

JAMES MORRISBY (1757-1839)

Written by Edwin Morrisby about 1980; edited by Ian Bowie, April 2022

Editorial Note (Ian Bowie)

Edwin Shropshire Morrisby ('Ted', 1924-2001), born in Hobart, Tasmania, and died in Sydney, New South Wales, was 'intensely proud of his soldier ancestor James Morrisby' according to one obituary¹. During his working life in England (1957-1972) he spent much time researching this ancestor.

In 2020 after a visit to Norfolk Island I wrote a note for the Kingston and Arthurs Vale Historic Area (KAVHA) Research Centre on the lives of James Morrisby and his *de facto* wife Ann Brooks. When challenged for the sources of my information I was able to reference most of what I had said in the note but could not then cite primary sources for my information on the lives of James and Ann before their trials and convictions, notably on James' military service.

Much has been reported (and repeated) about James and Ann both online and in hard copy from the 1980s onward and there seemed to be a common source for much of that information, perhaps (from what he had said in a 1983 letter²) the research of Ted Morrisby. However, I was unable to find any records to corroborate some of what was being said particularly about James' British military service.

In 2021 after extensive inquiries, I was given a copy of a copy of a typescript of the present memoir. From circumstantial detail in this I have little doubt that it is the original source of information reported by others. It may also have been the 'family source' which I understand was used by Gillen and Flynn in their definitive compendia of what has been documented about First and Second Fleeters to New South Wales³.

In light of this I subsequently updated my research note for the KAVHA Research Centre and posted it on various websites, as *James Morrisby and Ann Brooks*⁴. I have now lightly edited the text of Ted's memoir here, repaginated it, embedded two images in it, and added endnotes to qualify some of Ted's content in the light of information that has become available more recently.

James Morrisby (1757-1839) (memoir by Ted Morrisby)

James Morrisby is a gateway ancestor for it is through him that his many descendants in Australia and elsewhere pass into a wider and well documented historical process. Not that anyone ever imagined James Morrisby appeared from nowhere. It was locating him on another web of family connections in another country that was to prove difficult.

The first attempt to do this was made by a Miss Morrisby in 1867. She had written from Tasmania to Katherine Fairfax Moresby, who was then either visiting or living in Melbourne. No doubt the similarity of the surnames prompted her letter. She was right in that fact. They are both versions of the same name and the Cumbrian village of Moresby is pronounced locally 'Morizbi'. She told Katherine in the letter that her father's name was Henry and that he had been dead for ten years (he died in 1856). Her grandfather's name was James. We do not know which of Henry's three unmarried daughters took this step⁵, nor do we know what Katherine's reply was,

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File 72/2/100-1/271
at Jan 1798

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This time the initiative came from England. In 1894 John Robert Morrisby (1832-1923), a cousin of the Miss Morrisby, who wrote to Katherine, received a letter from Matthew Fortescue Horesby, a son of Admiral Sir Fairfax Horesby and, at that time, Paymaster-in-Chief to the Royal Navy. Matthew explained that he was a keen genealogist and recognised the identity of the surnames. He went on to say that he had heard a Tasmanian Morrisby commanded a colonial steamer (this was Henry Augustus Morrisby, a son of Henry's and a cousin of John's) and that an old mess-mate had given him John Robert's name and that of four of his relatives. He added: "I would be very much obliged if you would send me all you know of your descent and family. I am anxious to know about any living kinsmen I may have, particularly so as I believe your descent is from the elder branch." He signed himself: "Your kinsman."

The Morrisbys in Tasmania were flattered by this letter and set about constructing a family tree. None of the first generation was alive but quite a lot of the second were. In a petition addressed to the Lieutenant-Governor of Tasmania James Morrisby stated that he had 50 descendants of the second and third generation at the time of writing and asked for a further grant of land. The petition is undated but it was minuted by Lt. Governor Arthur and surrounded by documents dated 1828 so this is the likely date. The 50 descendants pose a problem. Four of his children were still alive and we know that he had only one grand-child by his sons at this time. Both his daughters had been married more than 13 years, however, so they may well have had ten children each even though that seems a bit excessive.

Edwin Morrisby, *James Morrisby 1757-1839*: page 1 of 6 [from a copy of the original typescript]

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The 50 descendants pose a problem. Four of his children were still alive and we know that he had only one grandchild by his sons at this time. Both his daughters had been married more than 13 years, however, so they may well have had ten children each even though that seems a bit excessive. In addition, Ann Brooks, the mother of James' children had had two sons before she lived with James so he may have counted them amongst his descendants as he brought them up.

