

The convict nursery at the Cascades Female Factory, Hobart

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One of the primary aims of the Founders and Survivors project is to trace the descendants of Van Diemonian convicts and their life outcomes. This article outlines the early living conditions of some of the first convict descendants—the children born to convict women in the Hobart convict nursery.

Background

Most female convicts lived and worked in the community under a system of assignment to free settlers. However, if they were unmarried and became pregnant, they were sent to the Female House of Correction, also known as the Female Factory, to give birth in the convict nursery. For example, in 1828, Prudence Clare was returned to the Female Factory 'being unable from pregnancy to be any longer of service to her Master'.¹

The Female Factories were synonymous with convict mothers and their children,

one visitor to the colony noting that the 'greatest part of the women seemed to have been sent there to be confined in more senses than one, for nearly every one of them had a child in her arms, or by the hand'.² Once a child was weaned, her mother was sent back out to service, leaving the child behind. At the age of three years, children in the convict nurseries were sent to the Orphan School.

The Female Factory was run very much along the lines of workhouses back in England, with a superintendent and matron—usually a married couple—in charge, a part-time medical officer, and several subordinate positions held by inmates of the institution. Also like the workhouses, the death rates of children in the Female Factories was inordinately high, at least four times the level in the general community.³

The Cascades Female Factory

At the end of 1828 a new Female Factory was opened in a remodelled distillery at Cascades, near Hobart. At this time the British population of Van Diemen's

Land was estimated to be around 18,000. Of these, 725 were female convicts.⁴ About 100 of these women were sent to the new Factory.⁵ The Cascades Factory was criticised by the local newspapers before it even opened for business. It sat in a swamp at the bottom of Mount Wellington, was always cold and damp and received very little sun.⁶

The Factory quickly became notorious. Within a year there were almost 200 women and children located there. The *Colonial Times* reported that a 'great number of deaths...constantly occur at the new Female Factory...so many as six or seven children have laid dead there at the same time'.⁷ There were lurid rumours that 'the corpses of children [were] conveyed secretly out of the Factory, without the slightest regard to ceremony'.⁸ In 1830, a woman convicted of killing her infant child in the new Factory became the first woman hanged in the colony.⁹

The reasons for the high mortality were not hard to ascertain. The women and

children were crowded together, dozens to a room, and they received inadequate food and clothing for good health. The regulation diet was very poor but often the women and children did not even receive that.

For example, in 1830 the Lieutenant Governor wrote asking whether the stipulated rations were being adhered to in the Female Factory. The rations were, for breakfast, a quarter pound of bread and a pint of gruel; for dinner, half a pound of bread and a pint of soup; and for supper, a quarter pound of bread and a pint of soup. For the soup, there were to be 25 pounds of meat to every 150 quarts of soup, which was to be thickened with vegetables and peas or barley. This diet, even if fully supplied, was totally inadequate for pregnant and breastfeeding mothers.

The superintendent wrote back to the Lieutenant Governor and said that he was 'unable to comply' with the regulations because no vegetables were available.¹⁰ Consequently, the so-called 'soup' consisted of water with a couple of chunks of meat floating in it. However the superintendent had misunderstood the Lieutenant Governor. The Governor simply wanted to ensure that the women were not getting more meat than was stipulated in the regulations and that they were not getting any meat in solid form, although, of course, 'vegetables with the necessary quantity of barley and peas must be regularly supplied'.¹¹

Another recurring problem was cleanliness, or lack thereof. In 1832 the Lieutenant Governor paid a surprise visit to the Female Factory. He found it in a 'very dirty state'. Rubbish had accumulated in every building, the walls and floors were crawling with bugs and the blankets were 'quite black with fleas'. The children's rooms were 'particularly bad', which the Governor thought partly accounted for the sickly state of the children. He ordered the problem be fixed immediately through obtaining extra quantities of soap 'or anything else that may be necessary for putting the Establishment in a clean and wholesome state'.¹²

The problem may have been temporarily fixed¹³ but keeping the Factory and the nursery clean was a constant challenge. Settlers frequently complained that women from the Female Factory were sent to their service 'in a filthy state', sometimes with their hair 'full of vermin'.¹⁴ Although the superintendent of the Factory argued that 'our women' were 'free from Filth and Dirt', he did acknowledge that it was impossible to maintain complete cleanliness given that bedding from prison ships, which were 'generally covered with vermin', were washed in the Factory by the women.¹⁵

Inquests on deaths in the nursery

Over the next few years, the continuing terrible conditions in the nursery were occasionally brought to public attention through inquests which were held on deaths occurring there. These inquests have a depressing similarity about them. The child in question dies of some sort of bowel complaint, often soon after being weaned. The coroner is appalled at the overcrowded conditions, sometimes at the meagre diet, and recommends immediate remedial action. The coroner's recommendations are promptly ignored by the authorities.

