

*Maitland and District Historical Society Inc.*

# **Bulletin of Maitland and District Historical Society Inc.**

(Established March 1977)

Affiliated with Royal Australian Historical Society and  
Museum and Galleries Hunter Chapter



Frances Reynolds

**Volume 33, Number 2**

**May 2026**

*The Aims of the Society are to  
Discover, Record, Preserve, Advise on and Teach the History of Maitland and the  
District*

## *Maitland and District Historical Society Inc.*

**Cover:** The image was supplied by Jean Archer.

**Telephone :** 0468 438 990

**Email :** maitlandhistorical@gmail.com

**Website :** <http://www.maitlandhistorical.org>

**Location:** 3 Cathedral Street Maitland (opposite Bishop's House)

**Lecture meetings** are held on the first Tuesday of each month from 5:30-7.00pm as a forum for lectures, talks and presentations.

**Committee meetings** are held on the third Tuesday of even months from 5:30-7.00pm.

**General meetings** are held on the third Tuesday of odd months from 5:30-7.00pm.  
Members are invited to attend all monthly meetings.

Meetings are held at the Society's rooms, 3 Cathedral Street Maitland.

Membership fees : \$25 (single) and \$35 (double / family)

**The rooms are open between 11 and 3 on Wednesdays and Saturdays.**

**Patron:** Dr AC Archer AM

**Current Office Bearers :**

**President :** Jennifer Buffier      **Vice President :** Janece Mcdonald

**Treasurer :** Kevin Short OAM      **Secretary :** Steve Bone

**Bulletin Editor :** Lisa Thomas      **Consultant Editor :** Jennifer Buffier

**Bulletin contributions** are being sought. Please contact the Society via email  
[maitlandhistorical@gmail.com](mailto:maitlandhistorical@gmail.com)

©Copyright. This publication may be used for private study and research. Please contact the Maitland & District Historical Society Inc. regarding any other use.

While every care is taken in the compilation and editing of the information contained in this bulletin, Maitland and District Historical Society Inc. and its editors do not accept responsibility for the accuracy of this information

**Editor's Notes:**

I became aware of Jean Archer's book *Women in the History of Tocal* because it was featured under Book Notes in the June 2012 edition of *History* (Magazine of the Royal Australian Historical Society). For this edition of the Bulletin Jean has written of several of the fascinating women who have been associated with Tocal's past.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Some Women of Tocal**

By Jean Archer

History is the result of the convergence of time, place, people and the environment.

The locality, Tocal, between Maitland and Paterson has been bountiful for a very long time. The current focus is the College and the Tocal homestead. They sit on an area at the junction of Webbers Creek and the once navigable Paterson River. The site was obviously attractive to the Indigenous people as their name for the place was Tocal, meaning plenty. It is possible to imagine women finding the food, fibre and shelter in the area a source of sustenance for thousands of years.



Tocal homestead during the Reynolds era

The location was also an obvious choice for early settlers. The colonial history of the place is well documented from the original grant to James Webber in 1822 to

the establishment of the Agricultural College in 1965. At each stage of this history women were involved, although often their stories are less well documented.

The women of the colonial period of Australian history are very distant from us – despite all the books and films that purport to show us an image of their lives. Many travelled across the globe and lived in isolated places with scant hope of ever seeing the world of their childhood and family ever again. They lived in places where there was often little or no comfort and few other women. This took courage. They relied on their own commonsense and audacity to make a home for themselves, to bear and bury children, to help their husbands – or some other man of their family – to run a property or a business, to be the arbiters of taste and behaviour as was expected of them and to fight an alien and hostile environment.

This article will give a brief account of four women associated with Tocal.

### **Catherine Ferrier**

Catherine was the convict wife of free settler and wealthy Sydney merchant, Caleb Wilson, who purchased Tocal from James Webber in 1834. She married Caleb in 1826 after gaining special permission from the Colonial Secretary as she was a transported Scottish convict. She had been sentenced in Edinburgh in 1818 for the crime of reset, which is receiving of stolen goods. The court documents of the time show she was the child of Thomas Ferrier, who was Tacksman of Melville Colliery, a position of some wealth and standing in the community. Catherine has been in service to Isaac Haig at Bemersyde and had borne him three children. At the time of her arrest she was married to Robert Stewart and together they ran The Russian Taproom in Canongate, Edinburgh. Stewart was sentenced with her and also transported. Catherine later claimed they were not legally married.

