James Morrisby and Ann Brooks

Archival note for Kingston and Arthurs Vale Historical Area Research Centre

Ian Bowie, September 2020

James Morrisby and Ann Brooks were early convict settlers of Norfolk Island about whom much has been said but not a lot is known for certain, particularly from before their convictions in England. A reason for this is that on the one hand public access to official archives in both the United Kingdom and Australia was restricted until the 1960s while on the other hand families with convict ancestors either stayed quiet or simply did not know about this.

These restrictions and inhibitions seem to have been particularly the case in Van Diemen’s Land, ie Tasmania, which is where James and Ann ended up, until after 1962. I knew nothing of James and Ann until told of them by a cousin in 1994. Other descendants may have known more and earlier but families aren’t always good at sharing inherited information or their own research and until the advent of the internet seldom have had the means of doing so.

Since the 1960s some writers have published biographical information on James and Ann but with inconsistencies and errors which have often since been amplified without reference to primary sources or other forms of corroboration. Sources are seldom referenced, which is particularly a problem when relevant primary records are not known. Many speculations and misinterpretation in reading the records now abound.

I had no intention of researching James and Ann in 1994 beyond noting what had been said in books published then. Nor, as information came online, did I intend to do much more than to collect copies of primary records. But, with intensive exposure to new primary records over the last couple of years, I have become uncertain about some of my information and resolved to try to separate fact from speculation and mistakes here.

In this brief note I’ve tried to document information that can be tested against the known primary sources cited in the end-notes, or which appears likely from the secondary sources also referenced or circumstantial evidence, excluding some of the lesser details of James’ and Ann’s lives in Norfolk Island and Van Diemen’s Land which are summarised elsewhere. I hope I’ve made it clear where I’ve drawn inferences or reported speculations.

James is generally believed to have been the James Morrisby baptised in Cawood (Yorkshire) in January 1757, in which case five generations of Yorkshire ancestors have been traced for him (including a father, Luke, said to have been killed in the Cape Breton Island battle of Louisbourg in 1758), but nothing is known of him for certain until he was tried in July 1784 in the Old Bailey for stealing an iron bar and for breaking-in with intent to steal. He was sentenced to seven years’ transportation.
At his trial James claimed to have been in ‘the guards’. On the strength of this a 1776 enlistment in the Third Regiment of Foot Guards has been found but his service record is uncertain: he may have been a lieutenant; he is said to have been stationed in the Tower of London; he may have served in the composite Guards battalion that fought in America; and it seems likely that he was discharged after the American battalion returned in 1783. At his trial he was said to have claimed a wife and five children and, perhaps, to have been a watchman.

After two and a half years on the prison hulk Censor in the Thames he was transported on the Scarborough in 1787, arriving in Port Jackson in January 1788. He was moved to Norfolk Island in March 1790 (where he was disembarked from HMS Sirius four days before it was wrecked). By July 1791, at the expiry of his sentence, he appears to have been living with Ann Brooks on an acre in ‘Sydney’ (now Kingston) and was sharing a sow with her and her eldest son William, known as Brooks and possibly the child referred to in Ann’s December 1787 trial who seems to have arrived in Port Jackson with Ann.

Ann Brooks (not to be confused with a mother and daughter who arrived in Sydney on the Pitt in 1792, one of whom was also on Norfolk Island later), was born in the early 1760s and was convicted in London for stealing two linen bed sheets. From London court and other records she might have been any one of: a then-21-year-old daughter of Charles M’Ginnis; a slightly older Ann Lavender who may have become Ann Brooks in the early 1780s; or a completely different Ann Brooks; all living on the fringes of ‘respectable’ society at the time.

This Ann (who appears to have been recorded only as ‘Brooks’ or ‘Moresby’ from 1787) was sentenced to seven years’ transportation and arrived in Port Jackson, reportedly with William, on the Lady Juliana subject of Sian Rees’ book The Floating Brothel, in June 1790. She was sent to Norfolk Island on HMS Surprize two months later (by which time she was pregnant with her second son, who became known as Richard Larsom, fathered by an unknown seaman or convict (Larsom, perhaps, Simon Lavender, perhaps) who presumably had been her ‘protector’.

