

RESEARCHING IN THE PORT SORELL DISTRICT

Are you mystified by such names as Burgess, Torquay and Formby?

Unable to find them on the map?

Then you are most probably researching your ancestors in the District of Port Sorell.

The records for this Registration District commence in the year 1845. Firstly, where is it exactly?

The gazetted description is as follows:

Bound on the north side by Bass's Straits from Emu Bay to Badger Head, thence on the north-eastern side by the parishes of Stockport and Philips Norton to the western angle of the parish of Wells, thence to the south east by a line extending south-westerly (crossing the Rubicon River) to the confluence of the Dasher River with the River Mersey, thence by the Dasher River to its source and by a continued line to the old road from Deloraine to Emu Bay, and thence on the southern and western sides by that road to Emu Bay aforesaid.¹

Addresses given are vague: such as Port Fenton or River Forth, River Don, Mersey, Leven, Pardoe, Port Sorell and North Down. They are rarely specific.

Although the records begin in 1845, land alienation occurred as early as 1826 when the Van Diemen's Land Company took up all the country between Port Sorell and the Mersey River, naming it North Down. Part of this holding, which was soon relinquished by the Company, was taken up by Captain B.B. Thomas followed later by other members of the Thomas family.

Burgess was the official seat of Government for the district, with Charles Meredith appointed Assistant Police Magistrate in 1844². Amongst a regularly changing constabulary of predominantly convict origin was Isaac Stephens who, after relinquishing the position of District Constable, built the first cottages and a jetty.

The population of the "Port Sorell", which was until 1844, part of the Police District of Westbury, was in that year 1768, of whom only 378 were females. Houses totaled 162.³ By 1861 the district population had almost doubled to 1979 males and 1380 females and by 1870 was described as the "most populous country district in Tasmania"⁴.

The main Settlements were those of the self-styled "Gentlemen" farmers: Sam Thomas and his sons, George Hall, William George Gardner Sams, and Edmund Robson and their families, all of whom resided in or around the township of Burgess (present day Port Sorell) and the areas called North Down, New Down and Spring Lawn.

Much of the rest of the population was transient and consisted of convicts or Ticket-of-Leave men and women who made up the working population of these "estates"⁵: shepherds, shoemakers, blacksmiths, labourers, carpenters, sawyers; men and families who settled awhile, but soon moved on or became tenants of their former masters.

From 1849 the settlements at the Mersey, especially around present day Latrobe, were taking shape with Henry Bonney at Frogmore, Thomas Johnson at Sherwood and Charles Oldaker on the eastern bank of the Mersey River at what was to become part of Torquay. Frogmore was settled in 1836 by Miss Lucinda Moriarty, but was let to Henry Bonney in 1837. Both had connections with Westbury. Bonney is still a well-known name in the district. Thomas Johnson is best known as the husband of part Aboriginal, Dolly Dalrymple Briggs.

The discovery of coal in the areas which became known, as Tarleton and Ballahoo (near Latrobe) stimulated investment in the area and there was an influx of immigrant miners and their families. The first coal-miner appears in the, bdm records in 1853 (James Jeffreys), but not all settlers came direct from the United Kingdom. In 1854 sawmiller Stephen Kelcey traveled to the colony to hire labourers to come to the Mersey to cut sleepers for the Geelong Railway Co.

How many of these men stayed and settled in the district? The mid 1850s also witnessed the arrival of settlers from Germany, hence the settlement known as Heidleberg. The entrepreneurial mine owners (were they rogues or innocents?) may not have made their fortunes (or those of their shareholders) but their enterprise opened the way for those families who abandoned mining to become farmers, shop-keepers, sawyers and navvies for the railways.

Some early births, deaths and marriages for Port Sorell will be found in the records of the Launceston Registration District and some will appear only in the registers of that city's churches. Holy Trinity Anglican Church in Launceston records Port Sorell area baptisms as late as 1879! Henry Bonney's daughter Martha (born 1838) was baptised at St. Andrews, Westbury in 1840, together with Joseph Wiffen, son of Joseph and Catherine Wiffen. Both men gave their abode as Frogmore.

