

Honor Solan per *Panama*

Ann Chester (née Solan) was my (maternal) great grandmother. Although always referred to as Ann during her life in Australia, she was undoubtedly the same person as the Irish Famine orphan, Honor Solan who arrived on the *Panama* as an assisted migrant on 12 January 1850. Ann met and married Thomas Chester in Sydney in 1851. Their youngest daughter, Minnie, was my mother's mother. They settled in The Rocks where they remained for the rest of their lives. Through various records we can trace their lives and changing fortunes there, and those of members of their family.

Ann Solen

The marriage certificate shows that Thomas married Ann Solen (sometimes spelt Solan/Soln in other documents) in St Mary's Cathedral on 18 August 1851. The family bible shows that she was born on 12 January 1831 in Ballen Robae (sic), Ireland.

As with Thomas, there is no record of Ann Solen (or any spelling variation) arriving in Australia. However, it is highly probable that Ann is the same person as the Irish girl called Honor Solan who was one of 165 orphan Irish girls on board the *Panama* migrating to Australia under a scheme which has become known as the 'Earl Grey scheme' after its principal architect, Earl Grey, Secretary of State for the Colonies.

So our Ann, if indeed she was Honor, came to Sydney from an Irish workhouse. Family stories provided by my relative, Jenny Chester (also descended from Thomas) would suggest that this is indeed our Ann, as her grandmother spoke of 'Thomas' wife, Honora'.

The immigration records show Honor's mother's name as Ann, so we may deduce that this was possibly the preferred name which Honor adopted. It is also evident that Ann is a variation of Honora. It is not a large step, in a largely non-literate society, between Honora, Annora and Ann.¹

The shipping list of the *Panama* shows Honor was an orphan from Hollymount, County Mayo. She is described as a nursemaid. Like about 10 per cent of this immigrant group, she could neither read nor write but her health and 'probable usefulness' were described as good. She was indentured to C. Martin of Kent Street, The Rocks for £8 for 12 months. If this is our Ann, we can therefore locate her in The Rocks in 1850. Records show that a Christopher Martin was renting a modest house at 523 Kent St in 1848, and was at 396 Kent St in 1851.² He was possibly Honor's employer.

A slight discrepancy in the records of Ann and Honor is the references to their places of birth: the Chester family bible shows that Ann was born in Ballen Robae (sic), Ireland and Honor's birth place is given as Hollymount on the shipping list. However, Ballinrobe is, in fact, a town 6 kilometres from the small village of Hollymount in County Mayo. The dates of birth of both girls correspond. Ann's date of birth is given in the family bible as January 1831. If this is the same girl that arrived on the *Panama*, she would have been 18 when she embarked. The immigration record for Honor states that she was 18. They were both 18 years of age at the beginning of 1850. Ann's family bible gives her date of birth as 12 January 1831. Coincidentally, the *Panama* arrived in Sydney on 12 January. If our Ann is indeed the young woman who arrived on the *Panama*, it is highly likely that she did not know the exact date of her birth and subsequently chose the day and month of her arrival in Australia for her birthday. There are therefore enough similarities, together with Jenny Chester's family stories, for us to claim Honor as our Ann.

¹ <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~mallorybrody/Eire/celtirishfem.html>

² *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 December 1901, p.4.

Thomas Chester

Thomas Ditton Chester was born in Dover, England on 9 October 1826. He was the third son of Charles, a tailor (later policeman, later railway porter) and Charlotte. The date of Thomas' arrival in Australia is unknown but his obituary provides a clue as it claims that he 'came from Kent to Melbourne in 1849'.³ No records of his arrival have been found but it is possible that he stowed away on a ship leaving his native Dover and arrived illegally, as was common for many young men who lived near ports at the time. The obituary further notes 'he was a digger [gold?] until 1851 when he came round to Port Jackson'. In 1851 when he married Ann we can locate him in The Rocks where he remained for the remainder of his life.

Early years in The Rocks

Since the baptism record of their first child, Lucy, shows that Thomas and Ann were living in Kent St in 1852, presumably they settled in The Rocks immediately after their marriage. Except for the period 1854-55, when Thomas decided to try his luck in the goldfields in Victoria they lived in The Rocks for the remainder of their lives. They returned from the Victorian goldfields with three small children and again settled in Kent Street. A further three children were born there between 1855 and 1860, one of whom died.

