

THE VANDEMONIAN CONNECTION

Anne Grant

I'm still wondering what I am doing here today as my main interest is Genealogy but I guess genealogy equals people and that is what I am talking about.

The first we hear of Portland is when Lieutenant James Grant sailed by and named the bay for the Secretary of State for the Colonies, the Duke of Portland, and other features for his friends.

Which brings me to a problem that I face frequently with people researching their families. When we talk about Portland Bay, what are we talking about ?

1. The wet stuff—literally, Portland Bay? or
2. The settlement which eventually became the City of Portland? or
3. The Portland Bay Administrative District of New South Wales, an area which covered from the Werribee River to the South Australian border until the separation of NSW and Victoria?

The 'Portland Bay Immigration Society' was actually started by the citizens of Geelong. The explanation is that it was to bring ex-convicts to the 'Portland Bay Administrative District' because of the lack of labour in it. Portland Bay—the wet stuff—has also changed over the years. When Grant named it, on December 7th 1800, he described it as the area between Cape Solicitor—now Cape Grant—and Cape Otway. Now, I am told, the parameters are from Point Danger to Lady Julia Percy Island and make a sharp left turn to the coast.

Nicholas Baudin also sailed along the coast and named many places. Most names disappeared with Baudin but I know of three which survived—Cape Dusquesne, Cape Montesquieu and Descartes Bay—although two hundred years of the Australian accent have almost extinguished the French connection.

I am tempted to bypass the regrettable incident of the Convincing Ground. There are too many questions needing answers:

1. Who were the whalers? There were many nationalities around Southern Australia from as far away as England and Nantucket in America.
2. How many people were there—black and white? Some commentators seem to think there were not many white whalers but when one actually thinks about a whaling camp there must have been at least forty men.
3. What were the armament and skills of both parties?
4. When did this action take place?

All are questions that will never be answered—unless anyone has a time machine in their back shed. If they do I would love to borrow it.

Over the years between 1800 and 1830 there were many groups of whalers and sealers along the coast of Portland Bay. They came from VDL, Sydney, New Zealand, England and America. But in 1828 came a young man who was to become Portland's first settler, William Dutton, in as much as he built a house to live in for half of the year and returned to VDL for the other half.

(Here I digress. Claims are made that several huts were built by Griffiths' party and William Dutton lived in one of them. But George Jackson's painting of Portland Bay 1833 shows only one hut. Do we believe our eyes or not?)

Now William Dutton gave the story of his life to the *Portland Guardian* which published it. Unfortunately his story had a lot of errors. I suspect that he didn't know much about his origins or perhaps like many others he did not want to publicise his family's convict origins. William claimed to be born in Sydney, but after they left Norfolk Island—where their first three children were born—his convict parents were documented in Hobart. Henry Dutton and his wife, Catherine Sullivan, were married there in 1807. They had two further children born in VDL: John and William. William stated that his mother was Margaret. From his point of view he may well have been correct as Catherine died the year that William was born and we do not know if Henry Dutton entered another relationship or who raised the boy. Henry died in 1820 before William was 10 years old and the boy may have known nothing except what his siblings could tell him—if they were there. Two of his siblings had connections with early Victoria: John Dutton, a sea captain, and Catherine who married Henry Batman, brother of Melbourne's founder, John.

I have a problem with the use of a second name for William Dutton. He is referred to in modern literature as William Pelham Dutton. My problem is with the lack of primary evidence:

1. There is no baptism record for William and he was born before civil registration.
2. His marriage record to Mary Saggars is signed 'William Dutton'.
3. In the baptism record of his only child to his aboriginal partner he is described as 'William Dutton Mariner'.
4. His statement to the *Portland Guardian* is signed 'William Dutton'.
5. His will is signed 'William Dutton'.

To add to the confusion there were Pelham Duttons in Sydney in 1820 and a Richard Pelham Dutton who died in Adelaide in the 1840s. Richard was also a mariner who traded between Adelaide, Mauritius and Singapore. And our Bill was the master of Henty's ship the *Lady Mary Pelham*.

Also at Portland Bay with Dutton was James Sinclair—a boat builder and cooper—along with others unnamed. James was the brother of John Sinclair owner of the ship *Henry*. And there were lots of others. But we can't talk about settlement at Portland without mentioning the Henty family.

Edward Henty arrived at Portland after a rough and extended trip—34 days from VDL—and with every intention of staying although the Henty family had been denied permission by government in Tasmania and in NSW.

Edward seems to have been an enterprising fellow who was not afraid to get dirt on his hands. He was skilled as a blacksmith, carpenter and farmer. Age and politics later seem to have had an adverse effect.

Edward brought with him several convict servants and his friend Henry Camfield. Henry returned to West Australia less than two years later but had great trouble trying to make the sandy soils of the Freemantle area work for him. He eventually married well below his social class but had no family.

