

## Ann Simmons – the gift of resilience

My three times great grandmother Ann Simmons<sup>i</sup> had an extensive charge sheet long before she was transported to Van Diemen's Land in 1822 for larceny. Without proof of a birth date or who her parents were, Ann was likely born between 1793 and 1795 in London around Southgate, an assumption based on the location of future events. This put her at 14 years in 1807 when she was brought to the Old Bailey to face charges for stealing 14 yards of printed cotton from Mr Richard Samuel. Court records stated Ann was 17, the same age as her co-accused Elizabeth Clarke.

The following year however, in 1808 when Ann was charged with stealing linen valued at three pounds, she was described as being 15 years old whilst her new friend and co-accused, Mary Ann Tyrrell was noted as being 17. The young women along with Charles Brompton, (their handler?) were fined and sentenced to two months at Newgate prison provided the fines were paid by the end of their sentences.

Eight years later in 1816, Ann appears again at the Old Bailey for stealing, this time it was Mr Edward Flower's linen shirt that caught her eye. Ann's record stated she was 21 although there is never complete certainty about her age. What I do know is for the next few years Ann's life appeared to take a turn for the better. She had a little girl, Eliza, in 1817, married Joseph Allason in March of 1818 after banns were advertised across three consecutive Sundays in the parish of Edmonton, Southgate, and three months later, bore Joseph a son, Henry Allason. In early 1820, family life seemed to hold together with little Emma Allason's birth in the February, and her christening the following month in Southgate's 400-year old Edmonton Weld Chapel.

Glimmers of hope for Ann and her family soon ran out, as barely two years down the track in 1822, she was caught stealing clothing for the children. Based on her earlier record Ann might have been in for a long stretch but records show that she petitioned the Courts for clemency on the grounds of poverty, being unemployed, and having been abandoned by her husband, the father of her children. The punishment handed down on 22 May 1822 was transportation to Van Diemen's Land to serve a seven-year sentence. You couldn't imagine things getting worse but they did.

Perhaps after learning his wife and children were to be transported to the other side of the world, Joseph took Henry. Truthfully, I don't know for sure this is what happened, but when Ann was transported, three facts are clear; Ann reverted to her maiden name Simmons, two-year-old Emma died one month after Ann's sentencing, and when Ann left her homeland forever in September 1822, with 96 other female convicts on the barque *Lord Sidmouth*, the only child with her was five-year-old Eliza.

On the voyage to Van Diemen's Land, one month before landing in Hobart Ann was caught stealing again "*from one of her Messmates, punished as Customary in such cases by shaving her head*" (Tardif, P. 1990). By the time the ship anchored in Sullivans Cove (the harbour of Hobart), on the morning of 10th February 1823, Ann's head would have been covered in spikey new hair growth, hardly a flattering figure,

nevertheless, she was picked out by a Mr Thornton as an assigned servant. Tardin's publication also noted that Ann was 24 years of age and could read and write.



South west view of Hobart Town, Van Dieman's Land by A. Anglio del. National Library of Australia nla.obj-133219453

There are many gaps in Ann's life before arriving in Van Diemen's Land but some observations left me wondering. Was my three-times great-grandmother a seamstress given her preference for material and clothing? Did she grow up on the streets of London given how difficult it has been to find records of her parents? Ann's story offers an example of how structural barriers, discrimination around social status, and poverty, impact a person's life. Ann would have lived with the threat of violence on a daily basis. It is no wonder that during the next seven years, she continued to be a repeat offender; she was wily, likely very manipulative, and often found to be drunk and disorderly. A reference to Ann's character in 1839 in Hobart Town in relation to another charge, described her as *"a woman of infamous character, and a sad drunkard."*

Whatever we may think about Ann Simmons, she was resilient which made her a survivor. Within eight months of landing in Hobart Town, she married 26-year-old Michael Kevill<sup>ii</sup>, a Devonshire man sentenced in 1819 to life and transportation to Van Diemen's Land for highway robbery. Michael was also a repeat offender with regular charges for recurring offenses such as forgery, assault, fighting, drunkenness, and neglect of duty, to name a few. Despite being punished often with the lash, never less than 25 strokes, and numerous stints on chain gangs, Michael and Ann stayed together in their bigamous marriage and had five children together.

Michael Kevill must have been a force of nature in his younger days, and for a woman determined to survive in a tough world, I can understand her choosing such a character to partner with. However, it is equally likely that Michael saw similar

qualities in Ann. The other curious point of interest is on their marriage certificate, Michael's signature is a crooked 'X' whereas Ann's is her name written in a flowery style. Is this enough to confirm Ann was literate? Of the five children the Kevill's had, I descend from their third daughter, Mary Kevell [sic] who pre-marriage was often known as Mary Clarke. Reinventing one's identity was a family trait.

Reading through the conduct records of, and newspaper snippets about Michael and Ann Kevill, I discovered something extraordinary that happened in 1825. Captain Moon, the ship's mate of *Lord Sidmouth*, the ship that brought Ann to Tasmania, employed Michael and Ann as assigned servants. Taking on the Kevills two years after their marriage, at his Hobart residence at 26 Melville Street implies that Moon was also prepared to house and feed Eliza, Ann's English-born daughter, Honoraria Kevill born in 1825 and possibly my two-times great-grandmother Mary. Confirming Mary's date of birth has proven as difficult as her mother's.

After Ann was widowed in 1852, there was some entanglement of real estate concerning the Melville Street property which appears to have originally been owned by Dr Espie, the one-time ship's surgeon of the *Lord Sidmouth*. What was it about Ann Simmons, a compulsive thief that brought her back into the circle of men such as Dr Espie and Captain Moon? In 1857, Ann had lodged a caveat over the property citing an understanding between herself and Captain Moon that the property would "fall to her". There's no doubt about Ann, she was a survivor. After leaving England, she might have been 'down and out' on many occasions, but her resilience and survivor skills were as ingrained as her blood type.

I still have much to discover and verify about Ann Simmons' life. Researching family history often reminds us how the more things change, the more they stay the same. There are women today in our neighbourhoods and cities who struggle with similar challenges to the ones faced by Ann Simmons. The geography and centuries are different as is our modern way of life, but structural and societal barriers such as domestic violence can lead people into homelessness, poverty, and a life of crime.

Ann Simmons battled tragedy, fear, poverty, and peril from childhood, but she survived where many would or could not. Was it in her nature? It certainly wasn't due to nurture. Resilience might be our greatest asset.

## References

Tardif, P. 1990. *Notorious strumpets and dangerous girls: convict women in Van Diemen's Land, 1803-1829*. Pp 600-601, Angus & Robertson, UK.

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<sup>i</sup> Often spelt as Simmons

<sup>ii</sup> Often spelt Kavel