

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in July 2025, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women who were born in the same year as Queen Victoria, 1819.

Jane Hocking Edwards

2 May 1819 – 2 May 1891

Two births, Two Destinies

Jane Hocking entered the world on 2 May 1819, just three weeks before Queen Victoria's birth on May 24th of the same year. While Victoria was born into privilege at Kensington Palace, destined to rule an empire, Jane's first breath was drawn in the humbler surroundings of Phillack, Cornwall, where her father Joseph worked as a labourer. Both women would live through the transformative Victorian era, but their paths could not have been more different.

Early life in Industrial Cornwall

Jane was baptised on 7 June 1819 as the daughter of Joseph, a labourer, and Maria Hocking, who lived at Ventonleague in Phillack¹. The Phillack of Jane's childhood bore little resemblance to today's idyllic Cornish village known for its wildlife and sand dunes. In 1819, it was an industrial centre where the parish had swelled from 400 people in the mid-1700s to over 1,400 by 1800, largely

due to the copper and tin smelting operations controlled by the Cornish Copper Company².

Jane's early years were marked by family upheaval. Her parents, Maria Richards and Joseph Hocking, had married at Gwithian on 22 November 1818³. Maria may have been born there in 1799, while Joseph was likely born at Camborne around 1797⁴. The family expanded with the birth of Jane's sister Anna Maria in 1824 at Church Town, Gwithian, where Joseph worked as a miner, probably in the local tin sand extraction industry⁵.

Tragedy struck the family early. Maria Hocking died, leaving Jane and Anna Maria motherless. Joseph remarried Jane Burgan at Phillack on 16 July 1831⁶. By this time, Joseph had become an innkeeper at the Angarrack Inn, originally called 'The Lamb'⁷. The 1841 census shows Joseph living with his second wife Jane and Anna Maria (aged 17) at Angarrack, Phillack, where he continued as an innkeeper⁸. The 1851 census found Joseph still working as a victualler at Churchtown, Gwithian, with the younger John now employed as a sailor⁹.

Marriage and early struggles

At twenty-one, Jane married Edward Bath Edwards at Phillack Parish Church on 2 January 1840. Edward, then twenty-seven though listed as twenty-four, was a servant from Mawnam⁸. Edward came from a family of nine siblings. His father John also came from Mawnam and his mother, Sarah Trannick, from nearby Stithians. Mawnam was a parish in west Cornwall located on the north bank of the Helford River and estuary. Mining of copper and silver took place there from 1833, however it was largely an agricultural area. The marriage register reveals much about their circumstances: Jane was unable to sign her name and made her mark with an 'X', while Edward spelled his middle name 'Bath' as 'Baht', indicating their limited literacy⁹.

The young couple began their married life amid the industrial landscape of Cornwall. Their first child, Edward Hocking Edwards, was born on 11 July 1840 at Copper Houses, where Edward worked as a labourer¹⁰. The 1841 census shows the family still living at Phillack, where Edward was working as a male servant¹¹. By 1842, when their daughter Maria was born, Edward had found work as a coachman¹².

The family's fortunes remained precarious. They moved to Treloar Warren Street in Camborne by 1844, where Edward worked as an ostler. Another daughter, Jane, was born in January 1844. A local surveyor described their

neighbourhood as having "more miserable, squalid-looking cottages can rarely be found," with open sewers carrying "contents of privies through the streets in the open day"¹³. It was here that young Maria died of measles at age two in August 1844¹⁴.

The Edwards family continued to grow despite their hardships. Jane gave birth to Joseph in 1845¹⁵, another daughter Anna Maria in 1847, who died of whooping cough at thirteen months¹⁶; Elizabeth was born in 1849¹⁷, Sarah Jane in 1851¹⁸, and Ann in 1853¹⁹. The 1851 census found them living on Wellington Street, where Edward worked as a 'post boy' – though given his previous occupation as an ostler, this may have been a misunderstanding by the enumerator²⁰.

Emigration

By the 1850s, both mining and agriculture had become depressed in Cornwall. Jane's sister Anna Maria had already emigrated with her family, arriving in New South Wales in 1849. Facing an uncertain future for their children, Jane and Edward decided to join the 'Great Emigration' that saw an estimated 28,000 Cornish emigrants leave for Australia in the 1850s alone¹⁹.

