

**Oatley Heritage and Historical Society AGM**  
**Presentation February 2020 by Ros Ingram**

**James Oatley – Convict and Colonial Clockmaker**  
b.c1770 – d.1839

**Early Life**

James Oatley was born in Staffordshire and came to live in Birmingham, Warwickshire. He would later remember his first home in England by naming his largest land grant in St George, “Needwood Forest”. This was a small area in Staffordshire near Birmingham.

Oatley was married to Sarah Bennett at St Martin’s Church, Birmingham, 27<sup>th</sup> October 1802. He was described as a Watchmaker and his Bondsman was John Barnes.

**His ‘Fall from Grace ‘**

On 21<sup>st</sup> March 1806, James Oatley, aged 35 and John Barnes, aged 33, were found guilty of grand larceny, at Warwickshire Lent Assizes of stealing a ton weight of cheese, the property of Mr Robert Proudman, of Tamworth, (about 12 miles from Birmingham). Both were found guilty and sentenced to 7 years transportation.

Despite the sentence, they were not transported but were immediately removed to the Portland Hulk, Langston Harbour, near Portsmouth.

At that time prisoners awaiting transportation were held on the hulks on the Thames or at Portsmouth, where in both places they provided labour for the dockyards. Britain was

engaged in the Napoleonic Wars when not only did the crime rate decrease so there were fewer prisoners, but many of those on the hulks were chosen for enlistment in the army and the navy. Workers were also needed in the dockyards, and the supply from the hulks was only sufficient to keep up with demand. Consequently, during these years few prisoners were actually transported but the flow dramatically increased after 1815 with the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo. In October 1812, both Oatley and Barnes received free pardons when representations were made to the Prince Regent on their behalf.

Oatley remained in the Portsea/ Portsmouth area.

Within 12 months he was in goal again. By a Warrant dated 21 August 1813, aged 43, he was charged with stealing household goods, property of William Loves Esquire, including two feather beds, a pair of glass salt cellars, a tea caddie, pillows and other items.

He was held in the goal at the Castle of Winchester until his trial at the Southampton Lent Circuit on Thursday, 10 March 1814. Oatley pleaded not guilty but was found guilty, sentenced to hang but was immediately reprieved to be transported beyond the seas for the term of his natural life.

There was another indictment against James Oatley, (for stealing household goods again and clothing from the house of Mark Lee on 17 June 1813). He pleaded not guilty, but was not tried on this matter as he had already been found guilty and sentenced to death on the other indictment.

James Oatley remained in Winchester Gaol for almost six months when he sailed from England forever on the “Marquis of Wellington” on September 1814.

### **Arrival in the Colony.**

Oatley arrived in the colony on 27<sup>th</sup> January, 1815. When the transports arrived, the Colonial secretary and the Chief Superintendent personally inspected the prisoners selecting tradesmen and persons with special skills for government employment.

Macquarie wrote about the arrival of the “Marquis of Wellington” that the ship” arrived very opportunely, Convict Labourers being very much wanted; and therefore I had the Men immediately distributed amongst the Settlers, after retaining such Mechanics as were required for carrying on the Government Works.” It is likely that James Oatley was One of the “mechanics” who immediately came under notice for Government work because of his occupation of a clock and watchmaker.

The previous clockmaker in the colony, Henry Lane, died in 1815, so there was soon to be a vacancy in this role. The first recorded address of Oatley is in Cockle Bay, Darling Harbour.

In 1819 he was appointed “Keeper of the Town Clocks” (until 1821). At this time these were the clocks at St Phillip’s Church and Hyde Park Barracks. In this year he was paid £75 for “a new clock at the prisoners’ barracks”. The ex-convict Francis

Greenway was commissioned to prepare plans for this building to house the men in the government working parties. Until then, convicts had to find their own lodgings. The Barracks were designed to ensure that all convicts had adequate accommodation, food and clothing and were confined in one place after working hours. It provided dormitory and other accommodation for 800 men. The small bell turret above the clock was not present initially but appeared some years later. The bell is inscribed with the name of Thomas Mears of London, Founder 1837. It was not unusual for turret clocks to be installed and provision made for a bell to be added later when finances were available. This then became a striking clock.