By 1862 they had moved to 107 Princes Street to a one-storey building of 4 rooms for which they paid an annual rent of £47.3.0. By 1864 they had six children in that four roomed house and another had died. Their subsequent movements around The Rocks chart the changing fortunes of Thomas and Ann.



107-111 Princes St, 1926 (No 107, the Chester residence is probably on the right)

Between 1863 and 1870 they moved between 3, 4, 5, 7 and 107 Princes Street.⁴ It is possible however, that since the houses did not bear house numbers, officials just took a guess at the house numbers and the changes of address were somewhat less than what the records suggest.

By 1867 they were renting a bigger house at 7 Princes Street which was a two-storey building with seven rooms with an annual value of £70. Thomas had obviously started to do well. Minnie (my grandmother) was born there in 1869. She was the last of Thomas and Ann's

³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 December 1901, p.4.

⁴ City of Sydney Assessment Books, 1863-1905.

eleven children, eight of whom were alive at the time. By 1869 Thomas had gone up in the world and the family lived at 4 Princes Street which Thomas had bought for £1000. This was a three-storey residence of ten rooms which had an ‘annual value’ of £80. This residence also had a ‘coach house and stable attached.’⁵ In subsequent years 4 Princes Street is described as having four-storeys and 13 rooms, and by 1881 had an annual value of £156 – far higher than the average value of properties at The Rocks at the time. Between 1875 and 1896 he had also bought or built (and sold again) Nos 2 and 6 Princes Street, which were the dwellings on either side of his home.



4-6 Princes Street in 1926 (No 2 is the two-storey building on the left and No 6 is the single-storey building on the right)

Whilst most historians are quick to describe the extreme poverty at The Rocks at this time, historian Paul Ashton (2010) paints a picture of Princes Street as representing the gentry of The Rocks:

In the 1850s, social commentator William Stanley Jevons ranked the streets of Sydney according to their buildings and the type of people who lived in them. Princes Street, ranked in the second order, was one of the better streets in The Rocks, ‘having houses occupied by respectable tradesmen, shipmen, journeymen and other employees.’⁶

Thomas had also bought 2 Kent Street as a rental property. This was described as a six-roomed house with an annual rental value of £46. He also bought the three adjacent properties described as ‘off Kent Street’ (i.e. in the back yard). These were described as new houses: two-storeys and two-rooms with an annual rental value of £19 each. Thomas was now a man of property.

⁵ City of Sydney Assessment Books, 1863-1905.

⁶ Paul Ashton, ‘A Sense of the Past: Preserving Old Sydney’, in P. Ashton *et al*, *Painting the Rocks*, Historic Houses Trust of NSW, 2010.

Thomas Chester – Stevedore

Thomas had become a major player in the waterfront industry at Port Jackson. His obituary on page 4 of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 December 1901 recorded that:

He was a digger until 1851 when he came round to Port Jackson and commenced business on his own account. The building trade at that time was brisk, and Mr Chester's contracts were for the most part connected with the discharging of cargoes of lumber. A year or two later having increased his connection and his business he became a stevedore. That was in the days of the Blackall Line. Amongst the firms for whom he discharged ships were Messrs Learmouth, Dickenson.....etc.⁷

Thomas was also an inventor. In 1861 he applied for the patent on a 'Lumper's Patent Single Winch'.⁸

Thomas Chester – Civic Leader

In 1873 Thomas stood as a candidate for Gipps Ward in Sydney in the Municipal election. The main issue on which he fought the election was the question of a loan of one hundred thousand pounds to build the present Sydney Town Hall. Thomas argued against the municipality 'plunging itself further into debt' by borrowing this money. Fortunately for the City of Sydney, he lost the election!

Separate lives

Ann, however, was not to enjoy the status of the woman behind our civic leader as the marriage had broken down some years before. In fact, she did not even enjoy the spacious surroundings of 4 Princes St for long.

