

*We acknowledge the traditional custodians of Hunters Hill
and show respect to Elders past and present.*



www.huntershillmuseum.org.au

“Bunk”

“History is more or less bunk”
HENRY FORD, Chicago Tribune, 1916

Reibey, Reiby, Rabey, it's all the same to Mary

The emancipated convict and pioneer entrepreneur Mary Reibey (1777-1855) has always held a fascination for me. Apart from the romantic but harsh story of how she was sentenced to transportation to Botany Bay for stealing a horse while dressed up in male clothing, circumstances have conspired to bring our paths close together.



Like Mary, I was born in Bury, England, like Mary I emigrated to Australia (but unlike her of my own free will), and like Mary I can boast Hunters Hill as my address.

Apart from Mary Reibey's association with Hunters Hill through her ownership of local land, upon which stands Figtree House,

on the banks of the Lane Cove River, she possessed extensive holdings in the Hawksbury area. This was mainly due to her husband, Thomas, (1769-1811), who was granted a large parcel of land there. An ex-East India Company maritime employee, Thomas began trading coal, cedar and wheat from the Hawksbury and the Hunter and later expanded the Reibey commercial empire further afield to Tasmania, the Pacific Islands and even India.

Following Thomas's premature death, attributed to having been brought on by sunstroke while in India, Mary took over the business and steered it to further fortune. With her increasing wealth, apart from her Sydney city and Hunters Hill properties, Mary built a home as a wedding present for her daughter, Penelope, and son-in-law John Atkinson (1796-1893) at Freemans Reach on the Hawksbury. It is not clear, however, whether Mary gave the land to the couple or retained ownership. The house was situated on part of the 200 acres (80 hectares) of land which Thomas was granted. The Atkinsons stayed there for 15 years. Incidentally, Freemans Reach is named after Thomas, who was the first free settler there.

The house, called *Reibycroft*, still exists. It is an important surviving example of an old colonial Georgian farmhouse, a style for which extant examples are generally considered rare. It is well situated on a gentle rise to take in views of the Freemans Reach floodplain.



Reibycroft, at 141 Blacktown Road, Freemans Reach, has been altered and undergone numerous renovations, as well as changing hands on many occasions, since Mary Reibey's time.

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Diary Dates 2021

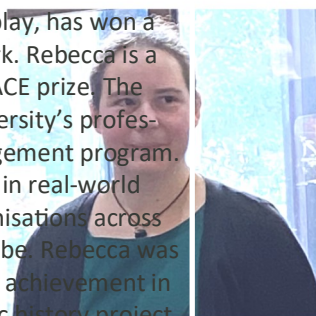
Due to the COVID pandemic the museum, including the Kelly's Bush Exhibition, is closed until further notice.

In the meantime, Hunters Hill Council has produced a presentation to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of *The Battlers for Kelly's Bush*. It was done with the assistance of Hunters Hill Historical Society and can be found on the HHC website. It will also be placed on the Historical Society's website www.huntershillmuseum.org.au

Macquarie University Student Award

Macquarie University student, **Rebecca Nisbet**, who assisted the Historical Society to mount the Indigenous Connections display, has won a university award for her work. Rebecca is a joint winner of this year's PACE prize. The acronym stands for the university's professional and community engagement program. It allows students to engage in real-world learning activities with organisations across Australia and around the globe. Rebecca was selected for her outstanding achievement in a cultural heritage and public history project. She receives \$500 and the prize is recorded on her academic transcript and Australian Higher Education Graduate Statement which assists with career opportunities. The Histor-

ical Society was delighted to sponsor Rebecca and congratulates her on her success.



Joe Byrne and the Kelly gang

(Continued from page 1)

When it was constructed, it consisted of a central hall with four rooms downstairs, and an attic with two bedrooms and three dormer windows on each side. Reputedly still on site are an original barn with huge, bush timber uprights and cross beams, a well and a dairy. In fact, the property functioned as a dairy for 90 years of its existence. When COVID restrictions are lifted, it may be worth a drive out there to see the old place.

As an aside, Mary Reibey's surname is possibly more correctly pronounced Rabey as in 'ray' even though the more common pronunciation here in Australia seems to be 'Reeby'. I say this on the authority of her early descendants in Tasmania and ancestors back in England who were known to state that Rabey was the correct way of saying it. Indeed, on his wedding certificate, Mary's husband Thomas signed himself Rabey. The differences in spelling, Reibey, Reiby, Rabey, may have something to do with the spelling of family names changing over time, particularly when literacy was an issue.

Chris Schofield

Pictures: Reibycroft in 1947 and 1996.