It is said, but without a primary record, that James and Ann were ‘married’ by the Reverend Richard Johnson during the latter’s three weeks on Norfolk Island in November 1791 (if so, reflecting Governor King’s concern for good order amongst the convicts rather than for any previously married states).

Confusingly, Ann’s five children with James (all born on Norfolk Island), along with Richard (nothing seems known of William after 1801) were recorded as ‘Lavender’ in 1805, as they had been in 1802 excepting ‘Dinah’ (sic, who was named Brooks) but her three eldest sons were recorded as ‘Brooks’ in 1792-5. To add to the confusion Richard was listed as ‘Richard Brooks Lavender’ in 1802.

By October 1793 James was known as a blacksmith and had cleared seven of the twelve acres of a lot between Watermill Creek and the Mount Pitt Path (now County Road). In 1794 Governor King described him as ‘industrious’ and refused then to allow him to sell up. I wonder whether James, as his sentence had expired, had been planning to return to England. This lot appears later to have been enlarged to 16 acres and the lease put into James’ eldest son’s name.
Subsequently, James later took up a further 22 acres nearby, and he purchased another 34 acres where an airport runway is now located in 1802 when he was a constable. He also crewed on the island tender servicing *HMS Reliance* in 1799.

In December 1807, on an 1804 recommendation by Lt Governor Foveaux, James and Ann left their small house and barns behind when the Norfolk Island settlement was being closed down, and went with their five shared children on *HMS Porpoise* in 1807 to Van Diemen’s Land where James initially was granted 80 acres in the Clarence Plains near Rokeby in exchange for his Norfolk Island leases.

Richard followed them, Ann died in 1813 and James remarried in 1816 to Eleanor Murphy who died in 1821. James continued farming *Belmont Lawn* until his death in 1839, acquiring more land including land in Hobart (he had helped the Constables arrest a bushranger in 1817) which he assigned to his eldest son in 1818 and 300 further acres in Muddy Plains, Clarence Plains, which he was granted in 1828.

Among the children of Ann with James Grace, their elder daughter and second of their five children together, married George Smith in Hobart in 1810: their youngest son was to marry an unrelated Henrietta Letitia Smith, to become two of my great grandparents and the reason for my interest in James and Ann.

As to the wife and child(ren?) James left behind in England, nothing is known for certain but a likely wife (Mary Eaves) and child (Catherine Dorcas Morrisby who married William Davison and later George Davison) have been linked to him – in which case it may have been his wife who died in a London poor house in 1823.
End-Notes and Sources


2 In the case of James and Ann, notes made by H H Smith (ca 1895/96) and S E L Smith (1889) and shared amongst mainly New Zealand cousins since 2014 summarised what they’d been told by their father [Henry Smith] about their grandparents, George Smith and ‘Miss Morisby’ [sic], and alluding to James as a guards-man but not mentioning him as a convict.


4 A notable early exception appears to have been Edwin Morrisby who, from a 1983 letter to Frank and Thelma Cardiff, may have had information from family sources as well as from his own research in England between 1959 and 1972.

5 The earliest of these appear to have been John Cobley (1970), The crimes of the First Fleet convicts. (Angus & Robertson, Sydney) [which lists James as ‘John Morrissby’ apparently from a transportation arrivals indent; see note 16]; and C J Smee & C Selkirk Provis (1979), The Pioneer Register (1788-1820 Association, Artarmon).


7 Fuller information about their lives on Norfolk Island has been reliably summarised in Cathy Dunn (2015, pp 187-8), HMS Sirius Her Final Voyage (Australian History Research, Milton); information relating to Van Diemen’s Land as well is in Mollie Gillen (1989, p 253) The founders of Australia : a biographical dictionary of the First Fleet (Library of Australian History Sydney), Schaffer & McKay (1992) and Michael Flynn (1993, pp 174-5), The Second Fleet : Britain’s grim convict armada of 1790 (Library of Australian History Sydney).