Thomas began an affair with Emma Wiggin(g)ton (also known as Allen or Hill) who had a child by him in 1872, the year before he stood for election. The child was given Thomas' name, Thomas Ditton Chester Allen. Emma must have moved in with him as the birthplace for the second child, born in 1874, was given as 4 Princes Street. Emma and Thomas were to have four children. Emma was the sole beneficiary of Thomas' will, dated 24 November 1892, in spite of the fact that his legal wife, Ann was still living.

Sometime before 1877 Ann had left 4 Princes Street, presumably Emma had moved in. However, Jenny Chester's family anecdotes suggest that both families lived there side by side for some time before this. Being Catholic, Ann would not consider divorce.

The following item, published in the *Police Gazette* the year Emma's first child was born, suggests the possibility that at least one of the children was reacting badly to the family situation:

Left her home, No. 4, Princes-street, on the 22nd instant, Charlotte Chester, daughter of Thomas Chester, stevedore. She is 15½ years of age, stout build, dark hair, swarthy complexion, full face. Information to the Inspector General of Police.⁹

This is the closest we get to an image of any members of the family. However, all turned out well, as on 19 June the *Police Gazette* reported that she had returned home.

⁷ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 December 1901, p.4.

⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald*, Wednesday 24 July 1861.

⁹ 'Missing Friends', *NSW Police Gazette*, Wednesday 29 May 1872, p.150.

The following court report gives another vignette into the family situation. Ann was not taking this matter lightly!

SUMMONS SHEET.-Anne Chester was fined 5s., together with 5s. 10d costs of Court and 21s. Professional costs, for assaulting Emma Hill.¹⁰

Thomas is recorded at No. 4 Princes Street until his death in 1901. By 1907 the NSW Government had acquired all the houses in Princes Street and most other parts of The Rocks and, by the late 1920s, all the houses in Princes Street were demolished to make way for the approaches to the Harbour Bridge. But Thomas had made his mark here. In 1926, 25 years after his death, he is mentioned in a report on the progress of the Harbour Bridge in the SMH:

Princes-street will disappear from the map, and the thoroughfare will form the southern approaches to the harbour bridge. The street, which is to-day in practically the same state as it was sixty years ago, contains many historic residences of previous generations, when the Rocks area was one of the most fashionable residential districts near the city.

Fifty or sixty years ago many shipping people resided in Princes-street, and the homes of some old-time stevedores still remain. No. 4 was occupied by Mr. Chester, a well-known stevedore.¹¹

Ann's Later Years

When Ann moved from the spacious family home at 4 Princes Street, some time prior to 1873, she moved into a three-roomed house at 97 Cumberland Street at an annual rent of £28. By now she had 5 children living at home (2 daughters had already married) and she was still only 46 years old.



97 Cumberland St (with woman at the door), H Stuart Wilson 1902

¹⁰ *Sydney Morning Herald*, September 1873.

¹¹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, Wednesday, 24 November 1926.

When Ann and Thomas separated, he transferred 2 Kent Street and the other 'off Kent St' properties into Ann's name. She was registered as the 'owner or landlord' of those properties by 1877 although they all had other tenants at this date and Anne was a tenant in Gloucester Street. However, Thomas appears to have re-considered the transfer, and attempted to sell the property, obviously without her knowledge or against her wishes. A For Sale notice appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald:

FOR SALE (Freehold) one 4-roomed COTTAGE, with kitchen detached, also three COTTAGES at back, situated at No. 2, Kent-street North. For full particulars apply to Mr. T. CHESTER, No. 4, Prince-street North.¹²

Then in the *Sydney Morning Herald* three days later, Ann retaliated:

CAUTION - The public are cautioned against purchasing the PROPERTY situated in Kent-street North, Sydney, consisting of a Cottage known as No. 2 Kent-street; and three brick houses, at the rear; the same having been made over by deed of gift to me and my son by my husband, Mr. Thomas Chester.
ANN CHESTER.¹³

By June 1877 Ann was resident at 2 Kent Street as evidenced by the following notice:

THIS is to give Notice that ANN CHESTER, wife of THOMAS CHESTER, Stevedore, No. 4, Prince Street, Sydney, is not dead as reported; but is residing at No. 2, Kent-street, Sydney.
Mrs. ANN CHESTER.¹⁴

The conflict over the cottages apparently continued, as Thomas made another attempt to sell them in August, 1877, just two months after the above announcement.