For example, around the middle of 1834 no fewer than ten children died at Cascades within six weeks. One of these deaths was the subject of a coronial inquest. The coroner's jury went to Cascades to examine the accommodation. They resolved that a 'strong and respectful remonstrance' should be made by the coroner, as to the total unsuitability of the nursery. The dormitory for weaned children was only 40 feet long by 11 feet wide and held 26 children and 13 women. It had held more than 60 women and children, a number in the jury's judgement so 'totally disproportionate to the accommodation afforded that they felt it a duty to remark on it'.¹⁶

Elizabeth Lush, who was the subject of the inquest, had been weaned just before she came to the nursery, and her mother was sent out to service. The overseer of the nursery thought that she had died of a fever and bowel complaint. Elizabeth had been kept in a room over the

cookhouse, where there were seven beds for seven women and thirteen children. Two other children had died in the same room the day before; and one the previous Saturday. Every child in the nursery had been ill within the last month, and three of them were still very ill.¹⁷

The coroner's finding was that Elizabeth Lush 'came to her death in a natural way and not through neglect or injury from any other person'.¹⁸ The coroner deplored the 'present system of management', and the fact that unmarried female convicts who became pregnant were punished 'whilst the Father of the child whether he be the Seducer, or paramour, is rarely if ever punished'.

In March of 1838 the newspaper the *True Colonist* strongly criticised the convict authorities. It railed that the Cascades Factory, a 'miserable place', was 'the most unfitting place in the whole colony for the prison of women, children and infants'.¹⁹ The paper called for an inquiry into conditions and treatment of children at the Factory.²⁰ There had been 208 deaths of children within the Factory out of 794 admitted or born in the Factory since its opening in 1830.²¹

Again in March 1838, yet another inquest was held, this time on a female prisoner at the Female Factory. The jury found that ill health among the children was caused by the 'crowded state of the nurseries, the limited size of the yard, and the obstruction which the high walls give to the sun shining on the flagging of that yard and the lower part of the buildings'. The only place children could take exercise was in the wet yard where the sun did not shine for four months of the year.

Sixteen women and 16 children were kept in the upper room of the suckling nursery. The air was 'very close and very bad', especially in summer. The women and children were locked up from six in the evening until six on the morning. By eight or nine at night, the room became 'very offensive and pernicious' from the heat and the smell of excreta. The

suckling ward consisted of two rooms, each 28 feet by 12 feet, in which were crammed more than 70 women and children. The jury found the smell of these rooms 'most offensive' even in the daytime.²²

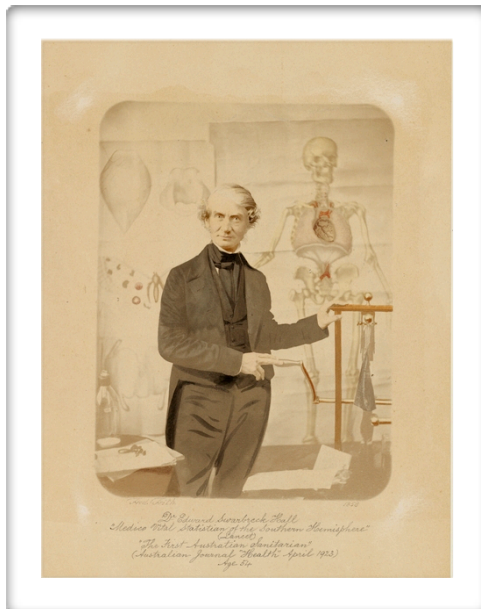
The amount of food supplied to the women was extremely limited. The women in the nursery complained that 'the food was not so nutritious for women suckling as they could wish'. The milk was very bad. However the coroner believed that their rations were sufficient considering that the Factory was 'a place of punishment'. The women complained of headaches and found the place very unhealthy. Twenty deaths had taken place within the last three months however the coroner had only been notified of seven. Two children had died within the last ten days without inquests.²³

Dr Edward Swarbeck Hall

In June 1854, Doctor Edward Swarbeck Hall took up a temporary appointment as medical officer at Cascades. Hall was an English doctor in his early 50s who was highly experienced in the medical management of institutions. Among other posts, he had had medical charge of an orphanage in Liverpool, and then various of the convict establishments on his emigration to Van Diemen's Land.²⁴ Hall was a great humanitarian who was not afraid of causing trouble in high places to get results.

On his arrival at Cascades, Hall found 60 women and 110 children housed in four damp cold rooms of 20 feet square.²⁵ The children were in a feeble and emaciated state, many of them requiring medical treatment on a daily basis, 'and the mortality frightful'. Dr Hall attributed this to a 'complication of causes' under the heading of 'general mismanagement'.²⁶

The children were kept outside all day, whatever the weather, with only an open shed in which to shelter. No heating was available in the rooms. The clothing of both mothers and children was quite insufficient to preserve vital warmth, and was often issued damp.



