Finding Forrester
The life and death of Joseph Forrester, convict silversmith

We continue our study of the life of Joseph Forrester, a Scottish convict in Tasmania, as Joseph’s wife is found dead and he breaches the conditions of his pardon to risk a return to Scotland. By Douglas Wilkie

On 27 February 1846, an advertisement was placed in the Sydney Morning Herald seeking a ‘first-rate Working Silversmith and Jobbing Jeweller, for the principal establishment in Hobart Town’. This was probably David Barclay looking for a new silversmith, and he specifically wanted a ‘respectable, steady, sober man’ who could ‘make a cup, salver, &c, &c, and be a competent hand at chasing’. The successful applicant would have their passage paid from Sydney to Hobart. But it seems a suitably sober person was not found and by 1848 Charles Jones, former fellow assigned servant at Barclay’s, having learned his trade well, advertised that he was now the only manufacturing jeweller and silversmith in Van Diemen’s Land.

Six months after Forrester arrived in Melbourne a shepherd came to him with some stone containing 60 percent pure gold. Forrester bought the gold, said nothing about it, but gave a piece to his friend Captain John Clinch, of the Flying Fish, who took it to Hobart. The Hobart Courier subsequently broke the story on 19 May, 1847, and other journals soon followed – ‘gold ore, of unprecedented richness, is said to have been found somewhere in the province of Port Phillip’. The story soon disappeared from the press, but Forrester presumably retained his gold, which was reported to have been ‘the size of an apple’. It would not be Forrester’s last encounter with a shepherd bearing gold.

Living in Flinders Lane but working from Charles Brentani’s shop in Collins Street, Forrester’s work was soon being commissioned by other jewellers in Melbourne. However, on 10 June, 1848, his wife Mary Ann was found floating dead in the Yarra River. An inquest was held on the Monday, with Forrester’s employers Charles Brentani and William Bennett included among the members of the jury. Forrester claimed his wife had been ‘insane’ for four years following the death of their son, and had threatened suicide on several previous occasions. On Friday night she had been unwell, and, unknown to Forrester had sought refuge with Mrs Millet, a neighbour in Flinders Lane, claiming there were people in her house who were out to murder her. Sometime during the night she left Millet’s house and was not seen again until the discovery
of her body. The jury came to a verdict of ‘drowned, being in a state of insanity’. Mary Ann was buried immediately after the inquest on 12 June, 1848.

**Discrepancies in court**

A correspondent to the *Argus* questioned the verdict of the inquest and implied that the death may have been due to murder rather than suicide. There were a number of discrepancies. The death of the son, the supposed cause of her insanity, had actually occurred six years earlier, in July 1842, and there is no record of another child being born or dying after the first. Forrester claimed he and his wife had not argued and that he knew of nobody who held bad intentions towards her, yet the newspapers reported an argument did occur. Forrester claimed he reported his wife’s disappearance to the constable on duty as soon as he missed her, and had looked ‘everywhere’, but apparently did not go next door to enquire at the Millers. The newspapers reported a nightwatchman had heard ‘considerable noise in Millers’ house during the night, and the voice of a woman apparently calling for help’. However, the nightwatchman’s evidence was not presented to the inquest. Neither did the jury consider that the location where the body was found, in the mud on the north side of the river, was a very shallow part of the river where there was no current and the depth not conducive to suicide by drowning; nor the fact that her jewellery and other items were missing, arousing suspicion that the jewellery had been removed either before or after her death. The implication to be read into all of this was that it was possibly Forrester who argued with his wife, killed her in a fit of temper, for which he was known, removed her jewellery, and left her body in the river. As for Mrs Millet, she and her husband ran what was described as a ‘notorious lodging house’ that was infamous as a refuge of Penrithians – the ex-convicts who had undergone two years of training at Pentonville prison before being transported to Port Phillip. They were given conditional pardons immediately upon arrival but were not to return to England – technically they were no longer serving convicts and were known as exiles.

Following the death of his wife Joseph Forrester was kept busy with a commission from Charles Brentani, making a silver snuff box for the publicans of Melbourne for presentation to Melbourne’s Chief Constable, William Sugden. The Argus described the box as ‘a very superb specimen of colonial workmanship’, ‘very richly chased and embossed with the figures of the Erun and Kangaroo’. Although 31 year old Brentani himself may have started learning the trade of silversmith in his youth, transportation also interrupted his training and Brentani knew Forrester, now aged 43, was the only person in Australia with the skills to create such a box with its intricate hinges – Jones in Hobart was apparently unable to do this kind of work.