Whilst many couples traveled to Launceston in order to be married according to their preferred faith, others could not afford the expense of such a trip (which could involve days of travel by road or a turbulent voyage by sea) or the fees due to the incumbent and so remained unblessed (much to the frustration of genealogists) but no less married.

Families living in the back districts such as Kentishbury, Gawler and Castra, from where the trip to the nearest church was equally hazardous, are likely to be missing from both the civil and religious records, or will appear much later than expected in the latter.

The advantage of having unlimited access to the pre-1900 civil records is undeniable. Diligent searching of the registers will often reveal an ancestor as informant or witness even though he or she never appears either as a birth, marriage or even as a death..

Burial records for the district exist as church registers but are not completely reliable and in many instances do not indicate the name of the burial place. The first entries in the Church of England burial register for the parish of Port Sorell - Sams, Hart and Burney (sic) of North Down carry no other details. At a later date, the Reverend Mr. Martin was on occasions lax in recording details; some entries carry a surname but no Christian name. The Reverend Mr. E.P. Adams buried Mrs Wright in 1866, but another hand furnished the fact that she was Anne, relict of Christopher Wright, aged 88 and buried 24 August 1866. However, three of the first 20 entries in the burial register were not registered as deaths in the Port Sorell district.

The earliest interments would have been at North Down and Burgess and many must have been on private property and long since lost.

An item published in The Examiner newspaper 5 March 1851, under the heading "Burgess, Port Sorell", mentions the fact that there were five different unconsecrated places of burial.

The early mining families would be at Tarleton where land was granted to the Catholics in 1857 and the Anglicans in 1858⁶, but their graves are now beneath Bass Highway and there are no specific records giving Tarleton as the places of burial.

Probably the place given as "abode" would indicate a likely burial place: Uriah Gauler (labourer), Mary Anne Molecombe (?) (an infant), George Knight (blacksmith), and John Burns (boatman) are all of Tarleton. All died in 1857 before the official date of the grant mentioned above.

There were two burial grounds at Torquay, one granted in 1864 to the Church of England, the other in 1861 to the Wesley community for no particular denomination⁷, and both are now resumed as parkland. The earliest dated headstone in the Church of England burial ground is for Isaac Stephens who died in 1857, so obviously burials pre-date the publication of the grants. A third grant was made in 1863 to the Catholic community, but may not have been used. Burial records for the former cemeteries survive in part in the records of the Church of England and the Methodists, although the latter are of short duration.

Early cemeteries survive for River Don, Hamilton-on-Forth and Kindred and the remaining headstones have all been transcribed. Again the burial registers for the Forth-Leven area are occasionally vague and often not specific. Formby did not have a cemetery until 1886⁸ when that at the Mersey Bluff was opened. Prior to that the funeral parties had to cross the river in the ferry and use the ground at Torquay. The space hardly seems adequate! Set in "most picturesque surroundings" the Bluff cemetery was free from water which was "so repulsive an element in the existing cemetery at Torquay". The question was pondered: would the "attractive spot now secured increase the demand for accommodation?"⁹

The farming districts of New Ground, Harford, Wesley Vale and Moriarty and Barrington all have cemeteries, mostly attached to a church at one time or another. The public cemetery at Latrobe was established by 1873, but trustees weren't appointed until early in March 1883¹⁰, but again the official records are very meagre.

This lack of burial records is in some way redressed by the existence of a series of local newspapers commencing in 1878¹¹.

The reporting is very much on local issues and the possibility of finding biographical material is far greater than can be expected in the newspapers of the larger towns and cities. But prior to this date the Launceston Examiner is useful and should be searched for marriage and death notices; district news was published regularly and the insolvencies concern many a struggling settler from the Mersey and the Leven.

As many of the poor would, at times of life-threatening illness, be transferred to the hospital in Launceston, deaths may be found in this district rather than in Port Sorell. Those found guilty of being of unsound mind were sent to the Asylum at New Norfolk.

