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RESEARCHING, PRESERVING AND COLLECTING AUSTRALIA'S HERITAGE



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COVER

Thomas Griffiths Wainewright (1794–1847), *George Gordon Byron, 6th Baron Byron (1788–1824)* September 1813, oil on canvas, 89 x 69 cm. Collection: Newstead Abbey NA 496, gift from Baroness D'Erlanger, 1936. Wainewright was trained by Thomas Phillips (1770–1845), who painted a similar portrait of Byron in the same month (later making several copies of it) and another of him wearing a flamboyant Albanian costume that Byron had acquired in Albania in 1809, now in the British Embassy in Athens. Wainewright shows a hint of embroidered Albanian tunic beneath Byron's black cloak. Wainewright, suspected of murdering three relatives, was convicted of forgery and transported to Van Diemen's Land in 1837.

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Richard Dowling, the elusive cabinetmaker of O'Brien's Bridge, Van Diemen's Land

David Bedford has researched the life and work of Tasmanian cabinetmaker Richard Dowling (c 1820/1822–1867), little documented till now. He presents new discoveries about Dowling's life and suggests why Dowling's story has been so elusive. Evidence has emerged, and examples of his work found, which show that Dowling, previously known only for parquetry writing slopes bearing his label, also made furniture. Dr Bedford provides technical descriptions of Dowling's workmanship and identifies most of the timbers that Dowling used. By examining labelled examples, he identifies the characteristics of Dowling's style, showing how these stylistic characteristics can be used to assess if unlabelled pieces can be credibly attributed to Dowling or not.

DAVID BEDFORD

Richard Dowling (c 1820/1822–1867¹) is well known as a maker of exquisite parquetry work. Numerous "boxes", which can be described as writing boxes, writing desks or writing slopes, are known. In this article I use the term writing slope, because its use open as a sloped surface for writing

is arguably the defining characteristic of this type of box. After all, who calls a tea caddy a box, although it is undoubtedly a box for holding tea?

Some writing slopes bear a paper label with his name and the address, "O'Brien's Bridge, V.D.L." (Van Diemen's Land) (**plate 1**).² Other writing slopes and boxes are often attributed to his hand. To date, little has been recorded about Dowling,

This article adds more information about Richard Dowling, extends our understanding of his life, and defines his distinctive style of workmanship and range of production.

I became interested in Richard Dowling around 1999. We were living in Hobart, and had gone to Launceston to a Tulloch's auction. One of the lots was a very ornately inlaid and veneered pole firescreen in Tasmanian timbers (**plate 2**). We decided to bid and eagerly awaited the lot. Two men next to us were discussing the firescreen and saying how keen they were on it, which made us concerned that we would have stiff competition. Then, to our surprise, they walked out not long before the lot came up. The result was that we purchased the firescreen; they returned soon afterwards and realised that they had missed it!



1.

Paper label R. DOWLING/ MAKER./ O'BRIENS BRIDGE,/V.D.L. 5 x 7 cm, affixed to underside of the upper section of the writing surface of the writing slope shown as plates 3-5 & 7-10

That purchase began a long, slow process of research. Fahy and Simpson include a photograph of one writing slope with a Dowling label.³ I had seen writing slopes either labelled or attributed to Richard Dowling in catalogues but had not had the opportunity to handle one. Photographs showed workmanship similar to that on the firescreen so I hypothesised that Dowling may have been the maker, although I knew only of writing slopes bearing his label.

Caressa Crouch and her husband Carl Gonsalves had a writing slope with a Richard Dowling label. When I mentioned my hypothesis to Caressa we began discussing putting the two items together to compare the workmanship. However, that did not happen, and the research went onto the backburner.

Carl and Caressa's labelled Dowling writing slope (plates 3–5) was auctioned in 2015⁴ after their untimely deaths. Physically handling the writing slope allowed me to compare the items in detail. That provided impetus to find out as much as I could about Richard Dowling and his work.

Richard Dowling's work

The terms marquetry and parquetry are often confused, and with good reason as they overlap. Different sources give different definitions. The usage adopted here distinguishes parquetry as the art of using pieces of timber in geometric patterns.

The American Marquetry Society describes marquetry as:

the art of creating decorative designs and pictures by skilfully utilizing the grain, figure and colors of thin veneers and sometimes other materials such as shell or ivory ... Geometric patterns (often referred to as "parquetry") were also quite popular.⁵

In this classification, Dowling's work is parquetry. From my reading, Dowling followed a long English tradition called Tunbridge Ware. Originating around 1650, tourist items had been made for visitors to the health springs of Tunbridge Wells in

Kent. In the early 19th century, this ware began to use a distinctive form of parquetry:

... the main veneer patterns available were cubes and the triangular 'Vandyke' pattern. Borders would be plain stringing and banding of contrasting timbers. Expensive and time-consuming production methods encouraged change and in a fairly short time (around 1830) the sophisticated tessellated mosaics, which we all know so well, became known as Tunbridge Ware.⁶

Online resources

The historical research reported here relies primarily on online sources.⁷ I have used the Tasmanian Government website index to named records held in the Tasmanian State Archives, variously known as the Tasmanian Names Index, Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office, or Libraries Tasmania (Names Index).⁸ The Tasmanian Names Index is a searchable online database about people in Van Diemen's Land in the 19th century. The database contains information from records of arrivals, both free and convict, convict records, records of departures from VDL and other information. The Names Index is expanding as paper records are digitised and as volunteers transcribe records. Other sources include the wonderful online resource, Trove (trove.nla.gov.au), provided by the National Library of Australia, as well as state births, deaths and marriages (BDM) records and other databases as detailed in the notes.

Where is O'Brien's Bridge?

While O'Brien's Bridge does not appear on a map today, the area known as O'Brien's Bridge was part of greater Hobart, now known as the City of Glenorchy. Dr Alison Alexander's history of that area records that Governor Collins began granting land in the area in 1804.⁹ Many of the early grants were not successful as farms, and many of the original grantees sold their properties.

Thomas O'Brien, on the other hand, was a successful farmer who had been in the first penal settlement on Norfolk Island and was relocated to Tasmania when that



2.

