

## ILFORD'S HIDDEN TRAIL OF HISTORY

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Do you wonder, as you drive through a small village that seems lost in the past, just what is its history? How did it come to be there? Who lived there?

Ilford engages me in that way. A village of beautiful old buildings, spread over kilometres, is a tantalising subject for the imagination. I started along its history trail when Peter M, wanting correct information for tourism signage, asked me about Ilford's beginnings. I knew little. But Trove, the National Library's on-line newspaper site, seemed a good place to start.

Along the trail I discovered crime and punishment, death and danger, romance, heartbreak, ambition and a good old fight for territory. But let's start with location. According to the Geographical Names Board Ilford is in the parish of Warrangunia, in the county of Roxburgh and was assigned the status of locality (instead of say a village or town) in 1995. It is located, we are told, two kilometres north-west of Mount Misery and three kilometres south-south-west of Mount Fitzgerald. Of more interest to travellers on the Castlereagh Highway, it is 55 kilometres to Mudgee and 20 to Kandos.

Ilford started as a village reserve on the road to Mudgee, shown on early maps in the 1830s, but unnamed. It became known as Kean's Swamp (spelt in various ways). The earliest reference on Trove is in 1855 when the Crown Lands Office, having surveyed the village, advertised blocks of land for sale at two to three pounds per acre, those blocks varying in size from 5 to 20 acres. In the same year the government designated ten acres for a halting place. We can imagine travellers exhausted by the arduous climb over Cherry Tree Hill (perhaps in a Cobb & Co coach) would have sought rest and refreshment at Kean's Swamp.

Advertisements for land sales continued till 1860. By 1875 the village, which in 1868 had had a name change to Ilford, was described by the *Sydney Morning Herald* as having "a population of 100, two places of worship – Episcopalian and Wesleyan, both well attended – and likewise a public school...for thirty or forty children. The buildings in the town are neat and substantial. There are two stores, a public-house, a carpenter's shop, a bakery, a butchery, and a post-office. The crops look splendid...The mines that existed there have lately been abandoned." (gold presumably)

Naturally there were births, deaths and marriages at Ilford and many of them appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald* or the *Empire* or the *Bathurst Free Press*. The most intriguing and infamous was that of Mary Ann Butler née Roberts who married Abraham Grinling in the Church of England Ilford in March 1870. Unfortunately she was still married to Joseph Butler and within a few weeks was charged with bigamy. She was committed for trial before Judge Wilkinson in her home town Windsor, pleaded guilty and was sentenced to six months hard labour in Parramatta Gaol. Her husband Joseph who was present in the court "made application to his honour for permission for the prisoner to take the child in her arms with her, but his honour refused to make an order."

Can we ever know the full story? Who doxed her in? Why did she leave her husband? What was her life after she left prison?

A horrifying death occurred at Keen's Swamp in 1860 when a man named Daniel Parker, travelling with his wife and two children, was unhitching the horses. The draught-horse plunged forward, catching him between a wheel and a tree and crushing him to death. "The most melancholy part," said the *Maitland Mercury*, "was his wife being the only witness."

There is a one-page history of Ilford Public School in *Rylstone Area History of Settlement*. It has a reference to a teacher W E Liardet – brutality and abuse and a Supreme Court trial in Sydney in 1878. That sent me on a search.

I found no reference to that trial but discovered another one at Dubbo Court of Petty Sessions where Mr Tynan complained that Mr Liardet, school teacher at Ilford, had beaten and ill-used his son. The case was dismissed. Moreover, reported the *Armidale Express* "an address, expressive of sympathy and confidence in Mr. Liardet, as Public School teacher, has been presented to the latter gentleman, and contains the signatures of three (out of the four) of the resident members of the Local Board, the Magistrates who decided the case, the resident clergyman (Rev H Dicker), and nearly the whole of the parents who have children attending the school."

Liardet's moment in history deserves more attention, especially as there are a number of references to him on the State Records index including insolvency, bankruptcy and divorce. Ilford Public School file and the Teachers Rolls at State Records would no doubt shed more light on him.

There were plenty of bushrangers in those days and a number of hold-ups occurred near Ilford. Being on the main road from the Gulgong gold fields and near a mountainous area that slowed down coaches, it is no wonder Constables Wright and Cleary were stationed at Kean's Swamp in the 1860s. When the Mudgee mail was stuck up by two armed men near the village in April 1863, the constables were quickly on their tail. They came across one robber, who as soon as he saw them, "started at a full gallop into the bush. Trooper Wright overtook him and upon presenting his revolver, the fellow said, 'It is no use, I surrender.' Upon examining him they found a revolver loaded and capped, two powder flasks, fifteen bullets, one mould, box of caps and a likeness of a lady..." She's another story perhaps hiding in the records of history.

It is the Ilford Post Office records, available on-line at the National Archives website that provides a fascinating amount of research material on the village. The post office at Kean's Swamp was established in 1860 replacing the discontinued post office at Running Stream. In 1861 it was moved to Cunningham's Creek, two miles away. That proved unsuitable and it was moved back to Kean's Swamp to Mr Harris's store. Since he could neither read nor write his well-educated wife became Postmistress and ran it very satisfactorily until 1873.

In that year the post office became part of a village tug-of-war. Thomas Corduroy, an ambitious newbie from Wallerawang, had already written to the Post Master General in 1872, putting himself forward as an excellent candidate for postmaster if the position became available. When he learnt of Mrs Harris's imminent resignation in March 1873 he wrote again, enclosing an impressive list of supporters. The trouble was, few of them were from the village; most from nearby areas. His brief appointment was overturned when Mrs Harris put forward her competent assistant Miss Hawker and pointed out Mr Corderoy's premises were at the other end of the village where there was only a blacksmith nearby. She had the

signatures of 40 Ilford residents, the postal inspector from Bathurst, the local Member of Parliament, George Cox, and the local magistrates, Hardwick, Armstrong and Cox. Miss Hawker was given the job. Unfazed, Thomas Corduroy wrote to the Post Master General in 1876 in anticipation of her resignation.

These are just snippets in Ilford's history. We can never know the lives of our collective ancestors. History after all is just a stumbling journey along a barely visible trail, in pursuit of shadowy figures engaged in the flickering drama of life.

I am always in search, usually enthralled, but rarely in command.