

## BETTY KING

### THE FIRST WHITE WOMAN TO SET FOOT IN AUSTRALIA

by

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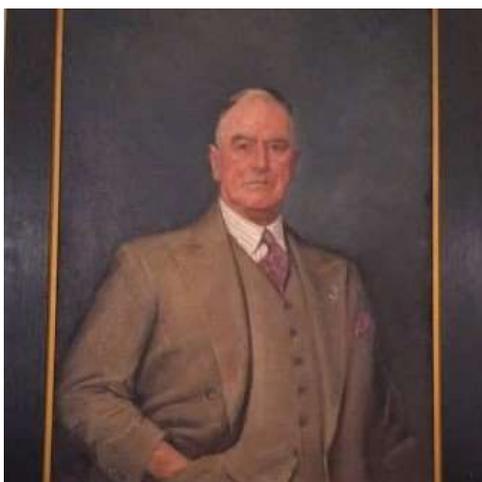
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The author laying a posy on Betty's Memorial, Australia Day

In 1856 the Hobart Town Courier newspaper reported: “THE FIRST WHITE WOMAN IN NEW SOUTH WALES – Mrs Elizabeth King the first white woman that landed in New South Wales, died this week at the Back River, New Norfolk”. (August 7)

As a small boy, Master Rupert Shoobridge (later to become Sir Rupert Rupert and a large estate holder at Plenty, Tasmania) met the aged, but still grand lady, Mrs King and was informed that she was the first white woman to set foot in Australia. Proud and dignified, Mrs King impressed upon his mind the awe and grandeur of that moment which survived all his life. When he became a man and grew in prominence and wealth within the community, he sought the final resting place of Elizabeth – or as she was more commonly known, Betty. Sadly, church records could not determine the exact spot where she rested.



Painting of Rupert Shoobridge which hangs in the Tasmanian Club Dining room, Hobart. Rupert was once President of the club.

Mr Shoobridge, however, thought that she should be remembered; consequently he erected a memorial with the inscription,

Near this spot  
was laid to rest  
BETTY KING  
the first white woman  
to set foot in Australia



Fact? Historical work surrounding Betty's life is scant and difficult to come by, but with evidence meticulously researched, we can piece together a reasonable picture of her life and of the possible truth. This is her story...

On the 4<sup>th</sup> May 1786, Elizabeth Thackery – at times spelt, Thackary, Thackey, Hackery and Hackley – was convicted at Manchester, England for stealing two black silk handkerchiefs and three others, the property of Jeremiah Kay and was sentenced for seven years. It is

believed she was married to Thomas Thackery, soldier of the 15<sup>th</sup> Foot, although her marriage certificate years later, states that she was a "single" woman.

Elizabeth together with another 191 female convicts was destined to embark upon vessels that would eventually take them to Botany Bay, New South Wales, under the command of the capable, half-German, half English Captain Arthur Phillip. Until the fleet was ready to sail and carry its human cargo to the unknown shores thousands of miles away, Elizabeth rotted and survived in an overcrowded hulk called the *Dunkirk*. Betty had arrived the 1 November 1786 together with Jane Parkinson.

Convicts were to be embarked either at the Thames, Portsmouth or Plymouth. Elizabeth joined the fleet at Plymouth and with other women was transported to the ships in carts and because of their exposure to the elements arrived being affected with rheumatism, coughs, colds and in dirty rags. By this time, May 1787, Elizabeth would have been about 23 years of age.

Once aboard (11 March 1787) all prisoners had to be medically inspected by the ship's surgeon and on the *Friendship* the doctor was Thomas Arndell, who was later to become a magistrate and large land-owner in the new colony. Two daughters of his, Elizabeth and Mary were to marry and were to settle in Tasmania.