The early nineteenth century was a time of popularity of turret clocks for it followed the Act of Parliament of 1799, which placed a tax on watches, so public clocks provided an alternative for those wanting to know the time.

Inspection of the clock is said to show the name “Vulliamy”, a well known firm of clockmakers in Pall Mall, London, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. A possible explanation is that parts of the movement of the clock were sent from England and were assembled in Sydney by Oatley, who would have had to make any additional parts and would have had to install the clock and regulate its timekeeping.

Clock dials were made by another specialist, so need not have been sent with the clock movement. There is evidence that the dial was made in Sydney for it was made from the copper sheathing plates from ships. Similarly, the dials on James Oatley’s long case clocks show evidence of being made

from brass derived from name plates and marine sources. Brass and copper were in short supply in early Sydney so the dial maker would have had to use supplies from any available source.

In 1820 Oatley sold the Cockle Bay property. Having previously been granted a ticket-of-leave, he was granted a conditional pardon in 1821, one of many granted by Macquarie in his final administrative acts.

In January 1822, Oatley was superseded by James Robertson (a free settler under the patronage of Governor Brisbane) who was appointed the “General Superintendent of the Government Clocks throughout the Territory”.

In September 1822, he purchased the George St premises where he had been living since 1817. This is opposite what was at the time the old burial ground and what is today the Town Hall. This became his primary commercial property and stayed in the Oatley family for nearly one hundred years.

James Oatley went on to be a successful businessman, convicts were assigned to him and the 1828 Census showed that he then employed five men in his George St. business. At this time, James Robertson, the man who took over from him as Keeper of the Town Clocks, employed only one watchmaker.

Oatley sold his long case clocks for about £40 and his customers were from the highest levels of society, including Governor Macquarie, Major Druitt and Rev Cartwright.

## **Mary Stokes** –and how she became involved in the Oatley story...

In November, 1809, Mary Stokes, passing as the 'wife' of Joseph Lycett, an engraver/ painter arrived in Ludlow, Shropshire. Furniture to their house was delivered by Joseph Felton, an upholsterer/ joiner/ cabinet maker from February 1810- May 1810.

By July 1810, Lycett's payment was dishonoured and a Sheriff's officer came on Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> July, to take possession of all Lycett's property to pay the debt to Joseph Felton and his brother William. A sum of £134:00:2d. On this day, Joseph Lycett left home to supposedly organise payment and didn't return. Mary kept the keys to a locked back garret and cupboard. Ultimately (28<sup>th</sup> July) a number of items were found in the garret- copper plate printing press, marble slab with ink, engraving tools, bottles of spirit of turpentine. Subsequently a drawing of a £5 bank note and fifty-one counterfeit Bank of England bank notes were discovered between the ceiling and the roof.

October 1810- The 'Lycetts' were tracked down in London and charged in Shrewsbury court.

August 1811-Verdict- Joseph (36) was found 'guilty' and sentenced to transportation for 14 years. Mary (28) was found 'not guilty' as it was thought that she had had ample time to dispose of the incriminating evidence had she been aware that it was there.

Joseph was detained in Shrewsbury goal for 12 months before being transported to the Portsmouth Hulks in August 1812.

In April 1812, Mary and Joseph's daughter, 'Emma Selina' was baptized in Shrewsbury. Her father was listed as a 'painter'. Lycett was apparently painting miniatures and landscapes whilst a prisoner in Shrewsbury Gaol, so (significantly perhaps), would have had money/ funds when he was moved to the hulks.

During the period August 1812- October 1812, Oatley and Lycett would have been together on the 'Portland' hulk, prior to Oatley's slightly early release in October 1812, on the 'Prince Regent's mercy'.

In August 1813 Lycett sailed on the convict ship, the "General Hewitt", also on board was Francis Greenway. He had pleaded guilty in Bristol to forgery. He had been sentenced to death but was reprieved and then sentenced to 14 years transportation. There was also one Robert Bogg (shoemaker), convicted of forging notes in April 1813 and sentenced to 14 years transportation.

