basis. But there is snippet that suggests bending of the rules was possible.

On Sunday 28 June 1846, Fr Cotham noted that he 'Took Alice Burgess daughter on board the *Anson*'. In all likelihood Alice was the daughter of Esther Burgess, who, with her eldest daughter Mary, was one of five Carlow women transported for seven years on the *Tasmania* (2) for stealing potatoes. Alice, perhaps not thriving at the Orphan School, might have been taken to the station for her own benefit. Or a visit might have been intended as an incentive to her mother. In any case, it was a kind, and surprising, act for a clergyman to do on a busy Sunday.

Fr Cotham was an integral part of the institution despite being non-resident (probably to his great relief) and overburdened with other duties, much to his annoyance. His strongest ally was the Catholic bishop of Hobart, William Willson, whose arrival in 1844 coincided with that of the *Anson*. Willson was clear that

the female part of the convicts ... certainly claim our strongest sympathies... Here was a task of difficulty to perform, to fit them, in a moderate time, to be good members of society, for many of them, as you may suppose, had been very, very unfortunate.ⁱⁱⁱ

The colonial government had never been fully committed to a female penal station managed along enlightened principles. The temporary floating reformatory became permanent until Comptroller General James Hampton decided on its removal altogether while Philippa Bowden took leave of absence in England following the death of her husband.

The official ambivalence towards her method of moral reformation and rehabilitation, as opposed to mere punishment, was bitterly criticised by Mrs Bowden from England:

Whatever good has been effected by the institution of the Anson, there is no doubt much more might have been accomplished but for the general apathy and indifference which hung around me like a shroud; everyone can appreciate the distinction between official formality and cordial help, and I have felt such bitterly.^{iv}

But there seemed to be no possibility of a replacement institution, given the increasing momentum against transportation.

In his final report to Hampton in February 1849 Fr Cotham repeated a request that he should be relieved of his duties at the Male Hospital and Brickfields Hiring Depot ‘that in order to do justice to those two very important establishments [the *Anson* and the Orphan School], my attention should be devoted exclusively to them’. He might have known that his remarks would be considered just the sort of maudlin sentimentality Hampton despised in the prison system, but he made them anyway.

He noted, too, the ‘peculiarly depressive’ effect of the repetitive nature of his convict chaplaincy work: the teaching and exhortation had to be started from scratch with each new batch of arrivals or repeated with reoffenders. Even a man of his ebullient spirits found it difficult to stay hopeful within the confines of the penal institutions.

Ambrose Cotham was blessed from childhood with an enquiring temperament, a strong constitution and an eagerness for activity. However, after leaving home, and his mother and sister, at the age of 11 or 12, his companions had been almost exclusively male in boarding schools, monastery and presbytery. This trained him in his role as priest, but the emotional sensitivity he showed as chaplain to women and orphans was surely developed outside this masculine environment.

His younger brother, Lawrence, had arrived in Tasmania a few months before him and had married Sarah Cassidy, daughter of John and Ellen Cassidy of Woodburn, Richmond. Fr Cotham – Uncle James – was a regular visitor to both homes and knew the Cotham children, Larry, Bella, Ellin and the others, well. When he spoke of the role of the *Anson* women as ‘exerting no inconsiderable influence ... over the future of this rising colony’ he was speaking from close observation and experience of warm family relationships.

After returning to England in 1851, Fr Cotham’s contact with women was more formalised but his respect for their capabilities, and his simple pleasure in their company, owed much to the intense experience on board the *Anson*. In an address to his whole congregation in 1853 he made his views abundantly clear:

I am aware that ladies form part of our congregation as well as gentlemen... Indeed I may say that the Ladies form the most zealous portion, the corner stone, of our congregation. At the call of Religion and of Charity they are always the first and most zealous.

POWERPOINT IMAGE 4

References to Cotham's Tasmanian Journal are made courtesy of Abbot Geoffrey Scott OSB, Douai Abbey, Reading, England

ⁱ *Colonial Times* (Hobart), 8 October 1856, p. 2.

ⁱⁱ *Colonial Times* (Hobart), 8 October 1856, p. 2.

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Courier* (Hobart), 28 July 1847, p. 4, report of a meeting held on 16 February 1847 in the Exchange Rooms, Nottingham, England.

^{iv} *Launceston Examiner*, 16 November 1850, p. 5.