Dr Edward Swarbeck Hall, 1858, photographed by Fred Frith. Reproduced by permission of the Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW.

Hall examined the children daily and 'scarcely ever felt a child's feet otherwise than stone cold'.²⁷ Neither the women nor the children got sufficient food. Breastfeeding mothers were allocated a miserly half diet. The food given to weaned children was often burnt or rancid.²⁸ Children were frequently kept in solitary confinement with their mothers.²⁹

Dr Hall urgently requested that fires be lit in the nursery to ward off the cold and damp. However the authorities 'appeared afraid of dirtying the grates, or of taking the trouble of lighting fires'.³⁰ He also asked for warm woollen cloaks for the children. He was put off, and then eventually told that the cloaks were being made in the workroom. So he went to the workroom where he found that there was no material with which to make them.³¹

Dr Hall was frustrated at every turn by the convict authorities who appeared to have no interest in the health of the children. So he arranged to circumvent the authorities altogether by having the mothers and children at Cascades transferred to the Infirmary in Hobart where they would be under the sole care of the Medical Department, rather than the Convict Department. This was done on 5 July 1854.³² At this time Hall had been at Cascades for less than a month.

Even though almost all the women and children were suffering from disease, immediately the mortality fell by around 75 per cent and the children 'thrive[d] better than was ever known before'.³³ Only ten deaths occurred in the second half of 1854, four of them in July, as opposed to 68 deaths in the first six months of the year.³⁴

In March of 1855, Hall was forced to resign from the service. Three months later, the Convict Comptroller General decided to commandeer the Infirmary for office space, and the women and children there were sent to the hiring depot at Brickfields, again under the control of the Convict Department. Within about two months, one quarter of the children moved had died, eight within one week.³⁵

Even though he had retired, Hall again took action, this time publicly. He wrote a number of very detailed exposés which were published in the press. Hall accused the Convict Department of a 'heartless, murderous experiment' in taking the children from the Infirmary and sending them to Brickfields, 'which had formerly been so fatal to them, and again proved so'. At the very least there had been 'reckless indifference to the life or death of the infant children of convict parents'.³⁶ Hall backed his claims of high mortality with statistical evidence from the Hobart death registers.

Inquiry into the convict system

Around the same time, the local Legislature appointed a committee to investigate accusations of 'fraud, peculation and embezzlement' made against officers of the Convict Department. The committee was to also 'make such other inquiries into the abuses in the Convict Department which may appear to affect the colonial interest'.³⁷ These 'other inquiries' included the high death toll in the convict nurseries. Dr Edward Swarbeck Hall was their star witness.

Hall described conditions at the Cascades during his time there as medical officer and the resistance encountered from officials of the Convict Department, who had ignored

his requests for adequate heating, and additional food and clothing for the women and children. He also exposed the petty pilfering of food meant for the convict women and their children. He 'knew well how plentiful a ration may appear on paper, but how regularly it became "fine by degrees and beautifully less" before it reached the plundered recipients' hungry mouths'.³⁸ The Committee found that the 'sickly state of the children' and 'excessive mortality' in the convict nurseries was caused by 'general mismanagement, exposure to cold, insufficient food and clothing, badly arranged dormitories,...and an insufficient allowance of nourishment to mothers who were nursing'. This was the fault of the Convict Department which was 'chiefly responsible for a reckless negligence which has resulted in the loss of so many lives'. What is more, the Committee named names, stating that culpability mainly attached to the Convict Superintendent and the Comptroller General.³⁹

All those who could share some blame in the high level of mortality fell over themselves to prove that the mortality in the nurseries was not so high as Hall stated, or to say that it was not so high compared to other places, or to blame the parents for the high mortality. The Comptroller General—who had been responsible for moving the women and children from the Infirmary—argued that, if mortality was high, it was because the children had 'constitutions tainted by the hereditary diseases derived from their vicious parents'.⁴⁰

This inquiry into the Convict Department was highly embarrassing for the Lieutenant Governor, who peremptorily shut down parliament before a final report could be produced. However by this time Van Diemen's Land had already received its last load of convicts from Britain. Within a couple of years the convict system had been almost entirely dismantled.

At least up until the 1870s the Cascades Factory was still being used to house female prisoners and their children. In 1872 it held 78 women and 26 young children. However this time the

newspapers reported that the women and children were well cared for and received a 'full supply of good and nourishing food'.⁴¹

¹ Archives Office of Tasmania, Hobart (hereafter AOT) CSO 1/288/6893, Police Report, 23 September 1828.

² W. Howitt, *Land, labour and gold*, (Lowden, Kilmore, 1972).