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Editor: Ian Adair

Joseph Byrne was the eldest son of Patrick (Paddy) and Margret Byrne (nee White). He was born in the Woolshed Valley, near Beechworth, in 1856, though there is no known birth certificate or baptism record. Three brothers and four sisters followed by 1871; all the Byrne children went to school and church in the Woolshed Valley.

Joe was a good student and showed early signs of the gift for language that would become a major part of his personality. He was dux of his school, but academic excellence was irrelevant to the lifestyle thrust upon the Byrne children. The small Byrne selection was a dairy and the cows didn't milk themselves.

Joe was considered quiet and unassuming by those who knew him. As he got older he would become more outgoing, largely thanks to the influence of his closest friend, Aaron Sherritt. The Sherritts were an Irish

protestant family and moved in different circles to the Byrnes. Regardless, the two became such firm friends that Aaron managed to get himself transferred to the Woolshed school so he could spend time with Joe. Aaron was more outgoing and seemed to regularly get himself into mischief.

When Joe's father Paddy died of a heart attack, it fell to Joe to earn some money, so, as a fifteen year-old, he took up doing odd jobs for the Chinese in Sebastopol, near Ballarat. It was during this time that he witnessed a Chinese man strung up outside a shop screaming for help. Days later, the man was found murdered due to debts to Chinese criminals. Joe was a witness in the trial, but gave very little information, possibly due to fear of reprisal. This would not be the only time Joe would end up in court thanks to his association with the Chinese. He spent much of his youth around the Chinese and learned Cantonese by ear. He also indulged in the food and other cultural habits, such as gambling and opium smoking.

Joe was in a long term relationship with Aaron's sister Bessie and they were expected to become engaged, but Joe seems to have been reluctant to commit to Bessie, a dressmaker.

The two young men tended to get up to increasingly greater mischief, eventually engaging in stock theft. This brought them in frequent contact with Beechworth police, the first recorded incident being in May 1876 when they stole the pet cow from the El Dorado school common. They butchered the animal and divided up the carcass between their families. The evidence against them was overwhelming and Joe and both were sent to Beechworth goal. This was to be the only time he would be convicted.

Shortly after their release, the pair was charged with assaulting a Chinese man who objected when he found them skinny dipping in a dam he used for his water supply. Aaron threw a large rock that cracked the man's skull. They were arrested and held in Beechworth to await trial. De-

spite the evidence, Joe and Aaron were let off, and it was probably at this time they met Ned Kelly's sixteen-year-old brother, Dan, who had been charged with stealing a saddle.

In late 1877 Joe and Aaron joined a horse stealing gang with Dan's brother Ned.

In October 1878, a party of four policemen went after the Kelly gang and found them at Stringybark Creek. A gunfight ensued and three of the policemen were killed. The gang were declared outlaws, with Joe for the first

time having a price of £250 on his head. Joe was now officially an outlaw.

The Kelly gang now embarked on a series of daring robberies throughout north-east Victoria. At Euroa, Ned dictated 'the Cameron letter' to Joe, addressed to Donald Cameron, an MP who Ned wrongly thought had their interests at heart. The gang went over the border into southern NSW, and in

February 1879 Ned dictated a second letter, 'the Jerilderie letter' to Joe. The fifty-six-page letter was meant to justify the actions of the Kelly gang, including the murders of the policemen at Stringybark Creek.

Dan Kelly and Joe began to suspect that Aaron Sherritt was colluding with the police, and set out to trap him and his brother Jack, who had also joined the gang. Joe's opium habit was also taking hold, causing him to behave erratically.

Joe was seeing a maid at The Vine Hotel in Beechworth. Just before the shootout at Glenrowan she told him she had seen Aaron Sherritt with a policeman, who had interrogated her. Joe found out that Sherritt was living in a hut, guarded by four policemen. He enticed him to come to the door and killed him with two blasts from a shotgun. For two hours, he and Dan Kelly terrorized the police before going to Glenrowan to meet Ned Kelly and Steve Hart.

On the morning of 28 June 1880, a special police train arrived at Glenrowan for the final showdown. As the police advanced on the Glenrowan Inn, Joe Byrne was drinking at the bar, and a bullet hit him in the groin beneath the armour he was wearing, severing his femoral artery. He bled to death in a matter of minutes.

The police set fire to the inn, but Joe's body was pulled out by a priest. Dan Kelly and Steve Hart were incinerated and Ned Kelly was the only survivor.

Byrnes' body was taken to the Benalla police station, where it was hung on a door for photographers. An inquest was held secretly that night before a casting was taken for the Bourke Street wax museum.

Joe Byrne was given a pauper's burial in an unmarked grave in the Benalla cemetery. He was 24 years old. Decades later a marker was placed at the approximate location of the grave. For the rest of her life, Joe's mother Margret refused to talk about him, and referred to him only as "The Devil."

