

## How I traced my earliest Australian ancestor

### Henry Joseph GRIMALDI alias ROBINSON

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I traced my earliest Australian ancestor way back in the 1970s. Over a few years I unearthed an incredible amount of unexpected and fascinating information about him but due to heavy business commitments my newly-found hobby had to be put to one side. Now, over 30 years later and well into my retirement, I have rediscovered family history and the sheer enjoyment first experienced so long ago. I have not yet added to my favourite ancestor's story but as I now have a computer I am optimistic that I will gradually familiarise myself with new avenues of research and possibly discover some more bombshells.

My interest was first aroused when browsing through a box of old cards, papers and photos souvenired from my grandmother's house following her death in Wagga Wagga in 1973 at the age of 90. It was a treasure trove and one small, yellowed newspaper cutting<sup>1</sup> had me guessing. I always knew that grandmother's maiden name was STRICKLAND but knew nothing about that family. All I was aware of was that she had grown up in the bush in the Colac district of Victoria. She often spoke about her youthful days around Deans Marsh and Winchelsea but from memory never talked much about her parents, although I was aware that her father's name was Charles STRICKLAND and that he had died when she was only a teenager.

The newspaper cutting featured the death of Sir Charles STRICKLAND, who also died at the age of 90, in England in 1909. He came from an ancient north country family, the last four baronets all living to ripe old ages and between them holding the title for 178 years. And the article included a photo. That picture of the old gentleman bore such a resemblance to grandmother that my imagination immediately came up with all sorts of scenarios. I had to follow this up. Who knows, I might be descended from English aristocracy! Could this be grandma's grandfather?

At that point I had no idea when her father Charles had died or, indeed, when her parents had married. Obtaining those certificates would have been the obvious starting point for me but I knew little at the time of the availability of birth, death and marriage indexes. I did, however, have the date of her mother Mary Jane's death, from a memorial card<sup>2</sup> found in the box of treasures. I imagined that Mary Jane's death certificate might show when she married Charles STRICKLAND and that I could then send for others related to Charles himself.

Mary Jane's certificate proved to be full of wonderful detail. It gave me the prime information I was after, that she and Charles married at Winchelsea in 1858 but I delayed sending for the marriage certificate as other information on the death certificate presented me with an even more fascinating puzzle. It showed that my great-grandmother Mary Jane had been born in Melbourne in 1840 and that her father's name was Joseph GRAINALDA. What sort of a name is that? I had never heard of GRAINALDA. Her mother was shown as Eliza HERD. I now certainly wanted to learn more of this Joseph GRAINALDA and Eliza HERD and find out what they were doing in Melbourne as early as 1840 so I sent for Mary Jane's birth certificate.

The surprises kept coming. What I received was a copy of an entry in the Baptism Register of St James, Melbourne dated 23 October 1840 – Mary Jane, born 1 September, daughter of Henry Joseph GRIMALDI and Elizabeth GRIMALDI! Now that's a better sounding name than GRAINALDA. But wait, his profession was shown as cook! I had been expecting to find that he held some important government position. And his abode was listed as Sydney, not Melbourne. I ignored the STRICKLANDS for the time being as this ancestor seemed much more interesting.

Shortly afterwards I found myself in Melbourne for a few days and took time out to visit the old St James church where I was staggered to find that the original registers were still there and that I could browse through them. Not only did I find the actual entry for Mary Jane's baptism but I also found the marriage of Henry GRIMALDI to Elizabeth HEARD (sic), 13 July 1839. They had been married by Chaplain J C GRYLLES. I could find no other children after 1840 and was bemused by the mention that GRIMALDI was shown as a cook and apparently living in Sydney at the time his daughter was baptised in Melbourne.

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<sup>1</sup> Undated newspaper cutting in possession of author

<sup>2</sup> Memorial card in possession of author

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Time to send for the 1858 marriage certificate of Mary Jane and Charles STRICKLAND, perhaps that would not only get me back onto the STRICKLAND search but also add something to the background of Mary Jane's father, Henry Joseph GRIMALDI. All it did was add to the confusion. I learnt that Charles was born in Beaulieu, Hampshire in 1835, his parents being farmer William STRICKLAND and Mary Elizabeth TYNER. That was certainly a start on the STRICKLANDS but GRIMALDI became more of a puzzle as Mary Jane's parents were shown as Henry ROBISON and Eliza HERD and father Henry ROBISON was listed as a labourer.

Then came a major breakthrough. Browsing in a genealogical bookshop in the Adelaide Hills<sup>3</sup> I came across a set of four books, *Historical Records of Victoria, Vols 1, 2A, 2B and 3*. A quick scan through the index and there he was, heaps of references to Henry GRIMALDI (see Henry ROBINSON), Joseph GRIMALDI and Henry Joseph GRIMALDI. I bought the set of books on the spot.

The very first reference, on page 135 of Volume 1, was headed *Salaries and Allowances of the Government Establishment in Port Phillip 1837-9*. Great, he was some sort of government official after all. There were 28 men listed, headed by Police Magistrate W LONSDALE Esq. I had to look well down the list before I found him and I can still recall my feeling of disbelief – *Henry GRIMALDI, Scourger, Bond, salary 1s 9d per day*. I felt sure I knew what a scourger was but checked my dictionary to be certain – *one who inflicts pain to punish, to correct, to flog, to lash, to chastise, to devastate*. It would seem that my great-great-grandfather was Port Phillip's official flogger during the late 1830s, and was certainly a convict.