Forrester claimed his wife had been ‘insane’ for four years following the death of their son and had threatened suicide on several previous occasions.

ounces of 90 percent pure gold. Italian Brentani was an ex-convict who had moved from Launceston in 1845, and Frenchman Duchene, a jeweller on a conditional pardon, also from Launceston, had arrived in Melbourne early. Duchene and Brentani gave Chapman £25 for the gold – a considerable bargain. Forrester was left out of the deal – perhaps he had no cash, or perhaps Chapman was the same shepherd who had already sold him an apple-sized piece of gold back in 1847.

Eventually Thomas Chapman was persuaded to take Brentani, Duchene and Forrester to the place he had found the gold. Forrester in particular irritated the squatter, Charles Browning Hall, by making out that he was interested in purchasing the run but then announcing that he had changed his mind because all the sheep had died. Although there was certainly gold to be found, Charles La Trobe quickly put an end to the search and the story was eventually dismissed by the press as a hoax.

**Workmanship questioned**

Later in 1849 a Major Davidson commissioned Charles Brentani to set a valuable diamond into a ‘massive gold ring’ made from some of the Pyrenees gold. Brentani gave the job to Forrester. When Davidson refused to pay the price Brentani took him to court where Justice Redmond Barry was told by former Launceston watchmaker James Robe that the ring was of inferior quality and could easily be made in just a few hours. Davidson was ordered to pay Brentani the costs but Forrester, furious at the slur on his workmanship, wrote to the *Argus* pointing out that Robe had worked as a watchmaker rather than a jeweller in Van Diemen’s Land and challenging Robe ‘or any person whom he can employ in the City of Melbourne, for £50 a-side, to manufacture any article whatever, in either silver or gold, from a diamond pin to a silver tea-urn’. Perhaps aware of his reputation for bad temper and violence, Forrester added, ‘I have carefully avoided either..."
exaggeration or harsh language, and leave the public to form their own judgment without my adding one word of comment'. Forrester's challenge was not taken up.

By early 1850 Forrester opened a watchmaking business in Elizabeth Street, and on 28 January he married Ann Willis, herself a pawnbroker and widow of Samuel Willis, at St James' Church in Collingwood Street. By the end of the 1850 the Willis's Bourke Street store was in Forrester's name and he was employing at least one assistant. The police regularly visited the store, as thieves tried to dispose of goods there.

A booming business

After the search for gold on Crown Land was made legal in mid-1851, the business of jewellers, silversmiths and goldsmiths took a turn for the better, but unlike Brentani, Forrester did not advertise to purchase gold, but was happy to give his opinion when hopeful gold-seekers brought their discoveries to him, such as in July 1851 when a claimant for the Gold Committee’s reward came to Forrester with some stone believed to contain gold.

By early 1852 Joseph Forrester seems to have fallen out with Charles Brentani, possibly following an unsuccessful court case in September 1851 where Brentani accused a former employee of pawning stolen watches at Forrester's shop. By March 1852 Brentani advertised for a working jeweller who would be paid wages of £6 per week. Forrester was available, but Brentani clearly wanted somebody else. Not only did Forrester fall out with Brentani, but also with John Hughes, a tinsmith, who lived in Collingwood near Brentani's Shepherds' Arms Hotel, and had his business at the rear of Forrester's Bourke Street shop with a frontage to Little Bourke Street. Early in 1852 Hughes borrowed an amount of money from Forrester and as security Hughes gave Forrester the title deeds to his house and land. Forrester claimed he thought it was a sale. Hughes thought otherwise. When Forrester visited the property and found Hughes there an argument ensued. Forrester's fiery temper got the better of him and he was subsequently charged with assaulting Hughes. There is no indication of the outcome of the case. However, it is likely that Hughes was right and Forrester wrong. John Hughes went on to become a successful businessman, establishing the firm of Hughes & Harvey, and becoming landlord of the American Hotel in Swanston Street. Perhaps to escape the humiliation, Forrester went to Tasmania briefly. Returning to Melbourne on the Shamrock a week later, he falsified his ship of arrival on the passenger manifest, but admitted he was on a conditional pardon. He was perhaps lucky to get back into Melbourne as the recently passed Convicts Prevention Act was aimed at preventing Vandemonian ex-convicts from coming to Victoria. Five months later Forrester's pawnbroking shop in Bourke Street was broken into and 'completely stripped of all the valuables, gold, cash, jewellery, to the value of £2000'.