And as well James married for the second time in 1816 to a forty-year-old woman who also may have had children⁷. Be that as it may there were people around who could fill in most of the details. They were a bit thin on James though. No one knew where he was born, what his father's name was or, for certain, that of his first wife. If they knew he had been a convict and come to Australia on the First Fleet they kept quiet about it. The family tree was duly sent off to Matthew Fortescue.

In their turn they received a family tree from him which, in his words, 'showed the Moresbys as Lords of Moresby in Cumberland for five hundred years till 1499, seventeen knights in direct succession'. After that, things got a little vague. 'I have as yet some fifteen individuals I cannot connect from that date. One, Clement Moresby, had three sons, Christopher, Clement, and John. I think you must descend from Christopher. I come direct from John'.

Well, this was not so. But what does appear true is that all those bearing the name Morrisby or a version of it (I have counted 20) constitute a single family (a rare occurrence in English genealogy) and descend from the ancient family. There are, of course, some gaps. One day, no doubt, they will be unravelled, but all the evidence points to a connection.

The tree that Matthew sent was duly tacked onto the beginning of the Tasmanian one. Matthew also obliged them with a coat of arms, which belonged to the ancient family, a crest, which was actually a Fairfax crest, a family seat in Cumberland - Moresby Hall - which was never their seat in fact and a living knight, Admiral Sir John Moresby, son of Admiral Sir Fairfax. It was all heady stuff.

This combined family tree was passed from hand to hand among the Tasmanian Morrisbys and laboriously copied out. Errors naturally crept in. The version my father had showed James Morrisby as having been born in 1750 (he was really born in 1757) and the name of his first wife as Donaldson. His second wife was given as 'the daughter of a French businessman called Lavende' [sic]. Her name was Ann Brooks, she was a convict and they never married as James was already married in England⁸. Lavender was probably her mother's maiden name as she occasionally used it, and it crops up as a second name in the next generation. Lavender is a French surname and Ann almost certainly came of Huguenot stock through her mother⁹. Another version of the same tree that I saw showed James as having come from Hull. This is not far off the mark. He came from a small town some miles from Hull. On this tree his first wife's name is given as Mary '-----'.

On a visit to Tasmania in the late 1940s one of my father's cousins, Allan Lancelot [Morrisby], produced a water-colour of James Morrisby. It was, I believe, a copy of an original which was in the possession of Keith Morrisby and destroyed when his house burnt to the ground, and he died. I took a photograph of it.

The picture is in profile. James has a determined jaw and a good head of hair, though it is receding. He is wearing a high collar coat and some sort of a ruff around his neck. I judge him to be between 65 and 70. On the same visit another cousin of my father's, Alfred Rowland



James Morrisby about 1822-1827 [*Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery*, AG5106]¹⁰

[Morrisby], told me that, when he was a small boy, he had met an old man, who had told him he remembered James Morrisby. This is quite possible. James, according to the old man, 'always wore knee breeches, white hose and buckle-shoes'. The old man also remembered that James had been often in a bad temper, especially when discussing the shortage of grain in the colony and the inefficiency of the administration.

So, we have two pictures of James, one painted, one verbal. Nothing else of him survives that we know of, apart from his various appearances in the records. But it is still possible to build some sort of identity-kit of him and this is what I have attempted to do. At the same time, I have been able to slot James into a family tree that goes back in a direct line father to son to 1580 and given the localities and social conditions of the times, in a broken line to 1190¹¹. It may even be stretched beyond that. After all, we all descend from people alive at the dawn of history.

James arrived in Australia as a convict on the First Fleet, so the place to begin the search for his origins was the Old Bailey. He appeared there before Mr Justice Heath and a jury on July 7th 1784 (Old Bailey *Sessions Papers 1783-4*. Trial. number 694). The indictment read: 'For that he on the 6th of July with force and arms one iron bar, weight 10 lbs, value 10 d, belonging to Thomas and William Morris, affixed to their dwelling house, feloniously did break, with intent to steal'.