Attributed to Richard James Dowling (1820/22–1867), *pole firescreen*, a very detailed micro-mosaic parquetry inlaid veneered frame to a contemporary 19th-century wool and beadwork portrait of a young woman, mounted with a brass collar on an *Acacia melanoxylon* (Blackwood) pole above a cross-pattern string-inlaid ornately veneered octagonal column with Blackwood mouldings and ornately inlaid and veneered octagonal base on *Toona ciliata* (cedar) bun feet. Veneers are Tasmanian woods: *Nothofagus cunninghamii* (Myrtle) burl, *Lagarostrobos franklinii* (Huon Pine), and Blackwood (on a cedar carcass). Yellow silk to rear. The fine mosaic inlays and timbers are identical to those seen in boxes and writing slopes bearing Dowling paper labels. 150 x 60 x 43 cm. Private collection, Queensland



3.

Richard James Dowling (1820/22–1867), *writing slope* with Richard Dowling label (plate 1), smaller size known 16.5 x 43.5 x 25 cm. Tasmanian woods: Blackwood, *Banksia marginata* (Silver Banksia), Huon Pine, *Nematolepis squamea* (Satinwood), Myrtle, *Olearia argophylla* (Musk), carcass: Huon Pine; metal fittings, dark purple velvet. Dowling's distinctive design features of string inlay bordered feather pattern micro-mosaic banding, aris edge micro-mosaic rope banding, 12-pointed centre star, corners to all faces with contrasting coloured/*chatoyance* inlay veneer squares and shield-shaped escutcheon are evident. Private collection, Queensland

settlement was closed in 1808. O'Brien was given a land grant bounded by what became known as Main Road and by Humphrey's Rivulet. Alexander notes "The next group of farms was at Humphrey's Rivulet, and was most commonly known as O'Brien's Bridge, after Thomas O'Brien; the bridge was at the corner of his property."¹⁰

Visiting in 1811, Governor Macquarie "named Glenorchy after his wife's home in Scotland: the name means 'glen of tumbling waters', ... Glenorchy, Humphrey's Rivulet, O'Brien's Bridge and Kensington (after a local farm) were all common names for the area."¹¹

By the mid-19th century, two place names, O'Brien's Bridge and Glenorchy, were used interchangeably, as well as, less commonly, the District of Kensington. Today, only Glenorchy is used; the name O'Brien's Bridge has disappeared and all that remains of the last name is a Kensington Street.

In Alexander's book Molly Tomlinson's map titled *Glenorchy in 1820* shows the exact location of Thomas O'Brien's farm on Humphrey's Rivulet,¹² the largest of the three creeks in the area and the only watercourse to require significant bridgeworks today. O'Brien's Bridge was a very small settlement and I presume that Dowling's workshop was on, close to, or visible from Main Road and Humphrey's Rivulet since he did not see the necessity to give a street address.

Richard's birth, marriage and death

Some aspects of Richard Dowling's life can be filled in. Records of Richard's marriage in VDL and his death in Victoria tell us where and when he was born.

The record of Richard's death in Queenscliff, Victoria in 1867¹³ says he was born in "Castle Connell, Limerick" (now called Castleconnell). It gives his age at his death as 45, which would equate to being born in 1822, and his full name as Richard James Dowling. That age does not agree with Richard's stated age of 29 when he married in 1849, which would equate to a birth in 1820. Although people's ages in the early 1800s were sometimes recorded inaccurately, it seems most likely to me that the correct date is 1820 as he was in the prime of life when he provided his age at his marriage. In contrast, his age at his death would most likely have been provided by his oldest surviving child, who was only 16 at the time she became an orphan with the responsibility for younger children, so some inaccuracy could be understood. The record gives cause of death as Phthisis, which is an old term for pulmonary tuberculosis, a very common disease at that time.

The earliest VDL record that I can find is his marriage in 1849. The register shows that a Richard Dowling "Free," "Carpenter," aged 29, married Jane Ayres, "Servant" and "spinster," aged 28,

on 20 February 1849 in the District of Kensington.¹⁴ O'Brien's Bridge Church of England minister the Reverend W. R. Bennett officiated.¹⁵

His wife Jane and children

I can find no records for the arrival or existence in VDL of a "Jane Ayres". However, the marriage application record,¹⁶ which was approved,¹⁷ spelled Jane's surname as Eyres. Convict conduct records¹⁸ show that on 30 November 1846 at Manchester Quarter Sessions, Jane Eyres was convicted and sentenced to transportation for seven years. Jane arrived in Hobart on 2 January 1848.¹⁹ The marriage application record gave Jane the "Ship/Free" description "Cadet" and Jane's conduct record includes an annotation about her as Jane Dowling. This convict record is definitely for the woman who married Richard Dowling in 1849.

Richard and Jane had four children recorded in VDL. For three, no given names were listed in the birth records but are on their parents' death certificates.²⁰ The first child, born nine months after their marriage, on 24 November 1849²¹ was a girl, Catherine Elizabeth. The second was a son, born 28 September 1851,²² named on the birth record Richard David Dowling, though the record of Jane's death gives his names as Richard James Dowling; he died in Hobart at age 24 hours.²³ A third child, Henry, was born in 1853²⁴

4.

Richard James Dowling (1820/22–1867), *writing slope*, smaller size, open, 11.5 x 43.5 x 49 cm. The dark purple velvet fabric on the writing surface appears to be original and is also found on the underside of the writing slope (not shown). Private collection, Queensland



and died before 1867 and the fourth, Sarah Jane was born 30 November 1857.²⁵ Richard is described as “cabinetmaker” in all four birth records. Jane’s death record shows that, in Victoria, a fifth child, Richard Thomas, was born in 1863.

When he worked in O’Brien’s Bridge

Fahy & Simpson record that Dowling was in O’Brien’s Bridge from 1852 and show one of his labels with some handwritten annotations “Since October 1853”.²⁶ Now his known dates at that location can be extended from 1849 to 1857/58.