As a town with a police court, Torquay witnessed many criminal proceedings and the dispatch of the condemned to the gaol at Launceston or beyond. May I hasten to add that the Torquayites themselves were of course model citizens! These legalities are recorded in several series of records, a few samples of which have survived and are available at Archives Office of Tasmania.

The surviving Police Department records are fragmentary, but those that have survived as POL 420 include musters of convicts employed by the local gentlemen from 1845-1849.

These records list name of convicts, ship, sentence and name of master assigned to. In some years religion is also recorded.

POL 428/2 is a police charge book for the 1860s. Again, it includes the name of the charged person, ship, status, occupation, crime and verdict of the court. Here we find the cases of petty larceny, drunk and disorderly, disturbing the peace, unsound mind etc. Even the "respectable" can appear here, and surely a description of a person who "came free" is a bonus indeed!

POL 428/3 is a continuation of the above into the 1870s. My great great grandfather must have been a hard man to work for as a number of men were charged with absenting themselves from his service. Another great great grandfather, William Singleton, a farmer at Sassafras, was arrested by P.C. Norris at 8.45 p.m. on 8 May 1868, being drunk and incapable of taking care of himself in a Public Place at Torquay. His personal possessions on that evening included a half sovereign, 19/6 in silver coins, a knife, a pipe and a letter. His mare, complete with saddle and bridle, was also noted. On this occasion William was fined 5/- which was duly paid. He appears on more than on occasion!

An entry in the Charge Books Latrobe Police Station 1880-1887 (POL 429) are revealing about another great great grandfather, John Sturzaker. Described as a carpenter at Leven, aged 44, John was charged with being "drunk and disorderly within the precincts of the Court House Latrobe 25 August 1882". His pockets were emptied of £1/13/6, a knife and a pipe. Described as "well-educated" he was reprimanded and discharged. Perhaps the Examiner will throw some light on this incident.

An accusation of bigamy was discovered in this series with a brief description of the accused who was born in Tasmania. This occasioned an appearance in the Supreme Court in Launceston, an entry in the convict records and a newspaper report.

The Tasmania Police Gazette (POL 709) is another rich source for genealogists. Details of warrants issued, reports of crimes, prisoners discharged from HM Gaols are all worth sifting through and well worth the time expended. Be warned, you will continually be drawn from your intended path.

These few examples may whet your appetite. "Stolen on the 13th inst, from the dwelling house of Mr. Roberts, of the Don, - about 151bs salt pork, 401bs flour and six lib tins of gooseberry jam. A man named Henry B..... alias Black Harry is suspected"¹² Black Harry is described as 5'7" tall, very dark complexion (hence the sobriquet), long dark hair and whiskers, has something the matter with right hand. He was "accompanied by a short thin woman" and presumably a cart to carry away the booty.

One gent convicted for assaulting police was described as having "very flash manners". A farm servant absenting himself from hired service is described in these terms: " 5'6", sallow complexion, dark hair, thin build. Wore patched jumper or blue shirt, moleskin trousers, bulcher boots, and cap. Carried 2 red blankets, a tick and rug."¹³

In 1872 my great great uncle Henry Warden of Castra Road (Sprent) had some items stolen from his hut: "1 flutina, 11 keys. 1 black cloth coat, nearly new, burn spots on left breast; 1 salmon-color dress-piece, about 7 yards in length; 1 white and red flowered muslin dress, flounced at the bottom; 1 white petticoat; 1 baby's cape, large size, trimmed with white muslin embroidery; 1 infant's robe, white; 1 do. petticoat; 3 pairs lady's drawers, 1 lady's night dress, lace trimming, 1 pair ladies riding cuffs; all identifiable". Countless similar examples could be quoted.

After all this you will still be mystified by the names Burgess, Torquay and Formby. Burgess is now the seaside town of Port Sorell; Torquay and Formby voted to amalgamate and became the town of Devonport in 1890.

References

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