By 1882 we find her as the owner and resident of No. 10 Kent Street. Anne remained here with the family until 1907. It is unclear whether she sold No. 2 and bought No. 10 or whether these are in fact the same property. Given the geography of the area it is possible that the houses in that area were re-numbered between 1877 and 1882 and that Nos 2 and 10 are the same property.

The 1891 records show Ann still owner of the Kent Street properties but they had a tenant. She is not shown on the records as being the 'person rated' anywhere in The Rocks. Perhaps she was living with one of her daughters. Possibly she was in Victoria with her daughter Annie whose first husband died there in 1891 or in South Australia with her daughter Lucy, who also died in 1891 of kidney disease.

The 1896 records show that her son-in-law William McCormack was a tenant in 10 Kent Street. William had had married Ann's daughter, Harriet in 1882.

Joseph Knock is another tenant at one of Ann's 'off Kent St' properties at that time. Joseph Knock was another son-in-law who had married Ann's daughter Annie in 1895. No. 10 Kent Street had obviously become a Chester family compound.

The 1902 records show Anne is again resident at 10 Kent Street. Joseph and Annie Knock are still there but Harriet and William McCormack and their family had moved. Anne lived with the Knock family for the remainder of her life.

¹² *Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday, 13 September 1873.

¹³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, Tuesday, 16 September 1873.

¹⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, Thursday, 28 June 1877, p.6.

By 1907 these Kent Street properties were all demolished to make way for the Argyle Cut upgrade. Joseph Knock was now the tenant at 3 Windmill Street, which was owned by the New South Wales Government. It was a new two-storey, six room building in a row of terraces built by the state government in an attempt to clean up The Rocks after the outbreak of Bubonic Plague there in about 1900. They paid an annual rent of £41.



3 Windmill St, where Anne lived until she died (taken in 2006)

Ann moved there with Joseph and Annie and their family. Windmill Street must have represented the last word in modernity for Ann at last, 58 years after she left the workhouse in Ireland.

Ann stayed there with Joseph and Annie until she died of bronchitis in 1920, aged 91. A notice appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald* deaths column on Monday 5 July:

CHESTER July 2 at her residence 3 Windmill St Millers Point, Ann, relict of the late Thomas Chester, stevedore, late of Princes Street City, aged 91 years. RIP.¹⁵

At the time of her death, five of her 11 children were still alive. Notices were placed in the funerals column of the *Sydney Morning Herald* by the families of four of her daughters 'to attend the funeral of their beloved mother and grandmother Ann'. The name of Minnie, my grandmother was not amongst them. She had obviously been estranged from her mother for some years.

¹⁵ *Sydney Morning Herald*, Monday, 5 July 1920.

The In Memorium column of the *Sydney Morning Herald* in the following year has the following entries:

CHESTER - In loving memory of our mother, Ann Chester, the widow of the late Thomas Chester, merchant stevedore; of Princes-street, city, who passed away on July 2, 1920.

In the old home you are remembered.

Sweet memories cling around your name:

The hearts that held you in deepest affection

Love you in death just the same.

Inserted by her daughter and son-in-law. Annie and J Knock.

CHESTER - In loving memory of our dear mother and grandma, Ann, wife of Thomas D. Chester, stevedore. No. 4 Princes-street, city, who departed this life July 2, 1920. Inserted by Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell and family.

CHESTER - In loving memory of our dear grandma, who passed away on July 2, 1920.

You are not forgotten, grandma dear.

Or the good advice you gave.

Inserted by her loving granddaughters, Maud, Florrie, and Violet. 13

Anne is buried at Rookwood Cemetery in a grave with her daughter, Annie, Annie's husband Joseph Knock and her grandson Reginald who died aged 6 years 11 months. The grave is in a deserted, neglected part of Rookwood; overrun but very peaceful and under enormous eucalyptus trees – a long way from the workhouse. I visited it in 2006 and left her some flowers. I wondered who the last person to stand by that grave was. It felt like a memorial to a close and loving family

Pamela Osmond
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