A servant gave evidence that she had risen at 3.30 am and gone to the cellar to fetch some coal. While she was there, she noticed dirt coming through one of the windows and then a stick being used to wedge one of the iron bars off the window. There was already enough daylight outside for her to see a hand pulling the bar free. Quietly the servant went up to the dining-room and opened a window which was directly above the cellar window. There was a man there. She gave the alarm, and an apprentice went out into the street, but the man had gone. Then he was seen returning but without the iron bar. The apprentice seized him, and the master came out of the house to ask him what he was doing. He gave no reply, and they observed his staff was split and burst. So, they conducted him into the watch-house.

Before he went in James is alleged to have said: 'I have a wife and five children. If you will excuse me now, I will never do the like again'. The master said he could not and, later, the constable found the iron bar.

James was a night-watchman paid by the parish to guard the very premises he had tried to break into¹². This, no doubt, told heavily against him for he was found guilty, despite the fact he claimed he was only an innocent bystander and produced three witnesses, who gave him a good character. He also said he had been 'between nine and ten years in the guards'. The sentence was to be transported [then] to America for seven years. He was 27 years old.

What are we to make of this? It seems a very amateurish sort of crime. The locality was given as the parish of St. Gregory by St. Paul in the Ward of Castle Baynard. This is St. Paul's churchyard, in those days a broad street of fashionable shops on the Thames side of St. Paul's cathedral. Unfortunately, it was almost totally destroyed during the Blitz in World War II. A London directory of 1784 puts Morris & Co, cabinetmakers at Number 15 and a contemporary engraving shows this as a tall, narrow building four stories high. It is difficult to see where the iron-bar was but the master, William Morris, said in his evidence that it was attached to the kerb.

So, what was James up to? It was the height of summer when people were up and around early. And it was virtually daybreak. Perhaps he intended to sell the information about the loose basement window to someone. Perhaps he was only interested in stealing the iron bar. He didn't try to run away. Nor did he try to resist. Instead, he said nothing. It was only when he was outside the watch-house that he realised the danger he was in. Prosecutions in those days were

not launched by the state but by the victim. So, he attempted to play on William Morris' sympathy. Hence the story about the wife and five children. He was married but he only had one child, a daughter, Catherine Dorcas [Morrisby], born on March 11th 1784, some four months previously¹³.

The one lead given in the transcript of the trial is James' statement that he had served in the Guards. There were three [five, in fact] regiments of [Foot] Guards in the British army then and the Third Regiment of [Foot] Guards, later known as the Scots Guards, was stationed at the Tower of London, three kilometres from St. Paul's.

According to the War Office Records¹⁴ James Morrisby was entertained or enlisted in the Third Regiment or Guards at London on April 3rd 1776, so he had been a soldier for eight years. His age was given as 20 (he was actually 19), his height as 5 ft 7 ins (1 metre 70 cm), his 'complexion' and eyes brown, his trade as labourer (probably farm labourer), his character as 'indifferent' and his place of birth as Cower, Yorkshire¹⁵.

At first, he was in No 1 Company, but he was later transferred, first to Colonel [William] Wynyard' s Company on March 24th 1777, and shortly afterwards on April 4th 1777 to No 5 Company where he remained. During 1778 and 1779 Colonel [George] Ogilvie was his commanding officer but, in December 1781, Major General [George] Osborn took over. Nine days after his conviction at the Old Bailey James was discharged from the army¹⁶.

Presumably he had lived in barracks at the Tower of London and after his marriage in married quarters. By combining the family trees, we can guess the name-of his wife. It was probably Mary Donaldson. Their marriage took place, presumably in London, on November 20th, 1782. There was only one child of this union, Catherine, who was married on October 25th, 1807, at St James, Duke' s Place, to William Alexander Davison. Duke's Place is not far from the Tower, so it would appear his wife and daughter remained in the area. Probably James' wife came from there in any case. This wedding, incidentally, might explain how James knew of it and, later of his wife' s death (which allowed him to marry for the second time, not to Ann Brooks, who died in 1813 but to Eleanor Murphy [in 1816]. William Alexander Davison shipped slop clothes to the convict settlements¹⁷.

The other question is why did James become a night-watchman? This was before the days of an organised police force. Security, such as it was, resided in the hands of watchmen employed by the parish. Soldiers were used but not often. No doubt the extra money came in handy with another mouth to feed. Perhaps this was also the reason he attempted to steal the iron bar. It was worth after all 10 pence, a small but tidy sum.