³ R. Kippen, *Death in Tasmania: using civil death registers to measure nineteenth-century cause-specific mortality*, PhD thesis (The Australian National University, Canberra, 2002).

⁴ J. Montagu, *Statistical account of Van Diemen's Land* (Government Printer, Hobart Town, 1856).

⁵ *Colonial Times*, 2 January 1829.

⁶ *Colonial Times*, 31 August 1827, 7 August 1829.

⁷ *Colonial Times*, 7 August 1829.

⁸ *Colonial Times*, 3 April 1838.

⁹ *Hobart Town Courier*, 24 April 1830; *Tasmanian and Austral-Asiatic Review*, 23 April 1830.

¹⁰ AOT CSO 1/365/8341, Letter from the Principal Superintendent to the Colonial Secretary, 30 April 1830.

¹¹ AOT CSO 1/365/8341, Letter from the Colonial Secretary to the Assistant Commissary General, 5 May 1830.

¹² AOT CSO 1/366/8341, Memorandum from the Lieutenant Governor, 25 January 1832.

¹³ AOT CSO 1/366/8341, Memorandum from the Lieutenant Governor, undated.

¹⁴ AOT CSO 1/895/19025, Letter from the Police Office at Hamilton to the Colonial Secretary, 19 December 1836; AOT CSO 1/895/19025, Letter from Dr Dermer to the Colonial Secretary, 26 December 1836.

¹⁵ AOT CSO 1/895/19025, Letter from John Hutchinson to the Colonial Secretary, 22 December 1836.

¹⁶ AOT CSO 1/902/19161, Coroner's report on the inquest into the death of Elizabeth Lush, October 1834.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *True Colonist*, 9 March 1838.

²⁰ *True Colonist*, 23 March 1838.

²¹ AOT CSO 5/114/2605, A return of the average admissions of women and children, deaths &c at the Female House of Correction from the period of its first occupation in the year 1830, until the 31st March of the present year 1838, 12 April 1838.

²² AOT CSO 5/114/2608, Coroner's report on the inquest into the death of Barbara Hemming, 29 March 1838.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Legislative Council, 'Proceedings of the Select Committee on the Convict Department, evidence of Dr Hall', *Journals of the Legislative Council of Tasmania*, Paper 32 (1856).

²⁵ E.S. Hall, 'Mortality at the convict nurseries', *Tasmanian Daily News*, 19 November 1855.

²⁶ Legislative Council, 'Proceedings of the Select Committee on the Convict Department, evidence of Dr Hall', *Journals of the Legislative Council of Tasmania*, Paper 32 (1856).

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ E.S. Hall, 'Mortality at the convict nurseries', *Tasmanian Daily News*, 19 November 1855.

²⁹ Legislative Council, 'Proceedings of the Select Committee on the Convict Department, evidence of Dr Hall', *Journals of the Legislative Council of Tasmania*, Paper 32 (1856).

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Legislative Council, 'Proceedings of the Select Committee on the Convict Department, evidence of Mr Watson', *Journals of the Legislative Council of Tasmania*, Paper 32 (1856).

³² Legislative Council, 'Proceedings of the Select Committee on the Convict Department, evidence of Dr Hall', *Journals of the Legislative Council of Tasmania*, Paper 32 (1856).

³³ E.S. Hall, 'On the medical topography and vital statistics of the city of Hobart, Tasmania, and its southern sub-districts for 1855', *The Australian Medical Journal* 2(1857), 81–110.

³⁴ P. Gunn and R. Kippen, *Household and family formation in nineteenth-century Tasmania*, dataset of 195 thousand births, 93 thousand deaths and 51 thousand marriages registered in Tasmania, 1838–1899 (Australian Social Science Data Archive, Canberra, 2008).

³⁵ Legislative Council, 'Proceedings of the Select Committee on the Convict Department, evidence of Dr Hall', *Journals of the Legislative Council of Tasmania*, Paper 32 (1856).

³⁶ E.S. Hall, 'Mortality at the convict nurseries', *Tasmanian Daily News*, 19 November 1855.

³⁷ House of Commons, *Copies or extracts of correspondence with the Governor of Tasmania, connected with the institution of an inquiry by a committee of the Legislative Assembly into the working of the Convict Department...* (London, 1856).

³⁸ Legislative Council, 'Proceedings of the Select Committee on the Convict Department, evidence of Dr Hall', *Journals of the Legislative Council of Tasmania*, Paper 32 (1856).

³⁹ Legislative Council, 'Draft of a proposed report from the Select Committee on the Convict Department', *Journals of the Legislative Council of Tasmania*, Paper 33 (1856).

⁴⁰ AOT GO 33/83/487, Letter from the Comptroller General on Mr Hall's observations on mortality at the convict nurseries, 26 September 1855.

⁴¹ *The Mercury*, 30 December 1872.