Forrester's enjoyment of the newly acquired fortune was short-lived

Forrester's marriage to Ann Willis lasted barely two years. On 30 March, 1853, aged 43, she died of unknown causes. No inquest was held and she was buried the next day. Forrester continued the pawnbroking business, as well as advertising Forrester & Co, Watchmakers and Jewellers at 100 Great Bourke Street East. It is unclear who else was in the company in 1853, but by early 1854 he had formed a partnership with Edward Hodgson. The new business, known as Forrester and Hodgson, watchmakers and jewellers, operated from Forrester's shop at 100 Bourke Street, although the address was regularly advertised as being Hodgson's and was apparently used as a meeting place for visitors. By November Forrester and Hodgson had created a presentation medal for the Independent Order of Odd Fellows. It was described as being made of colonial gold, and is surrounded with a rich border of grape and vine-leaves wrought in silver, also the product of the colony... a most creditable specimen of colonial art. The partnership between Forrester and Hodgson could have been a turning point in Forrester's career, but events back in the United Kingdom were to determine otherwise.

Inheritance

When Joseph Forrester's maternal grandfather, William Young, died in 1810 he bequeathed a total of £800 to his daughters or their descendants, but the distribution was not to take place until after the death of his daughter Euphan which did not occur until 8 February, 1852 when she was 83 years old. Robert Keay junior became administrator of the estate and drew up the necessary distribution documents. William Forrester signed in London on 24 July, 1852. Copies were sent to Joseph Forrester along with a power of attorney allowing his brother-in-law, Christian's husband, David Stuart, to act on his behalf. Thomas Miller, a Melbourne solicitor, and John Hodgson, the mayor of Melbourne, witnessed Forrester's signature on 26 January, 1854. Since 1810 the original capital of £800 had increased significantly and Joseph Forrester alone stood to inherit £774 13s 10d. The documents were sent back to Scotland and David Stuart signed on Joseph Forrester's behalf on 4 August, 1854. The sister, Christian, signed on 24 August,
1854, but five days later, before matters were finalised, their brother William died in London. His share would go to his wife Charlotte.

**Return to Scotland**

News of William’s death prompted Joseph Forrester to disobey the conditions of his conditional pardon and return to Scotland. In December 1854 he dissolved the partnership between himself and Edward Hodgson and on 25 January, 1855, left Melbourne with 160 other passengers bound for London on board the *Anglesey*. Forrester was 50 and it had been 26 years since he left England. When coming to Van Diemen’s Land on board the *Thames* in 1829 he had broken into the hold. If he had broken into the hold of the *Anglesey* he would have found over 37,000 ounces of gold, as well as 1,095 bales of wool, and a gold cup valued at £800 which had been presented to Irish hero William Smith O’Brien back in July 1854.

During their time in Van Diemen’s Land many convicts maintained a correspondence with their friends and families at home and, as Kirsty Reid has observed, they had ‘despite their physical banishment, sustained an intimate familiar presence … [and were] … remembered through broken relationships, mourned as lost family and friends’. Perhaps Joseph Forrester imagined that his family longed to see him as much as he wanted to be with them again. As soon as Forrester arrived in London he wrote to his sister Christian in Perth. She was shocked at the news that her convict brother had returned and wrote to advise him to stay away because the malicious gossip at home was too much for her to bear. Joseph’s first reaction was one of dismay, of betrayal, and also of defiance. Perhaps, like the returning convict, John Edmunds, in *Pickwick Papers*, Joseph Forrester discovered that ‘in the distant land of his bondage … he had thought of his native place as he had left it, not as it would be when he returned. The sad reality struck coldly at his heart, and his spirit sank within him’.

Despite his sister’s advice, Joseph defiantly wrote to Robert Keay on 5 June, 1855 to say that he would visit Scotland anyway:

“You no doubt know I am in London. I wrote to my sister who advises me not to visit Scotland altho it is nearly thirty years since or more since I saw her or any of my relatives. I actually think she is much too severe in fact Dear Robert I feel it worse than when I left my home. I am extremely sorry that there is such a change in Family concerns and that differences should exist between Friends.