His marriage record and convict employment records show Richard was at O’Brien’s Bridge from 1849 to 1854.²⁷ During that time Richard employed nine convicts, eight of whom were women and presumably house servants. In 1849–50 he had five employees, each for 3 months, four women and one man. The last, Thomas Peat, had been sentenced for forgery and was paid a rate of £10 compared to the £7 Richard paid the female convicts.

Then there was a gap in employed convict servants until 29 October 1852 when Dowling employed two convict women servants (the second on 1 November) for 12 months each at an increased rate of £9. In 1853 Dowling employed three convict women each for 12 months at the same rate of £9. If the last woman employed, Julia Murphy, worked her 12 months from a starting date of 8 September 1853, the Dowling family would have had convict servants until September 1854. The lack of any convict employees beyond that date is because transportation to Van Diemen’s Land ceased on 10 August 1853.

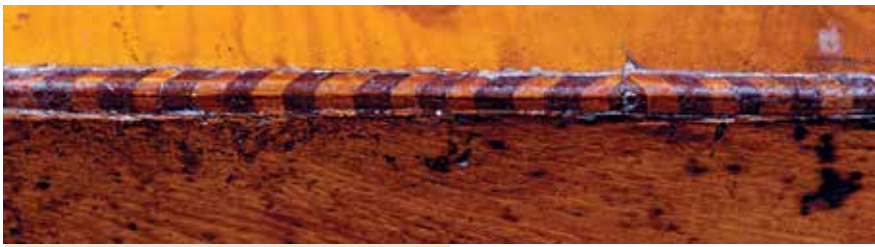
Another record from 1852²⁸ is difficult to understand without corroborating evidence. Richard Dowling, of Glenorchy, placed a public notice stating that he would not be responsible for any debts contracted in his name without proof he had provided a written order for same. We can speculate that someone had been running up debts in his name without his authority, but have no further evidence to support that at this time.

The records of the births of their children allow us to extend the date that Richard continuing working as a cabinetmaker in VDL until at least 30 November 1857.

5.

Richard James Dowling (1820/22–1867), *writing slope*, smaller size, right hand side. The timber panels are Silver Banksia at the top, Bird’s-eye Huon Pine in the centre and Musk at the base. The panels to the sides appear to be Myrtle burl. Private collection, Queensland





6.

Richard James Dowling (1820/22–1867), *writing slope*, larger size known, 18.5 x 51 x 25 cm, labelled by Richard Dowling, c 1849–57. Tasmanian woods: *Acacia melanoxylon* (Blackwood), *Banksia marginata* (Silver Banksia), *Lagarostrobos franklinii* (Huon Pine), *Nematolepis squamea* (Satinwood), *Nothofagus cunninghamii* (Myrtle), *Olearia argophylla* (Musk), an unknown very dark-coloured timber (most likely a darker shade of Blackwood), cedar; metal fittings, baize. This is the best-known size and design of writing slope made by Richard Dowling. Collection: National Gallery of Australia, accession no. 2012.1334.A-G, purchased 2012

7.

Richard James Dowling (1820/22–1867), *writing slope*, detail of micro-mosaic rope pattern inlaid arris edge of smaller sized writing slope (plate 3). Private collection, Queensland

What happened after 1857/58?

After 1857/58 there are no Tasmanian records that definitely relate to Richard Dowling the cabinetmaker or his wife Jane. However, Richard reappears in Victoria four years later when the *Argus* newspaper reported on the 1861 Victorian Exhibition held in Melbourne,²⁹ which was organised to gather worthy items to be selected for display at the London International Exhibition of 1862. The Melbourne exhibition opened on 1 October 1861 and closed on 29 November 1861.

Several inlaid writing-desks and dressing-cases of colonial wood, shown by Richard Dowling, Mount Shadwell [near Mortlake, Victoria], are of admirable workmanship, and are much admired.³⁰

The next reports concern legal disputes that may indicate things were not going well for the couple. On 28 March 1866, Richard (as R.J. Dowling) and Jane appeared separately in the Queenscliff

Police Court, Jane accusing Mary White of abusive language and Richard in two disputes over debt.³¹

The final appearances in the records for Richard and Jane are their deaths in 1867 in Queenscliff, Victoria. Jane died on 31 January and Richard, described as ‘Cabinet Maker’, died on 18 May 1867. Both are buried in the same unmarked grave in Queenscliff Cemetery.³²

Richard Dowling’s likely insolvency

The very high quality of his work should have guaranteed Dowling a decent income. However, in May 1858, a Richard Dowling was before the insolvent court in Hobart.³³ His solicitor, Mr Lees, applied to adjourn the proceedings and the Commissioner accepted the application. By September the same year, he had absconded.³⁴

INSOLVENT COURT.
WEDNESDAY. (Before Mr. Commissioner Browne.) *In re* Richard Dowling. This was an adjourned first meeting. It appearing that insolvent had absconded the Commissioner stated that he had suggested to Mr. Lees to take some remedial measures, and the meeting was then further adjourned for six months.



The Richard Dowling referred to in the insolvency court had left the colony without satisfying his creditors. While it is likely that this was Richard Dowling, cabinetmaker of O'Brien's Bridge, the records found do not provide enough detail to be certain; it does seem too much of a coincidence, given that Richard and Jane disappeared from Tasmanian records at this time, and later appear in Victoria.

Possible reasons for insolvency
Lack of promotion/advertising

If this was the cabinetmaker's insolvency, I speculate that it may have occurred because he was not a good self-promoter nor self-publicist. There is little contemporary record of his work in VDL, and in the existing records, his creations appear to have been mis-attributed.

Geoffrey Stilwell's notes record a "writing desk" supposedly made by a Francis Dowling from Glenorchy in 1850.³⁵ The description is not clear whether the 'desk' was a substantial item or a writing slope 'portable desk.'

However, Trove has revealed a more complete 1850 record in the *Launceston Examiner*,³⁶ which regurgitated an article from the *Hobart Town Advertiser*. It is more detailed and informative and almost certainly the same record that Geoffrey Stillwell noted. The report attributes items to a Francis Dowling, as discussed below. The first name 'Francis'

is almost certainly an error since there are no other records for a Francis Dowling, cabinetmaker of Glenorchy.