Elizabeth was declared 'fit' to undertake the arduous journey and was placed below in gloomy quarters where the air was constantly foul with the hideous, nauseating smell of vomit, excrement and human sweat lingering for twenty four hours of the day. The *Friendship* was a 'wet' ship, that is, always dark, damp and dank. It also carried 76 male convicts and although segregated, it was impossible to keep them apart and prostitution and grog drinking was uncontrollable. It was not only the convicts who were the problem, but also the crewmen and marines.

When the first fleet left England the eleven vessels, none of them larger than a Manly ferry, carried 1480 men, women and children. This included naval and merchant seamen who manned them. A course for the Spanish colony of Teneriffe was set and on the 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1787, the peak of Teneriffe was sighted, after three weeks of sailing.

Behaviour aboard convict ships was always a problem and although brutal punishment was handed out, its effect was minimal. The convict women on most occasions were a greater headache with the authorities than the men. Lieutenant Ralph Clark, diarist wrote, "I wish all women were out of the ships." On the night of July 2<sup>nd</sup>, the ship's master, Francis Walton, called the marine officers, because his crewmen had broken through the bulkhead into the prison and he had found four women in their quarters. Among the four were Elizabeth Hackley (Thackery). The men, all except the carpenter were sent across to the *Sirius* to be flogged, while Elizabeth and the others were put in irons.

Their health began to deteriorate because of the close confinement and soon where, temporarily, released. When their health had sufficiently recovered their punishment resumed. Elizabeth was handcuffed with Elizabeth Barber. Lieutenant Clark wrote of the affair, “The damned whores the moment that they got below fell a-fighting amongst one another – and Captain Meredith ordered the sergeant not to part them, but to let them fight it out, which I think is very wrong in letting them do so.” (The Journal and Letters of Lt Ralph Clark 1787-1792) as held by the Mitchell Library, Sydney.

Captain Phillip became aware of the disturbances aboard the *Friendship* and ordered a tightening up of discipline. A few days later, Elizabeth Dungeon was promptly ordered a flogging when she verbally abused Marine Captain James Meredith.



Governor Arthur Phillip

The Christian name, Elizabeth, was one of the most prolific Christian names amongst the female convicts who sailed with the first fleet. We now shall refer to our Elizabeth as Betty.

From Teneriffe, the fleet sailed for Rio d Janeiro and on the 5<sup>th</sup> August 1787 they anchored in the bay.

Phillip, who had served with distinction with the Portuguese navy during the course of his career, was welcomed by the Viceroy of the colony and there at Rio, they took on provisions and remained a month.

The crew, officers, marine and free settlers had the opportunity to go ashore and inspect the sights – and the delights of Rio – but of course the convicts were not so privileged and because of this there were great behavioural problems aboard the ships.

Once anchor was weighted, Phillip sent sail for Cape Town, South Africa. When at the Dutch colony the food situation improved for all, including the convicts, because of the availability of fresh meat and vegetables. While there, Phillip ordered the *Friendship* to take on live stock, consequently all female convicts aboard were to be transferred to the *Lady Penrhyn*, *Charlotte* or the *Prince of Wales*. Betty was transferred to the *Lady Penrhyn* which

contained no male convicts. This was Betty's new home until they reached the shores of the unknown. As the fleet sailed across the Indian Ocean it was split on the orders of the Commander to allow the fastest ships, *Supply*, *Alexander*, *Friendship* and *Scarborough* to arrive at Botany Bay before the others. Nonetheless, the slower ships made good time and an air of expectation and excitement soon captivated all aboard. Bad conduct by the convicts when the weather improved always increased and to tackle this, the offenders aboard the *Lady Penrhyn* had their head shaved, a punishment that they hated and feared even more than the cat o'nine tails.



Lady Penrhyn – First Fleet

On the 20<sup>th</sup> January 1788, “Land Ho!” was shouted. At long last Botany Bay had been sighted.