Edward's indentured servants were Thomas Mills, William Gunter, Thomas Clark, Thomas Maland, James Hatley and William McVea who became Edward Henty's overseer. There are some differences in the lists so I've included them all. Most of these fellows have been lost to history but McVea left his mark on an infant settlement even though that mark has long been forgotten.

Three of us were at the Public Records Office of Victoria (PROV) some years ago when one opened a box of early Portland papers. One book was labelled 'Police Pay Book'. It was very brief but in the back it also included the original licences of the Portland Hotels—what a find! Also in the back of the book were two inquests.

The first was into the death of a six year old child in 1840. Henrietta Earles was supposed to be taken to her father at the Half Way House at the Fitzroy River—today's Tyrendarra. Early in the morning a couple of workmen came across an overturned dray and a fallen horse. They went to assist and the drayman, William McVea, was in a bit of a state so they unharnessed the horse and got it to its feet. Their attention then turned to the dray which they righted, only to find the body of a dead child, Henrietta, under a bag of flour which was over her face. McVea had not mentioned to the workmen that there was a child in the dray.

The workmen took the child's body to the Police Magistrate, Mr Blair, who seems to have been a bit suspicious about the state of the child's clothing and he sent for Dr. Byass who performed an autopsy. The doctor's report stated that the child had been raped and that the injuries were so severe that, had she not died, she would have been unable to walk. McVea was arrested and sent to Melbourne for trial for murder—not rape.

Believe it or not, he got off. First there was a dispute between the courts of Sydney and Melbourne, as it was said that the Supreme Court could not sit in two places at once. That was eventually settled—it *could* sit in two separate colonies at the same time!—so in due course McVea was tried, and acquitted; Henrietta's death was found to be misadventure; and another monster was released into the community. How little things change. McVea never returned to Portland and died in the Benevolent Asylum at Bendigo in 1865.

Another murder took place at Portland in the same year. Thomas Leahy murdered his wife.

XXXXX

John Leahy, like a lot of his fellow ticket of leave men, was fond of the drink and having had more than his fair share thought his home was being invaded. He grabbed a bayonet and pursued his wife, who had run for her life, but eventually he caught and stabbed her. This was observed by 'John the Chinaman' who ran for the police. They found Mrs Leahy's remains outside the house.

John Leahy was arrested and sent to Melbourne for trial. He languished in Melbourne gaol for some time and when he was eventually brought to trial he was found guilty and sentenced to death. This was reduced to 'Transportation for Life'. It seems he was being put back into the English System. One wonders how, but the sentence was to be carried out at Portland Gaol where for some reason of his own Mr Blair made Leahy the chief scourger. He was released from gaol within a few years.

A third murder or accidental death came to our notice at the PROV: this time by a John Payne or Pain. He was working north of Portland and was carving meat in a workers hut when a fellow worker came behind him and punched or pushed him. Whether in fun or seriously is probably immaterial, but Payne, with his knife still in his hand, swung around and the knife penetrated the aggressor who died. John was sent to Sydney for trial where he languished in prison for a year before being sent back to Melbourne where the judge, having heard the evidence including that from Portland's Dr Byass, sentenced him to 24 hours and released him as he had served time in Sydney. Payne later married and settled in Geelong: an ex convict who settled and lived his life as a model citizen.

Actually most of the convicts settled and blended into society, and their descendants get an awful shock when they find their backgrounds. Families covered up their history from a very early time, often moving to where they were not known and there blended into the scenery. Mine certainly did. My family spent much of my youthful years assuring me that: 'There are no convicts in our family, dear.'

'Dear' knows different.

To return to the Henty family, Edward was joined a few months later by his brother Frank who eventually took over the family property 'Merino Downs'. These two lived under canvas at Portland for several months until they had completed their house. In 1836 they were joined by Stephen Henty and his wife Jane, and later by their brother John Henty who is generally considered a 'failure'. I think John was an ordinary man in a family of ambitious and extraordinary men. He is said to have walked off a ship off the coast of West Australia.

Our convicts were mostly absorbed into the village life, but of course some reoffended. This was not helped by the steady river of alcohol that flowed through the fledgling settlement. At one point Portland had a pub for every sixteen people; not hotels as we know them but definitely places to buy and drink alcohol.

In 1840 Joseph Latrobe sent Captain W.A. Moore of the government cutter *Prince George* to Portland to investigate rumours that the Hentys were smuggling liquor from Launceston. The investigation after accepting the Henty's hospitality, suggested that nothing was amiss. Hmm!

Thanks to dedicated researchers like Marten Syme and the Launceston Branch of the Tasmanian Genealogist we have lists of people coming out of Launceston to Portland. They include:

The Corney Brothers. One of them settled north of Hamilton and the other became Warrnambool's first doctor. They also built a lovely home in Portland which survives to this day.

Alexander Turnbull, the son of Adam who owned 'Winimburne' near Coleraine.

Alex Rose who had 'Glenorchy Station'. My problem with him is I don't know if he came here or was only an absentee landlord.

