



## Ruth Guest

Date of Trial:	20 January 1817
Where Tried:	Lancaster Quarter Session
Crime:	Larceny
Sentence:	7 years
Est YOB:	1799
Stated Age on Arrival:	19
Native Place:	
Occupation:	Cotton Weaver
Alias/AKA:	
Marital Status (UK):	
Children on Board:	
Surgeon's Remarks:	An idiot but given to theft
Assigned NSW or VDL	VDL

At 19 years of age on arrival Ruth was the second youngest of the *Friendship* women sent to Van Diemen's Land. Only one baptism record has been found for a Ruth Guest for the late 1790s – that of Ruth, daughter of John and Mary Guest, for 25 March 1798, at the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel, Bedford, Lancashire, the first Methodist Chapel in Leigh. Leigh is today a town in the Metropolitan Borough of Wigan. If this is 'our' Ruth, she had at least one brother – Thomas - baptised at the same chapel on 20 August 1800.<sup>1</sup>

Although recorded as having been tried on 20 January 1817 at the Lancaster Quarter Session, at least two of the Settler and Convict Lists have her place of trial as Wigan.<sup>2</sup> No newspaper account has been found for Ruth's trial, but we do have two Prosecutors' Bills in respect of Messrs. Grimshaw & Marsh, Solicitors of Wigan, for their services in the prosecution of 'Thomas Burton against Ruth Guest', and 'Catherine Banks against Ruth Guest'. So we can assume that Burton and Banks were the aggrieved parties in the felony committed by Ruth Guest. The Bills were comprehensively itemised, and the total amount payable was £15 1s 6d.<sup>3</sup> The outcome of Ruth's trial was recorded in the Quarter Sessions Order Book.

Whereas Ruth Guest hath at this Session been convicted of Felony This Court doth therefore order and adjudge that the said Ruth Guest be sent and transported to some part beyond the seas for the Term of Seven Years pursuant to the Statute in such case made and provided.<sup>4</sup>

Ruth Guest was by no means a model prisoner at Lancaster Gaol, where she was sent to await her transportation beyond the seas, as evidenced by one particular event recorded by the Governor on 21 April.

About Noon a Number of the female Convicts under Sentence of Transportation were discovered on the Top of the Dungeon Tower. When the Turnkeys went up they found Ruth Guest, Mary Sharp, M.A. Buckley and S. Robinson on the Roof. They had managed to wrench off three padlocks from the lower and upper Doors and had the Impudence to tell the Turnkeys that they had only forced their way through the Doors to see the fine prospect. Their Intention was to let themselves down from the Turret upon the Wall and then proceed to the Roof of the County Hall, where they might have gone down into the Halls, or have let themselves down by means of the Blankets, on the Terrace. However well inclined I may be to overlook this Transgression, some punishment is absolutely necessary, especially as they seem to boast of the Feat. As I have no means of separating them by solitary confinement, the only resource is Irons, which must be tried until I see some signs of sorrow for the rash Act.<sup>5</sup>

It must have been a relief to the Governor when, on 19 May, he wrote to the Secretary of State regarding the orders of transportation for fifteen of his charges who were all destined for the *Friendship*. This list included those who had been tried in 1816 and 1817. The Governor must have been even more relieved when, in two groups, these women were removed from the Gaol on 27 and 28 May. Ruth Guest was in the second group.<sup>6</sup>