Another indication that Richard and his work may not have had a high profile in Tasmania are two later misattributions in the catalogue of the Intercolonial Exhibition in Melbourne in 1866-67. Item 595 was a 'Writing Desk, 22 sorts of Wood, 1470 pieces.' Exhibited by John Wood of Launceston. Fahy and Simpson³⁷ illustrate the item, which shows many of Dowling's distinctive design elements with inlaid bandings and shield-shaped escutcheon as well as Tunbridge Ware Van Dyke triangles, albeit more highly decorated than labelled examples of his work.

The catalogue does not claim that Wood was the maker, only the exhibitor of the item. Fahy & Simpson note that it is signed in ink "J Wood, Upholsterer" and dated 1866. I believe that this inscription is simply to declare the ownership of the item at the time that it was exhibited.³⁸ Item 607 in the exhibition was also almost certainly a writing slope made by Richard that was exhibited by T. Watt of Hobart but with the maker misnamed 'T. Dowling'. It was exhibited with an annotation that it was 'made upwards of 12 years' [earlier]. The catalogue of that exhibition has been digitised by the State Library of Victoria.³⁹

Other references give more detail and commentary to flesh out the catalogue

8.

Richard James Dowling (1820/22-1867), *writing slope*, detail of centre of micro-mosaic feather inlay reversing direction of angles in the centre of the run (plate 3). This image shows the position at the centre of the feather banding where it reverses direction, adjacent to a point of the central star. Private collection, Queensland

9.

Richard James Dowling (1820/22-1867), *writing slope* (plate 3). End of micro-mosaic feather inlay showing terminal square block. The original finish and patination are evident. The image shows that the work was definitely handmade. Private collection, Queensland

entry. Newspapers of the day^{40,41,42} comment that T. T. Watt (the Collector of Customs at Hobart), sent a "Workbox and Rock crystal" to the Intercolonial exhibition in Melbourne in 1866. The *Tasmanian Morning Herald*⁴³ goes on to say:

While examining these woods and allowing the eyes to wander you become insensibly attracted by some magnificent work tables and desks of Tasmanian woods exhibited by Miss Collins and T.T. Watt, Esq, which are the admiration of the visitors.



The cover springs open when pressed here

10.

Richard James Dowling (1820/22–1867), writing slope, detail of escutcheon (plate 3). Shield-shaped escutcheons occur on all labelled writing slopes seen. Private collection, Queensland

11.

Richard James Dowling (1820/22–1867), writing slope, detail of concealed drawers. The ‘secret’ mechanism and concealed drawers in Dowling’s labelled writing slopes may not have been features unique to his manufacture. However, when used in combination with other features they do add strength to an attribution. Private collection, Queensland

12.

Attributed to Richard James Dowling (1820/22–1867), writing slope, unlabelled but bearing the unique combination of features seen in Richard Dowling’s work. 17.5 x 51 x 25.1 cm. Private collection, Tasmania

Unless the maker’s name is clearly stated, 19th-century exhibition catalogue entries cannot be relied upon to denote a maker. Many items made by others were exhibited by the proud owners of the items and gave no reference to the actual maker’s name.

Competition

Tasmania had many fine quality cabinetmakers in the early 19th century as testified by the wealth of top-quality furniture, boxes etc. that still exist. Anne Watson also explores how the exhibitor of an object is not necessarily the maker⁴⁴ and notes that in 1847 “Hobart had approximately 20 directory-listed cabinetmaking firms ... of these only Hamilton’s furniture is documented in any quantity from surviving labelled pieces.”

It is possible (though not necessarily supported by the records) that since Richard Dowling and William Hamilton

both produced quality veneered parquetry work, and both labelled at least some of their work, they were competitors in that “fine veneered furniture” market.

Dowling appears to have worked alone, as there are no records of his employing any free workforce, nor of advertising for workers. Dowling’s household did employ a number of convicts, the majority of whom were female and employed for too short a time to have contributed to such fine workmanship. As such, it must be presumed that all of Dowling’s products were handmade by him. The numerous items Dowling is known or believed to have produced indicate that he was prolific between 1849 and 1858 which would have involved a prodigious amount of fine work for one person.

William Hamilton ran a much larger business⁴⁵ and therefore, in my interpretation, was a significant competitor, as he always worked with others and had employees. William Hamilton had his address in O’Brien’s Bridge in 1852⁴⁶ where he had a 150-acre freehold farm Ravensdale. Dowling may have once worked for Hamilton but I have found no evidence for that theory.

I have searched in vain for evidence of a link between their businesses. Fahy, Simpson and Simpson⁴⁷ note that after 1852, Hamilton retired from his sole-owner business and went into partnership with James Whitesides in 1853. Then, in 1857 he travelled to



13.

Attributed to Richard James Dowling (1820/22–1867), *work box*, Tasmanian, very finely made. It shows string-inlay bordered micro-mosaic rope pattern inlays, very similar to Dowling's work. It also shows similar layout, with veneer squares to the corners, a central motif and fan decorations internal to the mosaic borders. 12.3 x 31 x 23 cm. Private collection, Queensland



the UK, returned in 1858 and opened an expanded business with his sons. The same year, Richard Dowling disappears from the Tasmanian records.

The population of Tasmania in 1850 was about 70,000 across the whole island, not all of whom were in Hobart or nearby.⁴⁸ That is a small population to sustain even two businesses producing similar, top quality work, let alone the total of at least 20 cabinetmakers. After 1858, William Hamilton went into business with his sons and the large number of extant items labelled or attributed to that business indicate that it was a much larger business, which would have been difficult to compete with.

My speculation is that, with such a small population, there was not a large enough market for all the cabinetmakers, especially two producing such similar high-quality veneered work at the same time. Hamilton appears to have been the more prolific labeller and self-promoter of the two. That would be a possible explanation for the failure of Dowling's business, likely insolvency and sudden disappearance from Tasmania.