After his conviction James would have been kept in Newgate which was alongside Old Bailey, but on September 6th 1794, he was delivered on board a hulk at Woolwich in the Thames. The hulks were disused naval vessels, moored at various places and used as floating gaols because the prisons were overcrowded. In the eyes of the law those on board 'were on their way to America'. Unfortunately, the American War of Independence effectively stopped transportation there which was mainly to Virginia and Maryland. So, while the government canvassed alternatives, the hulks were pressed into service. Convicts slept on board and were farmed out to contractors during the day. Most of those at Woolwich were engaged in repairing the Royal Dockyard.

James Morrisby must have been a hardy specimen as the Lower Thames was notorious for its 'fogs and miasmas' and the hulks were breeding grounds of fevers and epidemics. He managed to survive two and a half years under these difficult conditions until, finally, the authorities made up their minds to do something about what was rapidly becoming a scandal. On August 18th 1786,

Lord Sydney sent a letter to the Lords Treasury which set forth the King's pleasure that Ships should be provided for carrying 750 felons to Botany Bay.

Why James was chosen is anybody's guess but, basically they only took the fit and the strong¹⁸. Some time in the Spring of 1787 possibly April as the ships had assembled at Spithead in March James and a number of other convicts were out into wagons and wagons and driven to Portsmouth 120 kilometres away. It could have taken three or four days. There they were rowed out to the ship that was to transport them beyond the seas.

In James' case this was the 'Scarborough', a not inappropriate name as Scarborough is a seaside resort in Yorkshire not too far from where he was born. She was chartered vessel of 430 tons, smaller than a Sydney Harbour ferry. Below decks the ship had been fitted out as for troops with hammocks, mess tables and wooden stools. Thick bulkheads about three feet high and studded with nails ran across decks behind the main mast. They were provided with loopholes through which the guards could fire. The hatches were held down with crossbars, bolts and locks, and the hatchways railed around from deck to deck with heavy oak. On the upper deck a barricade studded with iron prongs had been erected to prevent the crew having any dealings with the convicts. Sentinels were placed at the hatchways and there was an armed guard on the quarter deck.

I suppose James' last view of England was the chalk hills of the Isle of Wight which he would have seen as he paced the deck for exercise. Then at 5 am on May 13th 1787, the First Fleet slipped out of the Solent. Eight months later, on January 26th 1788, it dropped anchor in Sydney Cove, Port Jackson¹⁹. The 'Scarborough' entered the heads about six am²⁰.

The voyage had been long but unusually healthy...they had called at some exotic places on the way - Tenerife with its Pico del Teide towering 3718 metres above the clouds, Rio de Janeiro and the old volcanic plugs that guard the harbour entrance, Cape Town with its Table Mountain and Dutch fort, though it is doubtful whether James saw any of them. While the ships were close to the land it was not thought safe to allow convicts on the open decks at any time.

On the morning of January 27th, a party of 100 convicts from 'Scarborough' was set ashore in Sydney Cove and ordered to begin clearing the land. If James was among them our gateway ancestor had set foot in Australia. In any event he had arrived.

End Notes (Ian Bowie)

¹Alex Mitchell, 'Ted Morrisby - Obituary', *Guardian* 21 December 2001, <https://www.nbhsoa.net/Annual%20Dinners/Ted%20Morrisby.pdf>, accessed 5 March 2022

²Typescript letter from Ted Morrisby to Frank Cardiff (of East Gosford), 23 November 1983

³According to Michael Flynn (personal communication, 2021). The two compendia are: Mollie Gillen (1989: 253). *The founders of Australia: a biographical dictionary of the First Fleet*. Library of Australian History, Sydney. Michael Flynn (1993: 174). *The Second Fleet: Britain's grim convict armada of 1790*. Library of Australian History, Sydney.

⁴Ian Bowie (2020, 2021). *James Morrisby and Ann Brooks*. Archival Note prepared for Kingston and Arthurs Vale Historic Area (KAVHA) Research Centre. <https://ijsbowie.files.wordpress.com/2021/05/morrisby-brooks-archival-note-with-end-notes-.pdf>, accessed 5 March 2022.

⁵Believed to have been Catherine Morrisby (1838-1911) who married William Thomas Calvert in 1869.

⁶Manuscript letter (six pages) from Matthew Fortescue Moresby (of Exmouth) to John Robert Morrisby (1832-1923 a son of John Morrisby (d 1856) 12 March 1894.