Was it a coincidence that James Oatley was arrested for his second offence in Portsea, a suburb of Portsmouth about the time the 'General Hewitt' was about to leave? Oatley had been a free man for 10 months and these new charges were for offences committed 4 and 2 months earlier.

**Mary Ann Lycett** - approximately 9 years old.

Joseph Lycett, apparently had control at this time, over the welfare of an older daughter, one Mary Ann Lysaght. It is thought that representations must have been made to the Home Office resulting in arrangements for her passage on a female transport sailing at about the same time as Joseph's own convict transport. It is apparent that he had funds to assist with these endeavours from his paintings during his time at Shrewsbury Goal.

The convict transport, "Wanstead" left Portsmouth on 24<sup>th</sup> August, 1813. She carried 120 female convicts with 24 of their children, a Mrs Ann Hubbard, wife of the convict George Hubbard and Mary Ann

Lysaght, 9 years old, daughter to Joseph Lysaght, also convict per the "General Hewitt".

Mary Ann arrived in Sydney in January 1814, a month before her father. There was a registration in March 1814 of an admission of Mary 'Liset' age six and a half at the Female Orphan School, with father in the colony. The children here were mostly not orphans but those with parents either incapable or uninterested in looking after them.

By March 1814, both Joseph Lycett and Francis Greenway had received their 'ticket-of-leave'.

**\*\*Was it a coincidence that James Oatley was arrested for his second offence in Portsea about the time that the "General Hewitt" was about to leave? Oatley had been a free man for 10 months and these charges were for offences committed 2-4 months earlier. He was charged with stealing enough items to furnish a household – 3 feather beds, 4 pillows, 6 blankets, goblets, shirts and trousers plus a writing desk amongst other items. Was Oatley intending to set up a household for 3-4 people? Did Joseph advise authorities of Oatley's recent offences? Lycett would have known that passage to the colony for Mary, as his wife, would not be granted as she was not his legal wife. Would their respective occupations of engraver and clockmaker have brought them into contact in Birmingham much earlier?**

### **The next chapter .....**

Mary (Stokes) followed Joseph to Australia on the "Northampton". The ship departed Portsmouth on 1 January, 1815 arriving 18<sup>th</sup> June. 1815. She had received permission to join her 'husband convict' but this was not as Mrs Lycett. She came as Mrs Oatley. She embarked as "Sarah Oatley, wife of convict James Oatley (Life) with one child (Emma).



The “Northampton” carried 106 female prisoners with 21 children, 30 free women with 42 children on a 189 day voyage. There were 10 deaths on route and only one birth, a son in late February to Mary. She initially named him James but he was later baptized Robert 15 months after arrival and was stated to be the son of James and Mary Oatley. The free women were immediately allowed to join their husbands.

\*\* Who would she have intended to live with? There was no real option as Joseph had already been in custody for a month charged with further forgery of five shilling bills and was about to be sent to Newcastle sentenced to a further 3 years on 7<sup>th</sup> July 1815. Here he apparently made a good impression with the authorities and he returned to Sydney in 1819. He is thought to have had some status with Macquarie as an artist and his paintings of Sydney were sent back to the British Government in 1820.

### **James Oatley’s Life in the Colony.**

James Oatley set up in business as a clock and watch maker soon after his arrival. By 1816, 17 months after his arrival, he bought a block of land near the steam engine in Cockle Bay.

He was responsible for the turret clock in the Hyde Park Barracks, receiving a grant of £75. Architect Francis Greenway was commissioned to prepare plans for this building to house the men in the government working parties, until then convicts had to find their own lodgings. The early 19<sup>th</sup> century was a time of popularity of turret clocks following the British Act of Parliament of 1799, which placed a tax on watches, so public clocks provided an alternative for those wanting to know the time.

