

Louisa Atkinson

Along the wall of the meeting room at the Illawarra Historical Society's Museum is a collection of historic illustrations and photographs depicting the growth of the Illawarra District. One of those is titled "*Coal Mine Mt Keira*" originally printed in the *Sydney Illustrated News* of 14th April 1855. That illustration is of important historic value for two reasons.

Firstly, the illustration is most probably the first illustration or photograph showing the beginnings of coal mining in Illawarra. James Shoobert first mined coal on Mt Keira in April 1849. That marked the start of the Illawarra coal mining industry that led Illawarra into becoming the major coal mining area of the Colony. Along the escarpment from Mount Kembla to Helensburgh communities began to spring up around collieries as they were opened. Illawarra quickly grew from a grazing, farming and timber getting community to a coal mining community.

Secondly, the artist who drew that illustration was Louisa Atkinson from the Moss Vale/Sutton Forest area. Her father was James Atkinson who was born in a farming village near Oldbury near Kent in July 1794. He immigrated to Australia as a free settler with a reasonable amount of capital in May 1820 and soon was appointed principal clerk in the Colonial Secretary's office. He applied for a land grant and received two adjoining grants in the Parish of Bong Bong; one was 800 acres which he named "Oldbury" and the other of 700 acres he named "Mereworth". He left his employment in Sydney and settled at "Oldbury" where he built a modest little timber cottage to live in. He also built some respectable huts for his convict workers and a stone dairy. He combined the two grants into one calling it "Oldbury" leaving the name "Mereworth" for his brother John to use for his 2,000 acre grant in the same locality.

James returned to England for personal and business reasons to improve his farming techniques. On his return journey he met Charlotte Waring, fell in love with her and proposed to her before reaching Sydney in

January 1827. James and Charlotte married at Sutton Forest in September 1827. Initially they lived in the modest little cottage James had built. He then began to build a large sandstone mansion as his family grew. Charlotte bore James four children, Charlotte Elizabeth in July 1828, Jane Emily in June 1830, James John Oldbury in 1832 and Caroline Louisa in February 1834. Louisa, as she preferred to be called, suffered from very poor health and her mother cared for her greatly. James was an excellent farmer and improved his "Oldbury" property. He was also very active in local civil affairs and treated the aborigines courteously and with great respect.

Unfortunately James died in April 1834 after a long and painful illness having drunk impure water on Razorback, he was only 40 years old. James John Oldbury Atkinson was only two years old and thus not able to take over his father's estate until he was 21. Louisa was only 8 weeks old.

Charlotte, without James' help, was unable to manage the estate and sought assistance from the farm superintendent, George Barton, who had been a good friend of James. Charlotte married George Barton, but this turned out to be a disastrous move as Barton became a maniac and drunkard and had to be put away. Charlotte had no alternative but to lease "Oldbury" and with the four children move into a simple cottage on "Budgong", a property in the Shoalhaven that James was grazing under lease.

Charlotte Atkinson was a well educated lady, a capable artist and author. At "Budgong" she home-educated the family. The three girls quickly learnt their mother's skills, particularly Louisa. James proved to be not the "arty" type. Charlotte moved the family from "Budgong" to Burwood, then a leafy village on the fringe of the bush, when the older girls needed further education. Louisa was still in poor health, suffering with a weak heart, she received no formal schooling after she turned 12, but continued to be educated in the arts by her mother. While living in Burwood Louisa took up an interest in botany and became a skilful taxidermist.

The family returned to "Oldbury" for a short period where the two older girls went their own way. James John Oldbury, even though he was still too young to take over the estate, wanted to help in farming "Oldbury". Charlotte and her daughter, Louisa, moved to "Fernhurst" at Kurrajong Heights, a place well and truly in the bush where Louisa had ample opportunity to study the flora and fauna and sketch and write about it. Even though Louisa was of ill health she found the strength to hike and ride horseback in search of her subjects.

This love of nature took Louisa on long journeys; travelling on horseback or in a coach and plenty of walking to places where she could sketch and follow her taxidermy interests. These travels took her over a wide area of the State, including Illawarra and Mt Keira.

Louisa Atkinson was said to be the first Australian born female artist.

Charlotte and Louisa returned to live in the old homestead at "Oldbury" in 1865 where two years later Charlotte passed away. Louisa continued to live at "Oldbury" with her brother James John Oldbury Atkinson.

In March 1869 Louisa married James Calvert, a talented botanist. They moved from "Oldbury" to the nearby village of "Swanton". Aged 38 Louisa gave birth to a daughter, Louise, on 10 April 1872. The family happiness soon came to halt. On 24 April 1872 while sitting by a window at "Swanton" Louisa saw her husband's riderless horse enter the yard. Louisa must have panicked and her weak heart ceased beating and she passed away. When James Calvert arrived home on foot shortly afterwards he found that his wife had died.

Even though Louisa Atkinson was born with a weak heart she managed to pack a wealth of knowledge into those 38 years. Despite her mother being very protective of her she encouraged Louisa to follow and hone her artistic skills. Even a long string of family tragedies that followed Louisa and her mother didn't stop her desire to record the beauty of nature.

Don Reynolds