⁷ By my reckoning, James and Ann together had 16 ‘blood’ descendants living in 1828, including their 3 surviving children; James had up to 9 through his first wife Mary Eaves (it is unlikely that he knew of the births or deaths of 8 grandchildren, though his attempt to sell up in 1794 does suggest he may have hoped to return to his English family then); Ann Brooks had 8 through Simon Lavender/Larsom and may have had others by her first ‘husband’ believed to be William Brooks. James had no children with Eleanor Murphy (James second *de jure* wife) but she may have had others. Perhaps James included ‘dependents’?

⁸ Ted was clearly of the view that James’ and Ann’s ‘marriage’ was a *de facto* one, though it has often been said since without any known primary evidence, that James and Ann were among a great many married by the Rev Richard Johnson on 5 November 1791. The earliest suggestion of this mass marriage that I have found was in J H Donohoe (1983), *Norfolk Island 1788-1813: the people and their families*, self-published, Sydney.

⁹ I know of no corroboration for Ted’s suppositions about Ann Brooks/Lavender

¹⁰ This watercolour by an unknown artist appears to be the portrait or a copy of it referred to by Ted Morrisby. It was presented to the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (AG5106) by ‘the Morrisby family’ in 1988.

¹¹ This suggests that there may be further records of Ted’s Morrisby’s family research still to be uncovered. A reference in his 1983 letter to Frank Cardiff to James’ father Luke falling while ‘fighting the French’ in Canada suggests to me that Ted’s research provided at least a foundation for the later writings of people such as Merle E Pinch (ca 1994), *Morrisby-Moresby-Morrisby 1788-1994*, self-published, Melbourne.

¹² Although he was claimed during the trial to be a ‘watchman’ James had not been discharged from his regiment, the Third Regiment of Foot Guards which was then responsible for security in London, so he may have looked and behaved like a member of the Watch.

¹³ Catherine Dorcas Morrisby was baptised on 30 March 1784 in St Sepulchre Holborn, London [which, like marriage details in later endnotes, is verifiable through historical records on www.familysearch.org]

¹⁴ This information must have come from ‘WO’ records now held by The National Archives, but the TNA could not locate relevant records in regimental description books for me in 2020/2021 and I can only guess that the details came from musters or pay books. Lt Colonel George Ogilvie had returned from North America where served in the composite Guards brigade in 1776-7; I’m unsure as to whether Major General George Osborn as ‘lieut-colonel’ of the Regiment would have commanded one of the companies (see Richard Cannon (1851:58) *Historical Record of the Seventy-Third Regiment*, Parker Furnivall, London, <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/67001>, accessed 6 March 2022).

¹⁵ Cawood, Yorkshire, in fact. James’ family background does suggest he may indeed have been a ‘farm’ labourer, and he was recorded in 1793 on Lot 57 Norfolk Island as a ‘blacksmith’.

¹⁶ Discharged on 16 July 1784. It seems likely that James did not serve in North America.

¹⁷ James married Mary Eaves on 25 November 1782 in St Sepulchre Holborn, London, and I am not clear how Ted came up with the ‘Donaldson’ name for James’ first wife though it may have been from the family trees he mentioned (which I have not seen). Catherine Dorcas Morrisby married firstly William Alexander Davison on 25 October 1807 St James Duke’s Place, London (which James may or may not have known about), and secondly (with Mary Morrisby as a witness) his likely brother George Charles Davison on 12 August 1817 at St Matthew Bethnal Green, London. A Mary Morrisby (born ca 1755) was buried from the poor house in Hoxton, in London, on 26 February 1823. The Davisons were reported to be watchmakers and I have been unable to corroborate a Davison as a slops-seller. Mary Morrisby née Eaves appears to have been alive in 1816.

¹⁸ David Hill (2008:61, citing a reference), *1788: the Brutal Truth of the First Fleet*, Heinemann, Sydney, says ‘the convicts ‘ were not chosen with any regard for their fitness for the long voyage or for their ability to contribute to the building of a new colony’ and ‘it appears that no consideration was given as to how much of the sentences the convicts had left to serve....more than forty per cent had been convicted either in 1784 or before’.

¹⁹ Having actually rendezvoused in Botany Bay on 20 January.

²⁰ John Easty says ‘att 6 att night’: John Easty *A Memorandum of the Transactions of a Voiage [sic] from England to Botany Bay in The Scarborough transport 1786-1793*. State Library of NSW. <http://archival-classic.sl.nsw.gov.au/transcript/2017/D31314/a1145.html> accessed 6 March 2022. The various diaries and journals from the First Fleet do not agree on the timeline of Saturday 26 January 1788.