Once aboard the *Friendship* the fifteen women were reunited, and it is possible that they maintained their close

ties during the voyage. Surgeon Cosgreave had little regard for Ruth, describing her as an “idiot but given to theft”. On arrival at Port Jackson, and with the muster completed, Ruth Guest, aged 19 and a cotton weaver by occupation, was one of the seven Lancashire convicts who were then put aboard the Duke of Wellington and forwarded to Van Diemen’s Land which arrived at Hobart on 20 February 1818.<sup>7</sup> She was then transferred to Port Dalrymple. It was there, on 9 November 1818 that the first of Ruth’s litany of colonial offences was committed – she was charged with being insolent to Jacob Mountgarrett, then the Colonial Surgeon, based at Launceston, and a somewhat dubious character in his own right.<sup>8</sup> It is not clear whether or not Ruth was assigned to Mountgarrett. She was mustered at Port Dalrymple in 1820 and 1821.<sup>9</sup> On 20 January 1824 Ruth had served out her seven year term and was thus ‘Free by Servitude’. Despite some misdemeanours and as notified in the *Hobart Town Gazette* on 30 January 1824, she was issued with her certificate of freedom.<sup>10</sup>

Ruth Guest’s life in Van Diemen’s Land appears to have been one of unmitigated misery, primarily caused by, and perhaps consoled by, the bottle. As listed in the table on the following page, she clocked up thirty-five offences between February 1818 and January 1840. The year 1828 stands out as being the only misdemeanour-free year.

She was a ‘regular’ in the newspaper court reports with *The Cornwall Chronicle* taking a particularly cruel delight in relating her misadventures. Thus, in November and December 1837, its readers were duly entertained.<sup>11</sup>

Ruth Guest was politely introduced to the notice of the Magistrate, by constable Neale. It was evident, the moment she entered the office, that a strong prepossession was created in her favour, her beauty being of that order “whose force description only would abate;” but alas for the want of a paltry 5s. she was ultimately ordered to the cloisters for the term of 14 days.

Ruth Guest, the very beau ideal of a female drunkard, and whose appearance presented a living commentary on the baneful effects of dram drinking was sentenced to 14 days confinement in the House of Correction, being unable to pay the usual fine.

Ruth Guest, a constant visitor to this office, was charged with drunkenness. Her behaviour during her examination was most outrageous, and her language, even to the magistrate, (who declared her insane) it is impossible to repeat. On being committed under the vagrant act for 2 months to the house of correction, she stretched her limbs along the floor of the office and declared her intention of “war even to the tooth and nail” against anyone attempting to remove her. After considerable difficulty she was carried out.

Through the *Colonial Times*, we find Ruth as an out-patient of the Hobart hospital in March 1839.

Ruth Guest, an out-door patient of the Hospital, was charged with taking cordials and compounds not prescribed in the pharmacopeia, and which were decidedly not at all calculated for the malady under which she was labouring. As she was discovered in state of intoxication on Saturday night, and very turbulent, she was sentenced to pay 5s. for her offence, but she gave the Bench to understand that for the last few years she had not been possessed of such money.<sup>12</sup>

Reaffirming Surgeon Cosgreave’s assessment, on 2 January 1840 Ruth was declared a lunatic to be committed to the Lunatic Asylum. As a Convict Pauper, and suffering from mania (cause unknown), she was admitted to the New Norfolk Hospital for the Insane on 7 February 1840 and which was to be her home for nearly thirty years.<sup>13</sup>

Originally an invalid barracks, in 1827, due to the lack of any alternatives (and the necessary planning and infrastructure investment) the facility was required to provide for the insane as well as the sick, a dual role that did not satisfactorily cater for either, particularly in terms of keeping the invalids and lunatics separated. In 1832 work was begun on a building to adjoin the hospital for housing the insane, which was to be:

... sufficiently large and well-enclosed to allow of the lunatic being kept under that restraint and moral discipline which can alone [sic] their comfort and security, or hold out a prospect of their being ultimately cured.<sup>14</sup>

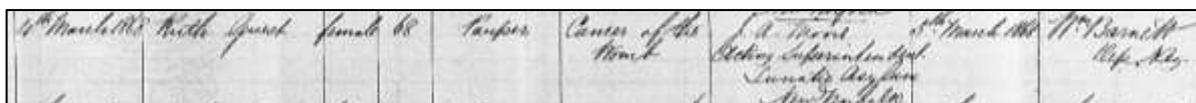
Regardless of the efforts to improve the facilities, for most of the time during which Ruth was an inmate the accommodation was very basic.