Economic circumstances

The same ABS website provides an interesting summary of the population history in Tasmania:

Until the mid-19th century, Tasmania experienced a fairly rapid build-up of population, then in the early 1850s this growth rate slumped. This decline

was due to two major factors: the discovery of gold in Victoria in 1851, which led to a large-scale emigration of Tasmanians, and the ending of convict transportation in 1853.

Large-scale emigration *from* Tasmania, coupled with the reduction in the workforce from the cessation of transportation and the demise of the whaling industry,⁴⁹ led to a significant economic slump in the colony. The slump, which was not reversed until the 1870s⁵⁰ would have increased the financial stress on businesses, especially those making goods for discretionary purchases, such as fine quality writing slopes and drawing room furniture.

Richard Dowling's work Historical records

During this research, previously unreported 19th-century historical information about the range of Richard's work has been found. The most informative of these is this report in the 1850 *Launceston Examiner*:⁵¹

COLONIAL MANUFACTURES.—A very handsome writing-desk was shewn on Saturday last, made from the woods of the colony. It is made of Huon pine, and the top and sides are veneered with a wood commonly called musk wood, from the odour which is given by its leaves when rubbed in the hand. The ends are veneered with a very beautifully grained piece of Huon pine; in the

centre of the top is a star, formed of lightwood and myrtle, and a similar ornament in each corner. The edges of the desk are inlaid with minute pieces of lightwood and myrtle alternately. It is French polished, and is one of the best pieces of colonial workmanship we have seen in the colony. The maker, whose name is Francis Dowling, and who lives at O'Brien's Bridge, exhibited it at government house, and it was at once purchased by Mr. Denison, his excellency's brother. The same man, a short time ago, made two very beautiful chess tables, also from the woods of the colony, which were purchased by his excellency, and one of them sent to England, to shew the excellent wood we have in this colony for all the purposes of cabinet-making.

Further evidence of the range of Richard's work comes in an 1855 newspaper report of a dispute between Jane Dowling and her neighbour Agnes Bailey.⁵² Evidence was given in the magistrates court that Jane had promised a table made by Richard to a witness as a bribe to give evidence against Mrs Bailey. The magistrate did not accept the evidence, but it is clear that it was well-known that Richard made tables.

Richard Dowling's extant labelled work

To my knowledge, the only known items with Richard Dowling labels and his distinctive 'work signature,' of complex,



14.

Attributed to Richard James Dowling (1820/22–1867), *tea caddy*, Tasmanian, extremely finely made. It shows an abundance of Dowling's distinctive complex, multi-part, Tunbridge Ware-like mosaic banding inlays, characteristic design features and use of timbers. 28 x 41 x 21 x cm. Collection: Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston Tasmania, QVM:1999:H:1482

fine, multi-part/mosaic parquetry pattern detailing are writing slopes. I will discuss the characteristics and timbers of these labelled items in detail before looking at items that may be attributed to Richard.

Timbers used in labelled items

The *Launceston Examiner* in 1850 mentions four timber species: Huon Pine, Musk Wood, lightwood and myrtle.

In examples I have handled, the timber species Dowling has used are all Australian. He used Huon Pine and Australian cedar as carcass timbers, which can usually be examined by a wood technologist without destroying the appearance of an item and such identifications can be confirmed. For veneers, destructive testing is usually necessary, and even then, the section sizes can be so small that identification may not be certain.

I am reasonably expert at what I call 'recognition identification' from the old, finished surfaces of furniture timbers which I always compare with examples of identified wood blocks. However, I know that I am not always correct. It is impossible to be so, given the variability of timbers and finishes. If I were being truly scientific, I would not state that veneer timbers are a particular species; I would state only that they *appear* to be. However, descriptions can become wordy so I have opted for brevity, but ask the reader to bear this qualification in mind.

The timber veneers described below, all Tasmanian, are my recognition identifications. They include *Lagarostrobos franklinii* (Huon Pine) both plain and birds-eye figure; *Acacia melanoxylon* (Blackwood) burl and plain; *Banksia marginata* (Silver Banksia), sometimes, strangely and antiquatedly called honeysuckle; *Nematolepis squamea* (Australian Satinwood) – for simplicity I use the name Satinwood; *Nothofagus cunninghamii* (Myrtle); and a highly figured golden timber that could be either *Olearia argophylla* (Musk) burl or Myrtle burl.

I do not list "lightwood" among these timbers; such common names are variable and cannot be tied to a single species. In colloquial usage, in 19th and in early 20th century textbooks⁵³ Blackwood was sometimes known as Lightwood, but the term could equally have been applied to other timbers.

Distinguishing between Musk and Myrtle burl in Tasmanian furniture is difficult. Along with the easily distinguishable Huon Pine, these were both frequently used ornately burl/bird's-eye figured timbers. Any knowledgeable woodworker today would scoff at the thought of confusing Musk and Myrtle. Freshly-milled Myrtle burl is strongly reddish pink and freshly-milled Musk burl is yellowish-brown, sometimes with a green tinge. But time and finishes change colours in strange ways, especially since some colours are more fugitive than others. The red-pink of Myrtle fades almost completely

with time and becomes golden. Musk mellows and also becomes golden. Burl timber have very similar and ornate figure, albeit with different botanical origins. In short, the two can come to resemble each other, especially under an old finish. There is usually a remaining colour difference between the two, even faded and under an old finish, but unless side-by-side it is often not very clear. I could not agree with any 'recognition identification' that claims to discriminate definitively between the two timbers in all situations.

What certainty does that give us whether the difficult-to-identify burl timber is Myrtle or Musk in Dowling's work? Very little without destructive wood technology analysis or a contemporary record when it was made, e.g. a contemporary timber plan (**plate 16**). The 19th-century timber descriptions in the press mention both timbers but imply that the ornate timber was Musk. Common names have always been flexible and often wrongly attributed. I can go so far as to say that the ornate golden timber in Richard Dowling's labelled writing slopes *appears to be either Musk or Myrtle*. Dowling likely used both timbers at different times, so some items will contain one, and some the other – or a combination of the two.