8 A Cawood baptismal record exists for 23 January 1757. This date is given by Morrisby (1983) as being for James’ birth but his source is not known. James was given as aged 66 in his 1816 Hobart marriage registration and aged 89 in his 1839 Rokeby burial registration.

9 Merle E Pinch (ca 1994), Morisby-Moresby-Morrisby (published privately). This gives fuller information on James’ family history than is in Morrisby (1983) but Pinch does not cite sources. She spells Louisbourg incorrectly.

10 Transcript of his 7 July 1784 Old Bailey trial is at https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/.

11 Pinch (1994) gives the enlistment date as 3 April 1776 but incorrectly states the name [at the time] of his regiment as the ‘Scots Guards, suggesting that this and other information was derived from secondary sources.

12 The rank is inferred from the notes of Smith (1896), the Tower of London service is noted by Pinch (1994) and others but their sources are unknown, and the possibility of American service is a speculation based on circumstantial evidence. The British National Archives holds relevant regimental description books (WO 67) and muster rolls (WO 12) which might confirm these details and yield up other details such as birth-date, date of discharge, permission to marry and occupation prior to enlistment. These records are not currently (2020) accessible and it will very expensive and time-consuming to have them searched and the findings published.

13 These claims were made by witnesses and not explicitly by James.

14 Home Office, Correspondence and warrants 1784 and 1787 (The National Archives HO 13 and 77).


17 Colonial Office, Papers, ‘An account of sows and pigs delivered to the Convicts 1791’ (The National Archives CO 209/9).

18 William’s name doesn’t appear on Lady Juliana transportation indents and his birth details are uncertain. Flynn (1993, p 175) wondered whether he might have been the William Brooks who was baptised in Whitechapel on 2 July 1786 [the baptism of another William Brooks in Holborn later that July was to parents who were in England after 1790].


20 All these speculations are consistent with information from trials at the London’s Central Criminal Court (https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/) and records at https://www.digitalpanopticon.org/. Ann Brooks has been said to have been shown as 25 in a ship’s muster but ages are not shown on known convict transportation indents. John Cobley (1989, p 33), The Crimes of the Lady Juliana Convicts (Library of Australian History Sydney) gave her as 25 at her trial on 12 December 1787. Don Chapman (1981 p 193), Seventeen eighty-eight: the people of the First Fleet (Cassell North Ryde) lists ‘Ann Lavender’ as wife of James Morrisby as does Smee (1988), First fleet families of Australia: containing genealogical details of four hundred & fifty six first fleeters, their children & grandchildren (Woolnough Artarmon), but their sources for this name are unknown. J H Donohue (1988, p 91), Tasmania 1803-1820: The people and their families (James Donohue, Sydney), and J H Donohoe (1990, p 31), The First Fleet Families (Fast Books, Glebe) give her as ‘Ann Lavender Brooks’ with no source cited. Flynn (1993, p 175) claims that Ann ‘sometimes used the name Lavender in colonial records’ which cannot be confirmed. Ann’s age may have been inferred from the age given (51) in her 1813 Hobart burial registration; her names may have been inferred from the fact that Ann’s younger children were mostly named Lavender in the 1802 and 1805 musters (Baxter 1989a and 1989b); however Ann’s three oldest sons were named Brooks in the 1792-95 victualling book (NSW Commissariat, Norfolk Island Victualling Book 1792-95, The National Archives CO 201/9).

21 Transcript of her 12 December 1787 Old Bailey trial is at https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/.


23 She appears to have been accompanied by William: NSW Commissariat, Norfolk Island Victualling Book 1792-95, p 75a, shows him also to have arrived off HMS Surprize in August 1790.

24 His 1791 birth is noted in the Norfolk Island Victualling Book 1792-95; he was given as aged 58 in his 1849 death registration.