 Conduct Register – Ruth Guest<sup>15</sup>

Date	Charge	Outcome
20 Feb 1818	Insolence to J. Mountgarrett Esq.	To sit in the stocks 2 hours
25 Jan 1823	Neglect of duty	To be kept to hard labour for 8 days and be confined at nights
13 Sep 1823	Repeatedly absconding from her Government labour	1 month solitary confinement
24 Feb 1824)		
18 Jan 1825)		
18 Apr 1825)		
29 Jun 1825)	Drunk & Disorderly	Fined 5/-
18 Jul 1825)		
18 Feb 1826)		
24 Apr 1826)		
5 Oct 1826	Drunk & Disorderly	To be placed in the stocks 2 hours
7 Nov 1826	Drunk & Disorderly last night	Ordered to be confined on month in Gaol as the House of Correction unless she shall find sureties for her good behaviour
11 Dec 1826	Drunk & Disorderly	Fined 5/-
13 Dec 1827	Drunk & Disorderly on the Street	To be confined in the Gaol as the House of Correction for 28 days
16 Feb 1829)		
4 Aug 1830)		
25 Feb 1831)		
15 Jul 1831)		
10 Sep 1831)		
4 Jan 1832)	Drunk & Disorderly/Drunkenness	Fined 5/-
14 Mar 1832)		
15 May 1832)		
27 Jul 1832)		
22 Sep 1832)		
29 Oct 1832	Repeated Drunken & Disorderly conduct	To find sureties for her good behaviour to 3 months.
30 Jan 1833	Disorderly conduct and breaking the windows of W. Evans' house	To find sureties to keep the peace. Committed in default
18 Apr 1833	Drunk and disorderly	To find sureties to be of good behaviour for 3 months
15 Jul 1834	Drunk and breaking the windows of T. Dudley's residence	To find sureties for her good behaviour for 3 months
30 Sep 1834	Indecently exposing her person	Discharged
24 Oct 1834	Disorderly and indecent conduct in the public streets	To find sureties to keep the peace for 3 months
18 Nov 1836	Being disorderly	Discharged
12 Jan 1837	Being an idle and disorderly person and a common prostitute	1 month House of Correction
9 Oct 1837	Being an idle and disorderly person	1 month hard labour in the Female House of Correction
23 Dec 1837	Vagrancy	2 months in Female House of Correction
27 Sep 1839	Being an idle and disorderly person	Committed to the House of Correction to be held to hard labour for 3 months
2 Jan 1840	Being a lunatic	Committed to the Lunatic Asylum at New Norfolk

There were no bathrooms and water closets were only placed in the yards. The centre wall through the yard ... divided the back quadrangle into male and female divisions. The provision of two kitchens took this separation to the extreme and, interestingly from a gender perspective, the washhouse was on the male side rather than the female. The separation of the invalids and lunatics was maintained through the dividing building only opening onto the front quadrangle.

As were all the inmates, Ruth was regularly examined by the doctors. Her patient records for the period May 1855 to December 1859 show that, while she was generally of 'good bodily condition', her mental condition was unchanged.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, the monthly reports for the years 1864 to 1867 reveal no noticeable change, although in May 1867 and again in September the doctors, suspecting uterine disease, had wanted to conduct an internal examination, which Ruth refused on both occasions. It was from the beginning of 1868 that Ruth's condition rapidly declined. It was observed on 4 March that she was 'evidently sinking this morning' and she died at 11.15am.<sup>17</sup> It was the Acting Superintendent of the Lunatic Asylum, New Norfolk, who was the informant for pauper Ruth Guest's death at the age of 68, the cause being recorded as cancer of the womb.<sup>18</sup>