Labelled writing slopes

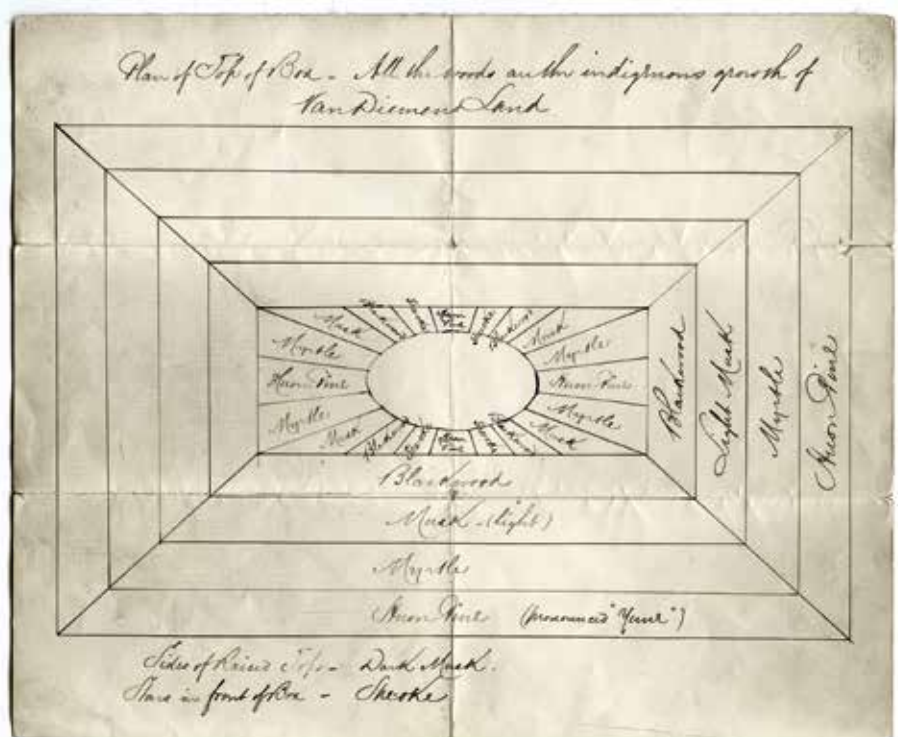
Different sizes of labelled writing slopes are known, although at this time we know of many larger examples and only one smaller example.

The National Gallery of Australia (NGA) holds a fine example of one of Dowling's larger writing slopes (plate 6), with numerous photographs on their website.⁵⁴ Timbers described in the NGA captions include "Huon Pine, Musk, casuarina, honeysuckle and cedar". What I can observe from photographs are border panels of Musk or Myrtle burl, with Blackwood corner squares around a central panel of Bird's-eye Huon Pine.

The central star appears to be made from Satinwood (not Myrtle) and Blackwood. The 1850 *Examiner* article referred to the fan decoration in the corners as Lightwood and Myrtle. In the NGA writing slope, these appear to be alternately Blackwood and Satinwood, but the darker segments may be another timber (but from the photograph it does *not* appear to be the *Casuarina* mentioned in the NGA caption). The outer arris edges of the box have Dowling's characteristic rope-pattern banding. The 1850 *Examiner* article referred to this as the edges being inlaid with minute pieces of "lightwood and myrtle alternately". Between the panels is Dowling's characteristic string inlay-bordered mosaic feather banding. The "honeysuckle" mentioned is Silver Banksia and occurs only on the ends of the box.

Numerous writing slopes of similar dimensions are in private collections. Many do not have labels but are virtually identical, so there is no doubt in my mind that Dowling made them (see below).

Another labelled version of one of Dowling's writing slopes is slightly smaller (plates 3-5). This model lacks the fan decorations to the corners but otherwise has detailing and workmanship very similar to the NGA example. The front and rear border panels are Blackwood as are the corner squares, but the border panels to the right and left sides are Musk or Myrtle burl. Similar to the NGA writing slope, the central star appears to have been made from Satinwood and Blackwood. The outer arris edges of the writing slope have Dowling's characteristic rope banding and his characteristic string inlay bordered mosaic feather banding between panels.



Characteristics of Richard Dowling's labelled work 1. Exceptional quality of workmanship

Dowling's work was of the highest quality seen in the colonies in the 1850s and equal in quality to that other fine-quality maker, William Hamilton. Dowling's work is distinguished by his distinctive inlay banding, which is especially detailed, intricate and precise. When there is a question about whether an item can be attributed to Dowling this very high-quality factor needs to be paramount.

15.

Attributed to Richard James Dowling (1820/22–1867), *tea caddy*, Tasmanian, top view. Collection: Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston Tasmania, QVM:1999:H:1482

16.

Timber plan for the top of the *tea caddy*, handwriting attributed to Charles Henry Smith, the first owner of the caddy. Collection: Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston Tasmania, QVM:1999:H:1482. See text for full list of timbers.



17.

Attributed to Richard James Dowling (1820/22–1867), *pole firescreen*, detail of centre of frame with Dowling's distinctive design features and rope inlay aris edging reversing at the mid-point.

Note also the Van Dyke triangles of alternating coloured timber, typical of Tunbridge Ware. 148 x 59.5 x 43.5 cm. Private collection, Queensland

2. Unique mosaic parquetry banding

The distinctive 'work signatures' of Richard Dowling's manufacturing were his use of particular, complex, multi-part, Tunbridge Ware-like mosaic banding inlays. In writing slopes the combination of two of these bandings seems to be unique to Richard Dowling's work. Certainly, when found in combination with the other significant features, these bandings critically identify an item as being made by Dowling. It is important to describe them in detail.

One of these banding designs was a 'rope' inlay pattern of very small pieces of alternating different coloured timbers in a single-angle striped array as described in the 1850 *Launceston Examiner*. Possibly unique to Dowling's work in Australia, the angle of the stripe reverses at the midpoint of the run. This 'rope pattern mosaic inlay' is seen on the outer aris edges of every one

of Dowling's labelled writing slopes that I have seen (**plate 7**).