Practically all of the GRIMALDI/ROBINSON (not ROBISON) references are in Volume 4 of the series and the first of them pre-dates the above government listing from Volume 1. The very earliest, dated 18 September 1837 is headed '*Men flogged for drinking in Customs servant's hut*'. It states that 'the prisoner, Henry ROBINSON alias GRIMALDI (*Hero* 1835, seven years) did not return to his master's house for an hour after – 25 lashes.' So the flogger had experienced the lash himself. The exciting thing about this first mention was that it named the convict ship he arrived on, and the year, as well as the term of his sentence.

This knowledge led to a request being made to the Sydney Archives and the subsequent receipt of the full listing of convicts who arrived on the *Hero* in 1835 as well as a copy of his Ticket of Leave and Certificate of Freedom.<sup>4</sup> From these I learnt that he was sentenced at Cork on 28 July 1834 and that he was born in Paris in 1815. Paris! He gets more and more colourful! I was also given an incredible amount of descriptive information, including the fact that he had a tattoo of a tightrope dancer inside his lower right arm. His crime was stealing money from his master and his occupation was shown as groom and 'riding at theatres'. On all three documents he was listed as Henry ROBINSON alias GRIMALDI. I began to build up a mental picture of an illegitimate circus performer whose father was a Frenchman named GRIMALDI and his mother, who perhaps was a tightrope dancer, being named ROBINSON.

My next step was to find an address for a Cork newspaper and send off a letter hoping that someone might turn up reference to his trial. My good luck continued as I subsequently received copy of a snippet<sup>5</sup> giving brief mention to the trial and that gave me the added information of the name of his master, presumably a circus owner or manager, Captain John SMITH.

I was beginning to build up a delightful picture of my colourful convict ancestor but did not know how he came to be in Melbourne so soon after arriving in Sydney. I found mention in the 1837 Convict Muster<sup>6</sup> that GRIMALDI'S master was then Georgina HELY, widow of the Principal Superintendent of Convicts, Frederick Augustus HELY, who died in office in 1836. The then 21 year old prisoner was described as a groom. At that stage I felt that he could have been one of over 100 prisoners who by October 1837 had been transported

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<sup>3</sup> Gould Books of Gumeracha

<sup>4</sup> all 3 documents in possession of author

<sup>5</sup> Cork newspaper snippet in possession of author

<sup>6</sup> NSW Archives

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down to Melbourne to work on road gangs.<sup>7</sup> I still have not found confirmation of this but he certainly was in Melbourne in September of 1837, as mentioned earlier.

GRIMALDI kept out of trouble following his 25 lashes and in July 1838 appears in the *Historical Records* series as a watchman. Then, in September 1838, the scourger James SIMPSON became a free man and immediately requested to be relieved of his unpleasant duties. In a letter to the Colonial Secretary dated 6 September 1838 William LONSDALE stated '*GRIMALDI has behaved very well since he has been here and is competent to fill the situation. The change will take effect today.*'

In July 1839 Henry ROBINSON alias GRIMALDI made application to marry a free woman, Elizabeth HURD (sic).<sup>8</sup> The application was subsequently sent off to Sydney for consideration, a process that could take weeks, if not months. That same month Reverend J C GRYLLES arrived in town.<sup>9</sup> GRIMALDI made an oath to GRYLLES stating he was a free man and was married to Eliza secretly. None of his fellow constables knew of it until after the ceremony but the deception was soon revealed, the youthful groom arrested, placed in gaol and the marriage annulled.<sup>10</sup>

Five months later he was still in gaol but working throughout the day on a road gang. In December there was a terrible gunpowder explosion in the centre of Melbourne and four men died. The former scourger was the only witness to race into the burning building, a gunsmith's shop, to rescue helpless victims. This act of heroism led to innumerable submissions from leading citizens to free the young romantic, not just from the penalty he received for his 'extreme ill conduct' but from his overall sentence. But no-one listened. He was subsequently tried in February 1840, found guilty of perjury and sentenced to 12 months back in the iron gang at Woollloomooloo.<sup>11</sup>

There clearly were times when our hero must have sneaked away from his Melbourne gaol or from the road gang as baby Mary Jane GRIMALDI was born in Melbourne on 1 September 1840. This was a little over 6 months following her father's return to Sydney. GRIMALDI being described as a cook at the time of Mary Jane's birth remains a puzzle. Perhaps it simply sounded better than referring to him as a convict.

Tragically, Henry Joseph GRIMALDI alias ROBINSON did not return to Melbourne. He did not see his 'wife' again and never did meet up with his daughter. His freedom was finally granted at Newcastle on 4 April 1843<sup>12</sup> and after that he immediately sailed for New Zealand, where he married a second time.<sup>13</sup> My earliest Australian ancestor also happens to be the earliest New Zealand ancestor of many unknown distant cousins across the Tasman.

And what of my 'aristocratic' STRICKLAND forbears? They turned out to be descended from a long line of farm labourer STICKLANDS (not STRICKLANDS) of Dorset.<sup>14</sup> Great-grandfather Charles seems to have added the 'r' to the name after arriving in Australia as a young man in 1857.

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<sup>7</sup> *Historical Records of Victoria Vol. 4*

<sup>8</sup> *Historical Records of Victoria Vol. 4*

<sup>9</sup> *Historical Records of Victoria Vol. 4*

<sup>10</sup> *Historical Records of Victoria Vol. 4*

<sup>11</sup> *Historical Records of Victoria Vol. 4*

<sup>12</sup> Freedom Certificate

<sup>13</sup> Family correspondence in possession of author – from a New Zealand 'cousin' searching for GRIMALDI

<sup>14</sup> Beaulieu Parish Records