

My Irish Orphan Girl - Honora Keily

by John Boyd.

My maternal Great Grandmother Honora Keily arrived on the 'Maria' 1st August 1850, aged 16 years. She came from Kanturk, Co Cork, Ireland.

She was part of Earl Grey's scheme to deal with a two fold problem -

- 1) an imbalance of the sexes in the Colony in the late 1840s -
7 males to every 1 female, and
- 2) too many young girls in the Irish Workhouses as a result of the Potato Famine.

The scheme operated from 1848 to 1852. During that time 4,114 Irish Orphan Girls were transported to the Colony, with just over 2,000 girls landing at the Immigration Depot (Hyde Park Barracks) in Sydney.

Along with the other girls, she was housed at the Hyde Park Barracks, then an Immigration Depot for Single Females. Many of the girls had a very difficult time upon arrival, as they were country girls and spoke very little English - Gallic was their language.

Many employers at the time complained that '*the girls were very wilful and not easily trained*'.

Honora was hired in 1851 by Michael Hindmarsh of Alne Bank, Gerringong, to work as a domestic servant on his property south of Wollongong. She travelled from Sydney to Gerringong riding side-saddle.

In 1861, aged 27 years, she married 35 year old widower William Irwin, a railwayman from Manchester England, who was working as a groom on the Hindmarsh property. They were married in St Mary's Cathedral. The first of their 5 children, a daughter Elizabeth (my Great Grandmother) was born at Alne Bank in September 1862. They then moved in 1864 to 'Oldbury' farm at Berrima, where John (1864-1908) was born and then in 1867 back to Sydney.

Mary Jane (1867-1937), Ellen (1869-1913) and Sarah Ann Easter (1873-1963) were all born in Sydney.

As early as 1866, Honora applied to the Benevolent Society for assistance, a pattern that continued over the next 11 years until 1877, when William died.

For the next 5 years (1877-1882) Honora recorded many fines and gaol terms for drunkenness, obscene language and common prostitution. She spent 6 months in both Wollongong and Bathurst gaols.

In 1878 her three youngest children were admitted to the Benevolent Asylum for care.

In 1879, when her eldest daughter Elizabeth married (aged 16 years), she wrote to the Colonial Secretary for custody of her three younger siblings - this was granted almost immediately. Elizabeth also cared for her mother Honora in her final years.

Honora was admitted to Hyde Park Barracks (then, on the top floor, an Asylum for Infirm & Destitute Women) in 1885 where she died on 3rd September 1885, aged 51 years, a widow and pauper, from phthisis (tuberculosis).

Her time in the colony had come full circle. Honora was buried at Rookwood Cemetery.

November 2008.

c John Boyd

How Honora was remembered over the years:

1994-1997

In 1994 the Hyde Park Barracks, now a museum, held an exhibition called "A Body of Troublesome Girls" which featured Honora's story. Mike Gibson, then a journalist with the Telegraph Mirror, was so taken by the exhibition he featured Honora in his article on the stories of the 'Troublesome Girls'.

1999

*When the Australian Monument to the Great Irish Famine 1845-1848 was opened at Hyde Park Barracks by the Governor-General, the Hon Sir William Deane on Saturday 28th August 1999, it was very moving to see **Honora's name** etched in the glass wall along with many of the other Irish Orphan Girls. There is now a remembrance service and gathering in August each year to remember the Girls.*

2003

*In an article called "Bedlam, Asylum and Grog" on an upcoming exhibition on the Female Emigration Depot at Hyde Park Barracks in the SMH in October 2003 **Honora's story** was again featured, with Exhibition Curator Bridget Berry saying, "Very little is known about this aspect of Sydney's history. It's important to remember the women and how tough their lives were".*

2005-2008

*The exhibition called "Female Immigration Depot 1848-1886", again featured **Honora's story**. It opened in September 2005.*

"A place for the friendless female: Sydney's female immigration depot.

The Female Immigration Depot housed at Hyde Park Barracks from 1848 to 1886 was the primary reception and hiring depot in Sydney for 'unprotected' females. During its 38 years of operation the depot received thousands of working-class Irish, English, Scottish and Welsh female immigrants. This new display explores the immigrant women's voyages to the colony, Irish orphans who stayed at the depot, Caroline Chisholm's contribution to female immigration and the archaeology associated with these women recovered over the years from beneath the barracks' floors.

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