On a clear day the *Lady Penrhyn* sailed smoothly into Botany Bay borne by the tide and a slight south-easterly wind. While it did so, Phillip together with Major Ross, Lieutenant Philip Gidley King (later to become Governor) were already ashore exploring. Contact with the natives had taken place and fortunately it was peaceful. Botany Bay, however, did not provide good soil and water nor suitable sites for a settlement, so Phillip decide to find another location.

Understandably, after eight months at sea, all aboard the *Lady Penrhyn* were disappointed that they were not to land and as yet no convicts, male or female had been – only seaman and marines. Phillip returned after an exploring expedition and informed his fellow officers that the fleet was to be removed to a new site which contained the ‘finest harbour in the world’- Port Jackson. Soon the fleet was on the move again and on the 26<sup>th</sup> January 1788, Phillip, the principal officers and other marines gathered around an erected flagpole and history was enacted. A toast to the new settlement was given and the Union Jack was raised. A volley was fired by the marines as a salute.

Over the next few days there were continual landings of male convicts but the women convicts were ordered to remain aboard. On the 28<sup>th</sup> January 1788, seventeen women, all marines wife together with their children accompanied the men to shore. So when did Betty come ashore allowing her to make her claim?

There is no documented evidence to state that Betty was indeed the first white woman to set foot on Australian soil. However, the story told to Mr Henry Shoobridge's father by Betty herself convinced him. Betty stated that at the time of arrival at Botany Bay, she was acting as a Lady's Maid to the officer's wives.

It was related to Mr Shoobridge that the officer's ladies were to be the first white women to land. They did not like the look of the surf through which they were to be carried with the possibility of getting a wetting. Just to be reassured they asked that a maid (Betty) be carried ashore first as a rehearsal. This was apparently done and as it was only a preliminary trial, there was no official record kept of it. However, no official account could alter the fact of the incident which was that Betty had been carried ashore first. (Shoobridge letter 29<sup>th</sup> May 1955).

On shore, organisation of community life was taking place together with exploration and the erection of dwellings and shelter. The first white child was baptised, James, son of Samuel Thomas (Marine) and wife, Ann. On February 5<sup>th</sup>, Phillip ordered fresh slop clothing to all the convicts aboard the *Lady Penrhyn* so that preparation for landing could be arranged. Five of the best behaved ones were taken ashore immediately to serve the officers which meant that they were to be fairly well treated.

The following morning at 5 o'clock the rest of the women were eventually landed and what took place was bedlam. The convict men, unable to contain themselves – and unable to be contained by the marines – swamped the women when they reached shore. With the men's pent up lusts and desires, a night of debauchery followed.

Also with the fleet, aboard the *Sirius*, was marine private, Samuel King. The frigate *Sirius* did not carry any convicts so that the voyage for Samuel, although no doubt a tedious one, would have been more tolerable than what his counterparts endured on the other vessels.

The duties of the marines once at Port Jackson were to oversee convict works, guard the settlement against aboriginal attack and to escort scientific and exploration parties.

In mid February, Governor Phillip ordered the settlement of Norfolk Island, under the command of Philip Gidley King and in March 1790 the vessel *Sirius* and *Supply* was sent to Norfolk Island. Samuel must have been aboard one of these. It is reported that he went to Norfolk Island with the *Charlotte*, but by this time, the *Charlotte* had left Australian waters therefor it was not possible to have been this vessel. It left in May 1788 for China, returning to England where it was sold and put on the London-Jamaica run. Betty was also

transported to Norfolk Island March 1790 on the *Sirius*, still as a convict. On the 5<sup>th</sup> April 1791 Samuel became a civilian and was granted 60 acres of land on Norfolk Island (Lot no. 13) and was living with Mary Rolt<sup>i</sup> and was a third class settler later to become a constable on the island. In 1799, he had taken another grant of 200 acres at Mulgrave Place. In 1807 it is believed he married, although it was not to Mary Rolt.