Forrester lost most of his money after arriving in London. He had explained the circumstances to Christian and asked if she could help with a loan – she refused and made it clear that neither would her husband or William’s wife assist him. Joseph said to Robert:

…had I come to England a Beggar man or a disgrace it would have been different – But I do not see why I might not come to Perth or some place handy [sic] to see you as it might be the last time that I will have a chance altho thank God I am as well and

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*Melbourne in 1840, around the time the Forresters lived there*
strong as ever I was, and when I settle my business in London I am going back to Melbourne to sell off all there and come back either to Scotland or London for good.

It was 30 years since he had left Scotland, and 26 years since being transported to Van Diemen's Land. But they had not forgotten. If, as Kirsty Reid has observed, the returned convict in literature was 'a frequent expression of social and cultural unease', so too did the return of Forrester arouse that unease among his relatives.

Cousin Robert wrote to Joseph and persuaded him to change his mind. Forrester replied from London:

I duly received yours of 22nd June when you state that you were surprised at my returning to England. The reason is simple after so many years absence that I would naturally have a wish to see my native place again and the Friends of my youth. I certainly will not visit Perth. I will take my sisters & your advice. I was not aware of the gloating tendencies it would create and could be extremely sorry to do anything that would be painful to any of my relations in any manner. Dear Robert that was the chief cause of my returning to England & I did not mean, nor do not to rem'n in England, I have got enough to keep me and to spare in Melbourne & think of embarking again in about 14 days so might be by the Queen of the Seas which sails on the 15th of next month. I am very anxious to get away and think my sisters Mrs. Wms. business will all be settled this week.

Joseph again expressed regret that his sister had refused to assist after he had lost his money, and suggested to he could reimburse any loan from his Melbourne bank account once he returned:

Things in London are very dull.
- I am sorry that you have been so unfortunate in business speculations no doubt but you have plenty to disturb your mind and wish but I hope by the help of God you will yet get over all, the 28 years you have been married to me only look like as many months but the alterations in life and circumstances are great, the many that I knew in London are all most of them dead. Give my respit and Love to Aunt Keay, Your dear wife & family. Please to answer this as you might not hear from me again until I write you from Melbourne. I Remain My Dear Robert/Your Old Friend.

Shortly after searching for gold was made illegal, Forrester's pawnbroking shop was burgled, with the loss of £2,000-worth of stock.

Nowhere to turn

Any hopes Forrester may have had for being reunited with his family were dashed. What was he to do? He knew nobody in London and could not go back to Scotland. He had lived in Australia since 1829. Just as Robert Hughes noted, convicts transported to Australia 'could succeed, but they could hardly, in the real sense, return'. On 7 August, 1855 Forrester said goodbye to England forever and left Gravesend on board the Queen of the Seas, arriving back at Port Phillip on 13 November, eleven months after he had set out. He had not only lost his family in Scotland. Years earlier his wives and only son had died, and upon returning to Melbourne he appears to have lost his friends as well.

Forrester's claim to cousin Robert Keay that he had a good business and sufficient to live on if he returned to Melbourne may have been an exaggeration. But his lifelong friend would never get to know the truth for in June 1856 Keay also died. The matter of the grandfather's estate would drag on for years to come.

When Forrester returned to Melbourne the people he previously worked for were no longer there. His old employer Brentani was dead. William Bennett had moved to Ballarat to take advantage of the gold rush there. His former partner, Edward Hodgson, thought Forrester would not be returning and sold the Bourke Street business to D. Abrahams in July 1855. Abrahams soon cleared out all the stock left with Hodgson asking patrons to collect their watches or they would be auctioned. Edward Hodgson, like Bennett, moved to Ballarat.

For a few years it seems Forrester
As the gold rushes brought more talented gold and silversmiths to Melbourne, Forrester moved to the country and was forgotten

followed Charles Fulke north, and by early 1861 was working as jeweller, 'opposite the Criterion Hotel', in High Street, Beechworth in the Ovens District. A few months later the Argus reported, 'A working jeweller, residing at the Ovens, has inherited a fortune of about £70,000 by the recent death of a female relative in England'.

The news spread— the town was identified as Beechworth, but none named the 'Lucky Fellow'. Perhaps Joseph Forrester's inheritance been inflated by a careless reporter from £700 to £70,000.