On 23 December 1856, the Edwards family boarded the *Fitzjames* at Plymouth, bound for Sydney with 429 immigrants²⁰. The voyage was eventful – a matron's diary describes the trials of managing 98 single young women²¹. The matron reported her charges suffered severe seasickness soon after departure as the ship negotiated a storm in the Bay of Biscay and the following night became hysterical imagining the ship was on fire. Christmas morning was spent in fear as the girls imagined the sea was rushing in during a storm. What the Edwards family made of this chaos is not known, but it must have been alarming in the relatively confined space of the ship. *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported the immigrants' arrival on 2 April 1857 in excellent health, noting there had been ten births and two deaths during the voyage²².

Life in New South Wales

The family wasted no time seeking employment. An article in *Empire* on 4 April 1857 advertised the immigrants as available to work and provided helpful lists of occupations and expected wages. A blacksmith was expected to earn 10-13 shillings a day; an engineer 13 to 16 shillings. A yearly wage was estimated as £35 to £45 for a ploughman, £60-70 for a country blacksmith, or £50-£55 for a married couple. A female cook might earn £25 to £30 a year in town, and a

male servant £35-£50. Immigration records listed Edward as a farm labourer, their son Edward (sixteen) as a blacksmith, and daughter Jane (thirteen) as a housemaid. All family members except the youngest children were recorded as being able to read and write²³.

Jane's sister Anna Maria was also in Sydney at this time. She had married Samuel Bettens, a carpenter and farmer's son, in July 1843. Anna Maria's first child, a daughter, died at age five in 1848 before emigration. She emigrated in 1849 with her four-year-old son with a second son was born at sea. She would go on to have three more daughters born in Australia. The family appears to have settled in Sydney before moving to Shoalhaven.

Jane's husband Edward also had family who made the journey. His brother Octavius emigrated, and three nephews, the sons of Robert Tranick Edwards, Henry, William, and John - my great great grandfather - joined the gold rush in Victoria. Tragically, William drowned in a gold mining accident in 1864.

Jane and Edward lived initially in Chippendale, Sydney, where their son John was born in 1860. Conditions here were as poor as those they had left behind in Cornwall, with social surveys describing shocking housing and open sewers in this industrial area²⁴. By 1863, seeking better prospects, they moved to Broughton Creek (now Berry) in New South Wales, where their daughter Susan was born. The move may have been prompted by Anna Maria's relocation to the area.

Broughton Creek had been settled in 1825 after the displacement of indigenous people. Originally centred around a sawmill harvesting red cedar, the area had developed into farming by the 1860s and boasted a 'substantial' population of 300 people²⁵.

Jane and Edward lived quietly in their new home, leaving few traces in public records. They seemed to have lived quietly, with no records found in directories, voters lists, or newspapers. The only records are their probate documents, which suggest they farmed as tenants rather than landowners. Edward's effects were valued at less than £100, indicating modest circumstances. Both wills showed little in the way of possessions, and there are no records to suggest they owned land²⁶.

Edward died on 24 November 1879, and Jane lived on until 2 May 1891 – dying on her seventy-second birthday. They are buried together in Berry cemetery.

Legacy

Jane and Edward's children had better lives in Australia than would have been likely in Cornwall. Their eldest son Edward Hocking Edwards had an adventurous life as a gold prospector before settling down with his wife and twelve children. When he died in Lismore, Queensland in 1920 at age eighty, his affection obituary described him as a pioneer of the local area, known to all as 'dad' and well-regarded in the Salvation Army²⁷.

Jane's greatest legacy lies in her courage to break the cycle of poverty through emigration – a desperate necessity that contrasted sharply with Queen Victoria's privileged reign over an empire built on such sacrifices. With no prospects in Cornwall's declining mining towns, Jane had little choice but to seize this lifeline for her children's survival. Her decision was vindicated when her children took opportunities across Australia and New Zealand and further afield, building lives and families that would have been impossible in Cornwall. Jane embodied the harsh reality of countless working-class families for whom emigration wasn't opportunity – it was survival.

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