

THOMAS HARRIS OF DARDANUP – CONVICT 4963

Twenty year old labourer Thomas Harris, facing three charges of horse stealing, could not have expected the profound impact the offences would have on his life. At his trial at Wells, Somerset, on 14 October 1856, Thomas may have expected a heavy sentence, but he would not have envisaged his future as a prosperous farmer on the other side of the world.

Convict 4963

Born in Northampton, England, around 1836, Thomas fell foul of the law when he stole three mares from Bedminster Common, on the outskirts of Bristol, in separate incidents in September 1856. The first occasion was on 11 September when he made off with a mare belonging to labourer John Baber valued at five pounds. He stole a second mare, worth ten pounds, which belonged to Samuel Smith. On 25 September, Thomas stole a third mare this time the property of James Alexander and worth seven pounds. Within a fortnight Thomas was behind bars. In the gaol description book, Thomas was listed as "five feet, four-and-a-half inches tall, of sallow complexion, with hazel eyes, brown hair, unmarried, had a cut on the little finger of left hand, an anchor on the right arm, was slightly pock pitted, a labourer, born at Northampton". His place of last abode was listed as "traveller". At the trial at Wells, on 14 October, 1856, Thomas denied the offences, but later pleaded guilty. He was sentenced to six months hard labour in Taunton gaol for the first offence, followed by two consecutive periods of four years penal servitude for the other two offences. Thomas was described as being of "good character" while in Portland Prison awaiting transportation to the last Australian penal colony, the Swan River Colony (Western Australia).

Thomas left Plymouth on 5 March, 1858, on the 753 ton ship 'Lord Raglan' and arrived in the Swan River Colony on 1 June 1858. The colony had been founded by Captain James Stirling only 29 years earlier, and urgently needed the influx of convict labour to ensure its growth and prosperity. Some nine and a half thousand convicts were transported to Western Australia between 1850 and 1868. Shortly after his arrival, Thomas was sent to the Wellington district to work as a labourer, and two and a half years later, in November 1860, he was granted a 'ticket-of-leave'.

Farming in the Wellington District

Thomas was employed variously at 'Belvidere', 'Parknook', 'Rosamel' and 'Spring Hill' near Australind. In late 1859, Robert Rose of 'Rosamel' referred in his diary to "Tommy working at potatoes". In 1872, Benjamin Piggott, of Spring Hill wrote of "Fox, Harris, Yates and Paddy Ryan digging potatoes" on his property. For this work, Thomas received up to two pounds a month. In 1871, Thomas took the first step toward owning his own farm and bought 300 acres in Ommanney Road from David Cundell, a former convict who, like Thomas, arrived on the 'Lord Raglan' in 1858. The acquisition of this land cost Thomas 30 pounds and was financed by a loan from Bunbury grocer John Hands. Ten years later, on October 15, 1881, mounting interest arrears seems to have prompted the sale of the land to Robert Rose for 60 pounds.

Marriage and family

On 17 August 1863, Thomas Harris, by then an industrious Western Australian, was granted a conditional pardon. Two months later, on 29 October, he married Bridget Keenan a young Irish Catholic domestic servant. Bridget was born to Patrick Keenan and his wife in County Antrim, Ireland, in 1841, and arrived in the colony on the 'Mary Harrison' in June 1862. It appears Bridget may have been working at 'Parknook', owned by Mrs Elizabeth Rose, when she met her future husband. The couple were married at 'Rosamel', another Rose family property, by Belgian priest Father Adolphus Lecaille. At this time Thomas gave his address as 'Parknook' on 24 November 1864, Bridget gave birth to a son at 'Parkwood'. The boy was christened Thomas William. A second son, John, was born in 1865, followed by a daughter Margaret Ann in 1868. There was evidence of Thomas' growing prosperity in 1868 when he employed Edward McGuinness, a ticket-of-leave man, as a general servant. He was strongly opposed to the discrimination displayed by employers against former convicts and signed a petition, along with many other citizens, condemning this practice. In 1870, Thomas employed another ticket-of-leave man, John Gill, as a labourer. In October 1871, Thomas also took on Thomas Green as a labourer. On the home front, a second daughter, Maria, was born in 1870. A son, George, was born in 1872, followed by Charles Henry in 1874. The older three children, Thomas William (Bill), John and Margaret, all attended school at Parkfield, to which they rode on horseback with the Rose children. Bill Harris was proud of the

fact that his grades at school were better than those of Edwin Rose, who later became a Member of Parliament. Thomas and Bridget had another daughter Mary E. (May) in 1877, and a son James in 1879. The couple's youngest child, Joseph Thomas, was born in 1883.