Forrester's enjoyment of the newly acquired fortune was short-lived. He was unhappy and had taken to drinking heavily. One day in mid-July 1863, while under the influence of alcohol, he suffered a slight superficial wound to his head and asked Doctor John Dempster dress it for him. He injury may have resulted from an altercation with Charles Francis Duchatel of the Alliance Hotel, and Forrester told his housemate James Barfoot that if Duchatel 'summoned him' he would leave the district.

Disappearance

A few days later Forrester put on his trousers, his usual black silk velvet waistcoat, leaving it unbuttoned, and tied his necktie in the askew way that people recognised as one of his peculiarities. He took the pink silk handkerchief that Barfoot had recently lent him and put it in his pocket, along with the knife he often carried, took his pipes, and walked off towards the Chiltern Road. When he did not return, Barfoot reported him missing to the Police. A search was carried out and enquiries made as to his possible whereabouts, but without success. Eventually it was assumed he had carried out his threat to go to Melbourne.

and personal items as being those of Joseph Forrester. The Chief Commissioner of Police noted that 'There does not appear to be any reason to suspect anything criminal in this matter'. However, the inquest said nothing about the possibility of suicide.

Forrester's death was registered at Beechworth on 8 December, 1863— the cause of death was unknown and the date was sometime around July 1863. What else was known about Forrester was minimal—a jeweller; believed to have been married but his wife was dead; thought to have been in Victoria for about twenty years and in New South Wales for fifteen years; thought to have been born either in Perth in Scotland, or in London; aged about 64 years. No mention of time in Van Diemen's Land. Forrester was buried at Beechworth on 9 December, 1863 with only the Reverend W C Howard and James Barfoot being present. A death notice was placed in the local newspaper two weeks later: 'Forrester— Mr. J. Forrester, aged 65 years'. That summed up his life.

The Ovens and Murray Advertiser carried a report of the inquest on 8 December, 1863. The same report was copied to the Melbourne Age a week later. The Tasmanian newspapers did not carry the news at all, and none connected the lonely death of Joseph Forrester of Beechworth with the person who had worked as a silversmith, jeweller, watchmaker and pawnbroker in Melbourne for about sixteen years. Nor did they connect him with the Joseph Forrester who had accompanied Brentani and Duchene on the quest for Chapman's gold in 1849. Mrs Brentani may have read about Forrester's fate but what impact it made, if any, is unknown. She certainly remembered him twenty years later when writing an account of the 1849 gold discovery.

As for the relatives back in Scotland — his cousin was dead, his brother was dead, and his sister, Christian — she was still
ex-convict and more because of who he was and how others saw him. Because of his comfortable family connections in Scotland, he was, perhaps, ostracized more than most. Many people are quickly forgotten, and Joseph Forrester became one of Port Phillip’s forgotten people. But perhaps Forrester’s tragedy is that those he cared about the most were also those who most wanted to forget him.

Douglas Wilkie has had an interest in history for many years and completed studies in Greek, Roman, Renaissance, and Australian History, as well as undertaking a major investigation of the origins of Australian gold rushes as his PhD thesis. Recent publications have included studies of some extraordinary men and women who found themselves at the transportation end of the British justice system.

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The news that Forrester had returned to London was not welcomed by his family back in Scotland.

Further reading

*Australian Jewellers: gold and silversmiths makers and marks,* Kenneth Cavill et al. (Sydney, 1992)


Convict Workers: reinterpreting Australia’s past, Stephen Nicholas (ed.) (Cambridge University Press, 1988)


*Gender, Crime and Empire: Convicts, Settlers and the State in Early Colonial Australia,* Kirsty Reid (Manchester, 2007).


alive, but would she be interested? It would appear that Forrester left no will and it is not known what might have happened to the £500 inheritance he should have received a few years earlier.

For a brief number of years Forrester had been the most competent silversmith in Hobart and Melbourne, and was in great demand, but this was due more to an accident of history than to his superior skills and business sense. As the gold rushes brought more talented gold and silversmiths to Melbourne, Forrester moved to the country and was forgotten. If we ignore the fact that his work sells for hundreds of thousands of dollars today and look beyond the Silvers and antique collectors to ask, ‘And the man Foster,’ as the *Cornwall Chronicle* called him, who was he? We find a man who enjoyed, and suffered all the emotions of any human being, and perhaps suffered them more than most. Was he one of Manning Clark’s ‘permanent outcasts of society’; serving out ‘the term of his natural life’ in more ways than the sentencing judge might have intended. If he was an outcast it was only partly because he was an
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