The second distinctive mosaic banding is a feather or herringbone pattern inlay (sometimes called chevron pattern) like two rope bandings side by side but at opposite angles to each other – looking like the barbs in a feather or a herring's ribs, referred to here as *feather inlay banding*. Dowling's own design of this is always bordered on both sides by a line of either dark or light timber string inlay. The longer runs of Dowling's string-inlay bordered feather banding always reverse in direction/angle at the mid-point (short, vertical runs of the banding on the ends of writing slopes often did not reverse direction). In rectangular items the run is terminated at the ends by a small square block of contrasting coloured timber that is the same width as the combined feather and string inlay band. These feather inlays feature on every labelled writing slope that I am aware of (**plates 8–9**).

As will be seen below under attributed items, Dowling sometimes seems to have used a version of his rope banding with similarly bordered string inlay.

3. Other significant characteristics of his writing slopes

Definitive characteristics of Dowling's writing slopes include: the 12-pointed star inlay to the centre of the top, with

each point comprised of two different-coloured timbers (the stars are presented as six points superimposed on another six, offset points); the inclusion of contrasting coloured (or with the colour change sometimes due to *chatoyance*) square sections of veneer to the outer corners of every visible face of the writing slopes, (**plate 3**); shield-shaped inlaid timber escutcheons (**plate 10**), and the small concealed drawers with ribbon pulls. Every Dowling labelled writing slope that I have seen, and some unlabelled very similar writing slopes, contain a set of hidden small drawers underneath the section for inkwells and pen storage. The drawers are hidden by a removable piece of timber/flap with a spring-loaded catch (**plate 11**). Pressing on a part of the side of the box releases the catch; the flap springs out, exposing the drawers.

His detailing and use of timbers show that Richard Dowling was a timber expert: he knew his timbers very well so he could select for contrast and figure. Dowling also demonstrated a good understanding of *chatoyance*, the way a timber's appearance and colour can change depending on the direction of the grain and the angle at which it is observed.

These latter design features are not necessarily unique to Dowling's work, but when seen in combination with the distinctive bandings do show a unique combination of characteristics.

Attribution – extrapolating from the labelled to the unlabelled

Writing slopes, boxes and items of furniture that do not bear a label but have similar design features and workmanship to Dowling's work are sometimes attributed to him.

Leaving aside the situation where an attribution is completely unsupported because the item has *none* of Dowling's distinctive features, we need to consider why many items may not have been labelled. Conceivably, one of his paper labels may have peeled off and been lost. Sometimes, items are incomplete or have had significant restorations.

Another possibility is that Dowling held only a small stock of labelled items as samples, primarily to show the quality of his work. He could then have produced similar writing slopes, other kinds of boxes and furniture on commission or for exhibition, which may explain the lack of labels. After all, commissioned items were not, by definition, offered for general sale, and the person who commissioned the item knew who the maker was, so no label was required.

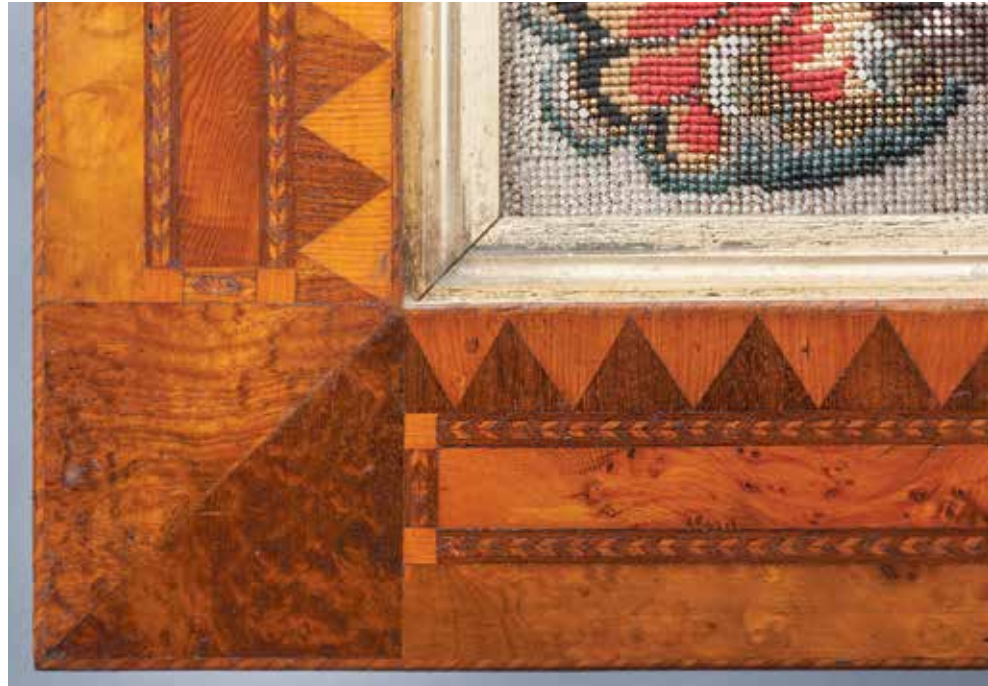
Similarly, Dowling would most likely have perceived that an item that he was going to exhibit personally (such as to Governor Denison at Government House) would not have needed a label. Unfortunately, that means that some items were misattributed in the press of the day and that the name of the maker of such items has not been passed down.

18.

Attributed to Richard James Dowling (1820/22–1867), *pole firescreen*, detail of corner of frame with Dowling's distinctive design features such as the feather banding with terminal square blocks. Private collection, Queensland

19.

Attributed to Richard James Dowling (1820/22–1867), *pole firescreen*, detail of column with Dowling's distinctive design features, cross-design string inlay and string inlay bordered feather banding. Private collection, Queensland





20.