After losing his position as Keeper of the Town Clocks he concentrated on his business. In an application for a land grant in April 1822, James Oatley said that he had been superseded by Mr Robertson. Governor Brisbane asked him to point out any other way in which he could assist Oatley. Oatley requested a portion of land to provide for the future of his family. Eventually Brisbane approved a grant of 300 acres which is now the suburb of Oatley.

Convicts were assigned to him and in the 1828 census he is shown as employing 5 men (in the George St business) as watchmakers, clockmakers and a jeweler. James Robertson who replaced him employed only one watchmaker at this time.

### **The Oatley Family in the Colony.**

The Oatley Family in Sydney consisted of father James, mother Mary and four sons:

**Robert** : born at sea 17 February, 1815 (died 16 June 1876 aged 61)

**James** : born 7 June 1817 (died 29 May 1890 aged 71 )

**Frederick** : born 30 April 1819 (died 29 May 1890 aged 71)

**George** : born 16 December 1820 ( died 30 May 1821 aged 5 months)

All children were christened sons of James and Mary Oatley, at St Phillip's Church, Sydney.

Only James Jnr and Frederick married to leave descendants.

The descriptions of Robert, James Jnr and Frederick and the bequests to them in James Oatley's will indicate that there was a difference in Oatley's recognition of their legal status. Robert was described as "an adopted child Robert Stokes otherwise called Robert Oatley, the son of Mary Stokes". James Jnr was described as "my adopted son James Stokes otherwise commonly and usually called James Oatley son of Mary Stokes". Similar terms were used for Frederick. The bequest to Robert was £100 in money, £50 from each of James Jnr and Frederick and a suit of mourning.

James Oatley's estate, including about 800 acres in the city of Sydney and in St George was divided evenly between James Jnr and Frederick.

There is no record of Emma, (Mary's daughter with Joseph Lycett, born in England but who travelled to the colony (at age 4, with her mother as Emma Oatley), during the period 1815-1822.

Perhaps she was placed in the Female Orphan School with her half sister, Mary Ann Lysaght? She may have lived with her father, Joseph, when he returned from Newcastle 1818-1819, although Mary Ann remained in the Female orphan School till at least 1821.

As required by law at the time, it was advertised in the "Sydney Gazette" of 21 June 1822, that "Mr J Lycett and his two Daughters, proceeding to Europe in the Shipley, all Claims to be presented at No.14 ,Prince -street." This legal requirement brought about a claim from one Thomas Stedman, claiming costs for goods and services on behalf of

Joseph. It is possible that Lycett still had funds from the paintings he did for “local benevolent gentlemen” during his time in Shrewsbury goal.

The Oatley Family group remains the same in three official recordings of inhabitants of the colony, although their status within the family changes over time.

### 1822 Muster

Oatley	James	CP	Wellington	Life	Watchmaker
“	Mary	CF	Northampton		Wife of
“	Robert (8)	BC			Child of
“	James (6)	BC			Child of
“	Frederick(3)	BC			Child of

### 1825 Muster

Oatley	James	CP	Wellington 1815(L)	Watchmaker
“	James (9)	BC		Child of J. Oatley
“	Frederick (7)	BC		Child of J. Oatley
“	Mary	CF	Northampton 1814	Housekeeper
“	Robert (11)	CF		Son of Mary Oatley

### 1828 Muster

Oatley	James	Watchmaker, George St Sydney
“	Mrs	

“ Robert (14)  
“ James (12)  
“ Frederick (10)

(CP = Conditional Pardon; CF = Came Free; BC = Born in Colony)

***The family story continues.....***

Difficulties apparently arose in the Oatley household from the 1830s, possibly with the arrival of Mary Ann Bogg, a young widow.

She had arrived (as Mary Cowell, 17 with her sister, Jane), sentenced to 7 years, in 1823. In July 1826, aged 20 she became the 3<sup>rd</sup> (?) wife of Robert Bogg (57) who had been transported with Lycett and Greenway on the “General Hewitt” back in August, 1813. Bogg was a widower and died himself in April 1829.

It is probable that Mary (Stokes) left the Oatley household by at least early 1832 due to Oatley’s relationship with the younger Mary Ann.