The census of 1828 reveals how her situation had changed. She is now Catherine Wilson aged 47 living with her husband, Caleb aged 59, her step son, Felix aged 26, her son, Alexander Ferrier aged 19 and her daughter, Elizabeth Wilson, aged 5.



Grantham in Potts Point (since demolished)

Caleb had built a substantial mansion in Potts Point. It was called Grantham, from the town in which he was born. Catherine was the mistress of this mansion and her time at Bemersyde would have taught her the ways of great houses. She came from the middle ranks of Scottish society but had been forced into servitude after the death of her father. It is not clear where she met Robert Stewart,

She was obviously an attractive woman who formed long relationships with three very different men and gave birth to at least five children. However, as a convict she would never have been accepted into Sydney society despite her husband's wealth.

The current enthusiasm to claim convict ancestry among many family historians suggests to some degree a lack of understanding of colonial society in the early decades of the colony. Convicts were members of the criminal class who had been caught, tried and sentenced. In colonial Sydney convicts and ex-convicts belonged to an inferior class, no matter what wealth they might have accumulated or social progress they might have appeared to have made. Moreover, it was never possible for merchants Caleb and Felix Wilson to be truly gentlemen as they were involved in the retail trade. However, by amassing wealth through land and property it was possible for Felix Wilson to leave the merchandising business after his father died and begin to use the title, Esquire.

The sheer numbers and increasing wealth of emancipists and children born in the colony did eventually challenge the social stigma of convictism. However, this social change has not been as rapid as perhaps is thought. It is only quite recently that many families have acknowledged convict ancestry. Some families still seek to negate the reality by disputing the seriousness or the validity of the crimes committed by their ancestors.

There is no clear evidence that Caleb Wilson came to Tocal, with or without Catherine. The trip from Sydney to Tocal at the time was done by sea and river to Morpeth and then either a smaller boat up the Paterson River or overland. The property was left to Felix Wilson after his father's death in 1838 and it was Felix who built the current homestead. Catherine went to live with her son, Alexander, near Bradley's Head. She died in 1847.

### **Frances Reynolds**

The Reynolds family have a long association with Tocal. Charles Reynolds was from Devon. He moved to Tocal in 1843 and the Reynolds family continued to manage the property under a range of lease agreements until it was finally purchased in 1907. Charles married Frances Seaton Dun of Duninald August 1844. Frances was the mistress of Tocal from 1844 until her death in 1900. Charles Reynolds was killed in a riding accident in September 1871 and after that Frances Reynolds was matriarch of both the house and all the family properties with the support of her sons, particularly the eldest, Frank who was 23 at the time of his father's death.

Frances Reynolds had arrived in Australia with her parents, William and Maria Dun, in 1821, aged three. She was the oldest of eleven children. William Dun had a series of financial problems due in part to bad luck and poor decisions. His property, Duninald, across the river from Tocal, was in receivership and he was virtually bankrupt when Charles Reynolds bought the property from his father-in-law in 1860.

As the eldest daughter she would have helped her mother run the household. She would have been aware of the family's straightened circumstances but nevertheless would have had to not only assist with daily life but also acquire the attributes of a young lady – at the very least, the art of conversation and a proper deportment. A photograph of her shows a woman with a calm countenance and strength which would have been necessary for her to prosper as a young woman and later as a widow. She married a man whose wealth and benevolence rescued her mother, father and siblings from imminent ruin. She went on to work with her husband to establish a very prosperous agricultural business. When Charles died, she ran the family property and studs. She maintained control until she died aged 82.

Frances and Charles Reynolds had six children. Their eldest child, Edmund, died at 16 months. In the 1800's, having children and raising them to adulthood was as much dependent on a combination of genetic strength, nutrition and luck as anything parental and medical care could achieve.

The other Reynolds children survived into adulthood. In her will Frances made special provision for her son, Frank, "in consideration of the valuable services

rendered to me...in my business and...the estate of my late husband.” All her children benefitted from her will and were able to establish themselves through purchasing property or eliminating debt.

### **Mary Gould**

Mary Gould was seventeen and lived in Paterson with her family. In October, 1874 she was walking from Paterson to Tocal to visit her sister who was ill. About half a mile from the homestead, but out of sight, she was assaulted. “The poor girl struggled, and screamed fearfully...the poor girl had her clothes nearly torn from her back, her earrings torn from her ears, her brooch torn out, and the man repeatedly put his hand over her mouth to endeavour to prevent her screaming and swore repeatedly that if she did not stop her screaming he would cut her throat and murder her. At length he released her, and got upon his horse and rode away without accomplishing his villainous purpose, so far is yet known. The girl does not know, for she fainted away.”