25 C J Smee (1990), The Second fleet families of Australia containing genealogical details of 349 second fleeters, their children and grandchildren (Smee, Artarmon), has Simon Lavender as a husband of Ann Brooks. In fact, Simon and Ann were in Port Jackson at the same time for barely a month (she left for Norfolk Island on HMS Surprize on 1 August 1790 and Simon arrived in Port Jackson on the 26 June 1790). Simon Lavender was on Norfolk Island only between 1791 and 1795 according to the Norfolk Island Victualling Book 1792-96, p 35b. Flynn (1993, p 74) speculated that Richard ‘may have been fathered by a seaman of the Lady Juliana’ before it sailed for Canton on 25 July 1790, perhaps giving currency to that possibility.

26 The date of 5 November 1791 has been given for many marriages on Norfolk Island. The only primary record that lends any support to this is Philip Gidley King’s note of 12 November 1791 (p 2) in his Journals and letters 1791-1796 (https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-26005434/view?partId=nla.obj-26041378#page/n151/mode/1up) to the effect that the Rev Johnson had married ‘upwards of one hundred couples’ in his time on Norfolk Island from 4 November. Circumstantial evidence suggests that these marriages were not officiated formally. However Ann is shown as ‘married’ and living with Ian Bowie, James Morrisby and Ann Brooks
James in a 1794 NSW Commissariat list of ‘Free women off the stores and their means of livelihood’ (The National Archives CO 201/5).


28 George [born in 1793 according to the Norfolk Island Victualling Book 1792-95, p 80b; he was given as 31 in his 1826 death registration]; Grace [born 1797 according to her baptismal registration], Diana [born 1799, per baptismal registration]; Henry [1803, per registration]; and John [1805, per registration].

29 William’s name does not appear in Norfolk Island records after 1796. Flynn (1993, p 175) thought he ‘almost certainly’ was the so-named 16-year old seaman on HMS Porpoise in 1801 [whom Admiralty musters in The National Archives, ADM 35, show to have enlisted on HMS Lady Nelson].


31 Norfolk Island Victualling Book 1792-95.

32 NSW Commissariat, Norfolk Island Victualling book 1802 (The National Archives CO 201/21). One transcription online incorrectly has ‘Richard Burns Lavender’.

33 Charles Grimes Norfolk Island Settlers Lots [map] with List of Settlers 1793 (The National Archives, Colonial Office Papers CO 201/9).

34 P G King, Journals and letters 1791-1796, May 1794.

35 Transcripts of the Norfolk Island leases are in Colonial Secretary, Register of Land Grants and Leases 1792-1865 (Archives Authority of NSW, Register 1 pp 78 and 81).


37 HMS Reliance ship’s muster: boat crew list, 19 November 1799 (Admiralty Papers, The National Archives ADM 36).


39 Colonial Secretary, Papers, ‘Second embarkation per the Porpoise for the Derwent 26 December 1807’ (The National Archives CO 201/9).

40 Colonial Secretary, Register of Land Grants and Leases 1792-1865 (Archives Authority of NSW) Register 2 [Van Diemen’s Land] p 74.

41 He was a witness at the 13 January 1812 Hobart marriage of Daniel Anderson and Elizabeth Macloud.

42 Hobart burial registration, 2 February 1813 [as ‘Moresby’].

43 Hobart marriage registration, 11 November 1816, and burial registration, 14 February 1821.


45 St Matthew, Rokeby, Van Diemens Land, burial registration 29 May 1839

46 Hobart Town Gazette and Southern Reporter, 12 July 1817.

47 University of Tasmania, Miscellaneous Manuscripts, 1(b)

https://www.utas.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/64489/rs_129_miscellaneous_manuscripts.pdf

48 Subject of Irene Schaffer (1991), Private George Smith of His Majesty's Royal Marines (Schaffer, Hobart).


50 Catherine Dorcas Morrisby, daughter of James Morrisby and Mary [no surname] was baptised in Holborn on 30 March 1784, married William Davison in Dukes Place on 25 Oct 1807 [Smee (1988) has some details incorrectly] and George Davison in Bethnal Green on 12 Aug 1817.

51 Hoxton death registration, 26 Feb 1823.