On 14<sup>th</sup> July 1791 Betty received 25 lashes for coming in from Phillippsburg without leave. She was with James Dodding (c1764-1834) in mid Jun 1794, having been victualled from public stores for 63 days in 1793. Dodding was a third class settler and had ten acres on Norfolk Island. On 1 May 1800, Betty must accumulate some money for she purchased from Samuel King ten acres and at the February muster 1805 she was marked off stores. The total population at the time of Norfolk Island fluctuated between 500 and 1000 people.

James Dodding sailed for VDL on the *Porpoise* in 1807 with his wife most possibly being Betty. Dodding was granted 100 acres at Glenorchy and land at Tee Tree. On his death in March 1834 he was listed as under gaoler at Hobart, aged given as 75.

However, Betty and he appeared to have separated and it is doubtful whether they were actually married and certainly had no children. Betty was free and all intended purposes, single. The previous year on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1808, the vessel, *City of Edinburgh*, glided into Sullivan's Cove and aboard was Samuel King, farmer who had been classed as a first grade settler. Samuel is an interesting fellow. On 30 August 1788 Michael Murphy, a fellow marine, made his will to "my beloved friend" Samuel King, signing with a mark and was discharged from the ship's books to Port Jackson detachment on 5 June 1789. Samuel received a grant of 62 acres at Back River, situated close to the settlement of what was originally known as Elizabeth Town, now called New Norfolk because of the influx of Norfolk Islanders. Betty had 20 acres of land in her own name. The district of course, was then a primitive one, but it was growing rapidly as there was now a shop supplying tea, sugar, tobacco, rum and slop clothing.

On Saturday the 28<sup>th</sup> January 1810 at Hobart Town, Samuel King, widower and Betty Thackery were married. The ceremony was performed by the pioneer priest, Rev. Knopwood. Witnesses were Susana Mitchell, thought to have been a friend of Betty's and William Thomas Stackes who obliged Knopwood on many occasions as a witness. Both made the X sign indicating that neither could read nor write.

The Kings immediately took up their grant at Back River and tackled a difficult and cheerless task and on many instances would have become dispirited. Yet, both of them had had a hard life and did not expect the future to be any easier. They worked industriously, side by side and Samuel because of his valuable services as a constable was granted a further grant of land which they called "Kings Rocks". There is nothing to be seen of any building.

Betty, outliving Samuel and having no children, left the property to Ebenezer Shoobridge<sup>ii</sup>. Samuel is buried somewhere in the Back River chapel cemetery. He died 21<sup>st</sup> October 1849 aged 86.



Back River Chapel 2019

Betty was a grand lady and should be seen as one of Australia's most prominent daughters. Her endurance and strength, her characteristics, the building of this great nation and together with Samuel laid the foundations of a prosperous society that we, the present generation, have inherited.

While Betty may have the distinction of being the first white woman to set foot in Australia, another distinction could possibly be given. It is also believed that she was the last first fleeter to die.

Her memorial is located in the Back River chapel cemetery which is on the Lawitta Road, just off the Lyell Highway not far out of New Norfolk. A number of other first fleeters are buried there as well, many now having no tombstones marking their last resting place.



Plaque that has been added to Betty's memorial

A good source of reference for Samuel King and Betty, referred to as Elizabeth Thackery, is the book *Founders of Australia* by Mollie Gillen (1909-2009) which was published in 1989.

See also Crimes of the First Fleet Convicts – John Cobley (1970)

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<sup>i</sup> Mary Rolt (c1757) was sentenced in June 1786 to seven years transportation. On 2 October 1788 she was sent to Norfolk Island on the *Golden Grove* and in June 1794 she was living with Samuel King. There is a belief she went back to England as a servant to the wife of Lieutenant Governor King.

<sup>ii</sup> Ebenezer Shoobridge (1820 England – 1901 New Norfolk) pioneered fruit and hop growing in the Derwent Valley. He was also a Member of the House of Assembly. He arrived in Tasmania in 1822 with his family.



Ebenezer Shoobridge