The extract above is from an article published in the *Maitland Mercury* titled “Diabolical Outrage On A Young Female” on 10<sup>th</sup> October, 1874.

Later that month, the Mercury carried an announcement that Edwin Wilks(sic) had been charged and that “he did, against her will, feloniously ravish and carnally know the said Mary Jane Gould, near Tocal bridge, at or near the Paterson and Maitland Road.”

There was a trial but Mary Gould was subsequently accused of perjury so that now it is very difficult to establish what actually happened. She could have been raped but, because she did not immediately disclose that, there was some suspicion. She may have been assaulted, she may have encouraged Wilkes and then regretted her actions and made herself dishevelled to shift the blame.

The episode is important to consider because it throws light on the difficult position of young, unmarried women of the late 1800's. Mary was sixteen and had the freedom to walk the distance to and from Tocal. She was a country girl and no matter what her social status she would have had an understanding of the mechanics of sexuality. She lived in an age, however, where the reputation of a woman could be easily lost and with it respectability and the chance of good employment or an attractive marriage. Nor should the propensity of late adolescent girls to involve themselves in drama be forgotten. This is not only a feature of today's teenage girls. The newspapers of the time were full of sensational tales which might have enlightened the imagination of a young woman living in a quiet, country town with little opportunity for excitement or relief from drudgery.

However, it appears that the incident did Mary Jane Gould little long term damage. In 1877 she married John Hume in Paterson and went on to have eight children.

### **Jean Alexander**

Jean Alexander was born in 1851 in Scotland and was the eldest daughter of the ten children born to William and Mary Alexander. Charles Boyd Alexander, born in Ballarat in 1864, was the youngest and last surviving child whose will ultimately led to the establishment of then CB Alexander Presbyterian Agricultural College.

The Alexanders bought the Tocal property from the Reynolds at auction in 1926 and it was Jean Alexander who made the bid which secured the sale. She was the matriarch of the family at the time, although their social reticence makes it difficult to truly understand the family dynamics. Local stories of their lives are mixed. On the one hand they were seen as aloof, miserly and insular. On the other hand, they could be generous to loyal hard-working employees and to those who helped them. They lived very parsimonious personal lives but also made expensive purchases such as a Rolls Royce, a large generator system and a lift for the homestead. They gave generous donations to the Salvation Army and to local hospitals.

The four Alexander children who lived at, and ran, Tocal were of Scottish heritage but had no experience of life there. Jean was aged one when the family arrived in Australia. It is suggested, however, that their Glaswegian origins and their Protestant background remained a central tenet of their lives. They became a wealthy family but they were incredibly thrifty, and would have believed in the Protestant ethic of the rewards of hard work and the discouragement of personal indulgence.

Until her death in 1938 Jean Alexander was involved in all aspects of the family's affairs and dealings. Marriage seems to have been somewhat of an issue for the family. Jean's father, William Alexander, died in the Ararat Asylum in 1886 and it is thought that may have been seen as a reason to not marry. Two of the Alexander children, John and Margaret, did marry but were effectively ostracised – certainly while Jean was alive. However, when Charles was the last remaining Alexander sibling alive, he invited his unmarried nieces, daughters of his estranged sister, Margaret, to come and live at Tocal. And they remained there until their deaths in 1985.

The recollections of Beatrice Jackson (later Bailey) who was employed in 1936 to help Jean Alexander in household duties at 10/- a week show something of her later life. Beatrice was eighteen and prepared meals and read the Bible to Jean who was then aged 86. She related the extreme self-denial which

## *Maitland and District Historical Society Inc.*

characterised daily life at Tocal Homestead. Charles and Jean ate very frugal meals, used threadbare towels and blankets and used home made products such as floor polish and dog biscuits.

It is clear that Jean Alexander and her family embodied all that was championed in late nineteenth century Scotland – Godliness, Thrift and Hard Work.

These stories of women who were associated with Tocal reflect the times in which they lived and the conditions of life in New South Wales from the convict era until the Second World War. I have discussed four women from very different backgrounds in order to illustrate the reality and complexity of women's lives from the past.

### Further Reading:

Archer, J. (2011) *Women in the history of Tocal*. All about Tocal number 21. CB Alexander Foundation.

Archer, J. (2018) *Caleb Wilson, owner of Tocal 1834-1838*. All about Tocal number 30. CB Alexander Foundation

Archer, J. (2021) *Felix Wilson, owner of Tocal 1838-1865*. All about Tocal number 31. CB Alexander Foundation