#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Ancestry, England Select Births and Christenings, 1538-1975, FHL Film Number 0560883 (RG4 831).
- <sup>2</sup> Ancestry, New South Wales, Australia, Settler and Convict Lists, 1784-1834, HO 10; Piece:2, HO 10; Piece:14.
- <sup>3</sup> Ancestry, Lancashire, England, Quarter Session Records and Petitions, 1648-1908, Wigan-Petitions-1817 Epiphany.
- <sup>4</sup> Ancestry, Lancashire, England, Quarter Session Records and Petitions, 1648-1908, Lancashire-Order Books-1817.
- <sup>5</sup> Findmypast (FMP), England & Wales, Crime, Prisons & Punishment, 1770-1935, Lancaster Gaol, Governor's Journal.
- <sup>6</sup> FMP, England & Wales, Crime, Prisons & Punishment, 1770-1935, Lancaster Gaol, Governor's Journal.
- <sup>7</sup> Ancestry, New South Wales, Australia, Colonial Secretary's Papers, 1788-1956, Series:NRS 937.
- <sup>8</sup> Isabella J. Mead, 'Mountgarrett, Jacob (1773-1828)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/mountgarrett-jacob-2486/text3343>.
- <sup>9</sup> Female Convicts Research Centre (FCRC), Female Convicts in Van Diemen's Land database, Convict ID: 3593. Phillip Tardif, "Notorious Strumpets and Dangerous Girls : convict women in Van Diemen's Land, 1803-1829", Angus & Robertson, North Ryde, 1990.
- <sup>10</sup> *Hobart Town Gazette and Van Diemen's Land Advertiser*, 30 Jan 1824, p.1.
- <sup>11</sup> *The Cornwall Chronicle*, 25 Nov 1837, p.2.; 9 Dec 1837, p.2; 30 Dec 1837, p.3.
- <sup>12</sup> *Colonial Times*, 26 Mar 1839, p.7.
- <sup>13</sup> Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Office (TAHO), HSD247/1/1, Patient Records – Admission Register, Jan 1830-Dec 1900. Note - HSD104/1/1, Alphabetical monthly register of patients, Apr 1841-Aug 1842, and subsequent records, show Ruth Guest's entry date as 6 February 1840.
- <sup>14</sup> Susan Piddock, "The New Norfolk Hospital for the Insane", [http://www.newnorfolk.org/~willow\\_court/](http://www.newnorfolk.org/~willow_court/)
- <sup>15</sup> TAHO, Conduct Record, CON40-1-3, image 233.
- <sup>16</sup> TAHO, HSD52/1/1, Patient Records – Case Books (Female), Dec 1854-Nov 1858, Folio 31.
- <sup>17</sup> TAHO, HSD52/1/2, Patient Records – Case Books (Female), Dec 1854 to Jan 1872, Folio 75.
- <sup>18</sup> TAHO, New Norfolk deaths 1868, RGD35/1/37 no 363.



## SOURCES

### Genealogy Websites

#### Ancestry

England, Select Births and Christenings, 1538-1875

Lancashire, England, Quarter Session Records and Petitions, 1648-1908

New South Wales, Australia, Colonial Secretary's Papers, 1788-1856

New South Wales, Australia, Settler and Convict Lists, 1787-1834

#### FindmyPast

England & Wales, Crime, Prisons & Punishment, 1770-1935

### Other Websites

Australian Dictionary of Biography, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/>

Female Convicts Research Centre, <https://www.femaleconvicts.org.au/>

LINC Tasmania, <https://www.linc.tas.gov.au/>

New Norfolk, <http://www.newnorfolk.org>

Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Office, <https://www.libraries.tas.gov.au/archive-heritage/>

### Online Newspapers

#### TROVE

The Cornwall Chronicle

The Hobart Town Gazette and Van Diemen's Land Advertiser

Colonial Times

#### Publications

Tardiff, Phillip, Notorious Strumpets and Dangerous Girls : convict women in Van Diemen's Land, 1803-1829, Angus & Robertson, North Ryle, 1990

© Leonie Fretwell, 2019