Sam Hutchinson and his wife Catherine—both convicted pickpockets—built and ran the Steam Packet Inn. He is said to have bought the building from Launceston as a pre fab. But the Launceston

paper shipping list tells us that a load of timber, barrels of nails, window sills and bedsteads had been loaded for Mr Hutchinson's new hotel at Portland Bay.

Captain James Fawthrop was a bit later arriving in Portland but was definitely a Van Demonian. He left England as mate on a convict ship and arrived as master—his superior having died on the voyage. And aside from captaining many of the coastal traders he was Pilot at Tamar Heads. He came to Portland as our first Harbour Master. He was a consummate seaman as proven when he captained the Portland Lifeboat to save lives at the *Admella* wreck and another at the Fitzroy River, whereas other lives were lost during these episodes.

Joshua Black, a stone mason from Ireland, settled in Portland after arriving in VDL. His name would become well known as he built some of Portland's oldest buildings including Scots church, 1849-50, and St Stephen's School—now the hall—which is recognised as the oldest surviving school building in Victoria. He married twice and settled at Bridgewater and his large family are still represented in the district.

George Dale another convict set up the Commercial Hotel. This was on the same site as today's Gordon Hotel and the licence is continuous from April 1841 to today, making it the oldest in Victoria. We don't claim the oldest working hotel but we do claim the oldest licence.

The Portland Inn was built in 1840 for William Frost, previously of Launceston, and it is now believed to be the oldest building in Victoria on its original site. Other edifices such as Captain Cooks cottage win the age stakes. Frost died in 1843, his wife having pre deceased him in 1841.

Another pub built by an escapee from VDL was the Half Way House at the Fitzroy River opened by James Earls, previously of Westbury. He was a soldier in the Royal Staff Corps and married first Ellen Roberts, a convict girl. We heard about the tragedy of his daughter Henrietta earlier.

1842 was a great year for future historians. We had two ministers arrive—no, not from VDL—but they provided us with records for baptisms, marriages and deaths of Portland and district that we would otherwise not know about. Both Rev. Alexander Laurie and James Yelverton Wilson were enthusiastic Christians and covered the district from Port Fairy to Casterton and beyond until these areas got their own clergy.

It was also the year when Portland got its first newspaper, the *Guardian*. Wow!!! Now we got news too..... who had what properties, who was arriving, what was for sale, who was breaking the law and who had died. The editor was Thomas Wilkinson from Hobart and his backer was Mr Swords. Then another newspaper appeared, the *Mercury*, which only lasted for two years.

Mr Wilkinson had worked as a missionary with George Augustus Robinson in VDL and when Robinson was appointed Protector of Aborigines in Victoria he appeared in Portland also. It astounds me that the appointment was made given his track record in VDL, and the more I read about him the more he sounds like a self serving God-botherer. (My opinion only.) There is no doubt he did some good among the Victorian Aborigines.

Wilkinson and his backer Mr Swords made a difference to the small isolated colony. Their paper stood alone until the 1960s when it was bought out by its rival, the *Portland Observer* and in the form of the *Portland Observer & Guardian* survives to this day.

1840 was not a good time for Portland. We had a severe drought—most unusual!—which sent many of the squatters broke. The Union Bank letter book tell us that it was difficult for the banks as

well. They of course were not the many-tentacled businesses we know today. The affected people just had to make do, there was no government or charitable assistance as we know it today. Neighbour helped neighbour or they just did not survive. The usual flood, fire and drought affected the whole community. One has to remember that almost all food was grown locally and fire destroyed that also. One Casterton chap lost his house, stock and grassland to fire, plus all the materials he had purchased to build a better house for his wife. Nothing left except the clothes he was wearing and no local shops to go to even *if* his money was safe.

The lack of a workforce caused the squatocracy to appeal direct to the Government in London to send immigrants to Portland instead of to Melbourne as there was no labour for hire in the place. This plea was answered by the arrival between 1851 and 1857 of 37 ships carrying 11,390 immigrants into the port. Portland's population would double with the arrival of a ship but the migrants were soon hired to work either in the town or on the sheep stations. We need to remember that the station was a settlement in its own right, remote from what little civilisation there was, and it employed a lot of people. Shepherds, labourers, cooks, shoemakers, saddlers, harness makers, maids and servants in the house, dairy maids, dog handlers and almost any other employment you can think of. If the manager or owner had children a tutor was necessary too, as was a bookkeeper.

Sheep were run in thousands but it took three people to look after 200 to 300 of them. The runs were unfenced and the aborigines hostile—don't blame them for that!—and the need was for at least one day shepherd, one night shepherd and a hut keeper-cum-cook.

The coming of immigrants direct to Portland brought to an end the isolation of Portland Bay. Immigrants brought their families, or married and produced offspring on arrival and the population grew. And of course more people crossed Mr Bass's Strait too, but they made less of an impact as the population grew.