Settling in Dardanup

Thomas and Bridget Harris eventually settled in the fertile Dardanup area, south west of Australind, some time in the 1870's. The major landholder in the Dardanup at the time was Thomas Little, who was attempting to establish a Catholic settlement. Little built a stately two storey home in the town in 1854 and in the same year, Bishop Salvado laid the foundation stone for Dardanup's first church. Little was plagued by financial trouble and sold much of his estate to Henry Whittall Venn before he died in 1877. It has been suggested that Thomas and Bridget Harris were invited to Dardanup by Little, but in any case they soon became tenants of Henry Venn on Dardanup Location 76. The 1890's brought mixed blessings for the Harris family. Maria died of tuberculosis in 1892 at the age of 22. At the time she was working in Adelaide Terrace, Perth, for Ernest Chowner Shenton, the brother of Mrs Henry Venn. In February 1896, nineteen year old Mary Harris, who worked for the Tyrrell family, also died. According to family legend, Bridget never recovered from the shock of losing her two daughters and, with rosary beads in hand, would often wander the house at night crying for them. Thomas and Bridget also enjoyed the happy occasions of the weddings of two of their children during this period. Thomas William Harris, known as Bill, married Mary Anne Slattery in November 1893. Mary Anne was the daughter of a former convict and Upper Ferguson farmer Patrick Slattery, and his wife Rose. In 1898, George Harris married another Slattery daughter, Catherine, but died in November 1899 after being crushed by a water tank which he was helping erect at the Venn residence. He left a widow and an infant son. In 1901 Thomas was 64 years old and his health was failing. He dictated a will to son in law George Fee on October 16 of that year:

This is the last will and testament of Thomas Harris of Dardanup in the State of Western Australia. I hereby give, devise and bequeath my right and interest in the lease at present held by me of land known as Wellington location 76 to my son Charles Harris, my wife Bridget Harris and my daughter Margaret Ann

Harris with everything thereon at present owned by me including all horses, cattle, and other stock for their own use and benefit. Provided nevertheless that my son John Harris may take if he choose ten head of cattle, out of abovementioned stock for his own use and to keep absolutely. And further provided that my grandson George Harris, child of my late son George Harris, shall receive out of the above stock one heifer which on the date of this will shall be about one year old. And I hereby give, devise and bequeath to my son Charles Harris, his heirs, executors and administrators absolutely and forever for his and their own use and benefit all my right and interest in that parcel of land known as conditional purchase number 240 in the Wellington district. Provided nevertheless that until the death of my wife Bridget Harris all my property, with the exception of conditional purchase land number 244, shall be equally divided between all my children then living. And I hereby appoint Thomas William Harris and John Harris my sons executors of this my will. Two months later, on December 19, 1901, Thomas added a codicil to his will: I give, devise and bequeath to my daughter Margaret Ann Harris an equal share with my son Charles Harris in that parcel of land known as conditional purchase number 240 situated in the Wellington district. Provided nevertheless that my son Thomas William Harris shall have full use of all that portion of the potato swamp at present occupied by Dominic and another Italian during his lifetime to commence from the date on which the said Italians shall cease to occupy the said portion of swamp.

Less than a week later, on Christmas Eve, 1901, Thomas Harris died of stomach cancer. He was buried in the Dardanup Roman Catholic cemetery with his children. The burial was the source of indignation to the local Anglican priest who wrote the following letter to the Editor of the Southern Times:

Dear Sir, I heard on Christmas Day of the decease and burial of the late Mr Thomas Harris of Dardanup. He was for many years a member of the Church of England, but interment took place at the Roman Catholic cemetery. It is in reference to this that I beg space for a few lines (of explanation) in your paper. As a matter of fact the old man died, as he lived, firmly convinced of the 'way of salvation' as taught by the Church of England...ie resting as a penitent sinner only on Christ and his merits for pardon and eternal life. I have his

declaration to this effect, signed by his own hand, shortly before his death. It is true, I know, that he yielded to the 'entreaties' of his family to be admitted to the Roman Catholic church, a few weeks previously to his death, but this was (he assured me) solely for the purpose of being buried in the RC cemetery by the side of his children, who had been Roman Catholics. Your kindly publishing the above brief explanation will oblige, yours etc, H. Darling, St Paul's Rectory, Bunbury, December 27, 1901.

In June 1911, Bridget Harris suffered a severe stroke. Her grand daughter, Kathleen Harris, was living with her at the time and returned home from school one day to find her grandmother had collapsed in the garden. Following this incident, Bridget was under care for almost three years until her death in April 1914, aged 73. Thomas and Bridget Harris have hundreds of descendants throughout Western Australia, many of whom live in Dardanup and surrounds.

Darren J Foster (great, great grandson)