In November, 1832 Mary (Stokes), now using the surname of Johnstone (which had been the maiden surname of her good friend Frances Johnston and who was now married to a Mr Capper Pass) married a Charles Howell, shoemaker (27). She was apparently listed as a widow, 32, but really was closer to 50 years. Mary (Stokes), was the mother of Oatley’s sons but never actually his lawful wife.

In March 1839, Mary Howell (55), of Brickfield Hill, husband a shoe maker, was buried.

In May, 1832, Oatley sold the premises in Elizabeth Street to Mary Ann Bogg. He goes on to marry Mary Ann in September, 1833 at St Phillip's Church. He is described as being a widower, 63 and she is described as a widow, 27. On Oatley's marriage to Mary Ann, the Elizabeth Street premises returns to him.

In March 1837, in his will, Oatley confirms the bequest of the Elizabeth Street premises to his lawful wife, Mary Ann and in addition his 40 acre grant in St George.

Apparently however, by early 1838, she had 'absconded' to 'live in a state of adultery'. As a result of this 'extreme ill conduct' he made a codicil to his will, 27 September 1839, cancelling the bequest of the 40 acres but leaving the Elizabeth Street property as stated.

Eleven days later, 8 October 1839, James Oatley died at his residence, Snugborough Park.

In December, 1840, a deed of marriage settlement between a Frederick Hulle and Mary Ann Oatley was made for a nominal consideration of 10 shillings in view of their intended marriage. This took place, January 1, 1841 at St John's Parramatta. Frederick Hulle died, aged 36, in February 1842.

### ***The children .....***

Robert learnt the trade of a Cooper. James Oatley's will (1839) described him as "an adopted child, Robert Stokes otherwise called Robert Oatley, the son of Mary Stokes. The bequest to Robert was '£100', fifty each from 'James Jnr. And Frederick and a suit of mourning'. James Jnr however completed the death

certificate as Robert being the son of James and Mary Oatley. He died at Pitt Street, 16 June 1876, aged 61.

James Jnr and Frederick were also both described as “my adopted son ..... otherwise commonly and usually called..... Oatley, the son of Mary Stokes”.

James Oatley’s estate, at the time of his death, of approximately 800 acres in both Sydney and St George, was divided evenly between James Jnr and Frederick.

James Jnr (21), married Eleanor Johnson (17), the daughter of his mother’s good friend, Frances. They had 9 children. He became Mayor of Sydney and Chief Magistrate in 1862. He was a Member of the NSW Parliament from 1864- 1869, (one of two Members for Canterbury). His wife died in 1864, aged 43 and he married again in 1870 with the addition of one further child. He was also an Alderman of Paddington Council and Mayor 1876/ 1877. Oatley Road that runs beside the Paddington Town hall is named after him. He died in 1878.

Frederick, followed in his father’s footsteps as a clock and watch maker and Keeper of the Town Clocks. He later held the office of Inspector of Abattoirs in Sydney for many years. In 1841 he married Jane Weedon. They had 10 children. Oatley Street in Kingsgrove is on the estate he once owned. He died in 1890.

Emma, the daughter who arrived with her mother, Mary Stokes, in 1815 returned to Sydney in August 1833, presumably living with her mother. Two months later, she married George Slater, 26. Witnesses to the marriage were Charles and Mary Howell, her step-father and mother.

A possible third (?) marriage is recorded of an Emma Selina Jefferson (47, servant & widow since April, 1855) with 8 children from a former marriage, all deceased, in West Maitland, to a James Mason. His first wife had died in the March, 3 months prior, leaving 6 children between 4-14, including 2 sets of twins. Emma had taken care of the family. Her parents were named as James Oatley, watch maker and Mary Oatley- Lycett. It was probably reported in the Sydney papers as her brother was Lord Mayor at the time. She lived in Strawberry Hills, Sydney around 1867 but died in Muswellbrook in 1881, aged 69.

The source document for the James Oatley presentation was:

Mr OATLEY The Celebrated Watchmaker  
Mr LYCETT Artist to Major General Macquarie  
MARY STOKES

by D J Hatton

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