Attributed to Richard James Dowling (1820/22–1867), *occasional table*. The circular top veneered and inlaid with a central dark timber star design set into Huon Pine, surrounded by four concentric circles of veneers, each delineated by rope pattern inlay (angled alternating stripes of different coloured timbers) edged with a string inlay of Huon Pine on both sides. Four circles are: a radial design in Satinwood; three outer circles of different cuts of Huon Pine segments. The two-height, tapered, octagonal cross-section tapered Huon Pine veneered column is subtended by an *Allocasuarina verticillata* (Drooping Sheoak) moulding. Triform, birds-eye Huon Pine veneered base and shaped bun feet. Carcass timbers are cedar and Huon Pine. The workmanship of fine inlays and timbers are identical to those seen in boxes and writing slopes bearing Dowling paper labels. 73 x 77 diam. cm. Private collection, Queensland

Not applying a label would have saved Richard the minor cost of one, but has had a much larger cost to how he has been remembered until now.

Many Australian colonial cabinetmakers never labelled their work and others did so intermittently. Dowling appears to have been an intermittent labeller.

I used to find such intermittent labelling difficult to understand and was highly suspicious of attributions. However, I have developed more of an understanding of a lack of labels since I began to design and make (contemporary) furniture myself. When I first began some years ago, I had not developed a label or mark so many pieces were unintentionally unmarked (though I sometimes used a pencil inscription on a hidden surface for larger pieces). Even since I developed labels, occasional pieces do not receive one, such as when a commissioned item was made to a tight deadline and the client was in a rush to take the item.

Attributed writing slopes

In recent years, collectors and dealers have attributed many unlabelled writing slopes to Richard Dowling. Where do these attributions stand given the evidence that we now have? The current evidence supports the attribution to Richard Dowling of those writing slopes that are virtually identical to the labelled examples described above. The example shown (**plate 12**) can definitely be attributed to Richard Dowling, as the whole set of his characteristic workmanship and inlaid bandings are present. The height and pattern of timbers used vary slightly from that seen in the similarly sized NGA writing slope (**plate 6**), but that is to be expected as items were handmade not machine made, and available timber supplies would have varied with time.

I strongly suspect that Dowling may have made writing slopes in other designs. I have seen high-quality slopes in other designs that I suspect could be his, but with no labelled examples of these different designs, we can't be sure. Therefore, I urge caution about attributions to Richard Dowling unless they show clear evidence of his distinctive work features as identified and described in this article.

There were many fine cabinetmakers in VDL/Tasmania and they may well have tried to cash-in on the prestige of owning high-quality work. That purchasers were more concerned with ownership than the maker was demonstrated by owners entering items into national and international exhibitions under their own names, without mentioning the maker.

Until we discover further examples that have a Dowling label but not the above-listed set of characteristics, we cannot attribute writing slopes with other designs to Richard Dowling. Because the style of work, Tunbridge Ware, was widely made in the UK and possibly elsewhere, many writing slopes with difficult to identify timbers but superb workmanship are likely to be found; most will have no connection with Richard Dowling, maker, Van Diemen's Land.

Boxes

Many 'boxes' have been attributed to Richard Dowling in recent years. What of them? Some of these have rope pattern inlay arris edges and string inlay bordered banding similar to those seen in his labelled writing slopes. Unfortunately, to my knowledge, none are known bearing a label and with their original tray or other internal fittings, where such a label may have been. However, 19th-century accounts record that Richard Dowling made boxes.

Some degree of confidence can be found when an item demonstrates a set of characteristics and similar high-standard workmanship to that seen in Dowling's labelled works. The work box (**plate 13**) shows string-inlay bordered rope pattern inlays, very similar to Dowling's work (see below for an attributed example with both the bordered rope banding and the bordered feather banding). This box exhibits similar layout, with a central motif and fan decorations internal to the mosaic borders. Because the remainder of the work is of similar quality and style, I would be confident that this can be attributed to Dowling. I do wish I had a signed example to be absolutely sure, so hope that this article prompts the discovery of such an item.

A tea caddy

While flicking through the pages of Fahy and Simpson (an enjoyable pastime), I noted a tea caddy with some of Dowling's distinctive inlay bandings in the collection of the Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery (QVMAG), Launceston.⁵⁵ The QVMAG tea caddy is described by Fahy and Simpson as 'Of classical sarcophagus shape, this tea caddy is a testament to the high level of workmanship achieved by its unknown maker'. So I made a visit to Launceston to see it.

The tea caddy (**plates 14–16**) is the most superb inlaid Australian tea caddy that I have seen. In my opinion, the maker is far from unknown. This shows an abundance of Dowling's distinctive complex, multi-part, Tunbridge Ware-like mosaic banding inlays. Richard Dowling has to have made it, and he has excelled himself.

The raised top of the lid is a flat rectangular area, within which are inset

a range of different timber veneers in a complex design. In the very centre is a small circle of what appears to be Huon Pine, surrounded by a 16-point star of Satinwood set into an oval cartouche of Musk, bordered by Dowling's string-inlay rope banding. Outside the oval is a fan of radiating segments of different timbers (named in the included timber map, attributed to the first owner of the tea caddy). The arris edge of the raised section on the lid has Dowling's fine rope edge arris banding. The lid cascades down in layers, each layer delineated by Dowling's string-inlay bordered rope banding, which, as usual for Dowling, reverses direction in the middle of the run. The arris edges where the four faces of the lid meet are also adorned with Dowling's fine rope edge banding.

The front face of the tea caddy displays a number of Dowling's design characteristics: the outer band is Blackwood and the four corners are decorated with modified squares of different coloured/*chatoyance* timber; there is an inlaid shield-shaped timber escutcheon, and the central veneered panel of Huon Pine is delineated with Dowling's string-inlay bordered feather banding.

This is where the design varies considerably from Dowling's signed writing slopes. The front displays two of Dowling's 12-pointed star inlays described as being made of 'Sheoke'. In Tasmania this would have to be one of the species of *Allocasuarina* as there are no members of the genus *Casuarina* (She Oak) on the island.

The introduction of a dual-feature design element on the front of an item that is otherwise so distinctive of Dowling's workmanship provides a possible link to connect Dowling to a number of boxes attributed to him. However, unless those items also display some of Dowling's characteristics we should be cautious about attribution.

The 19th-century timber map with the tea caddy (**plate 16**) gives further support to the idea that Dowling used only Australian timbers. Above the plan reads: "Plan of Top of Box. All the woods are the indigenous growth of Van Diemen's Land."

Most of the timber veneers to the top are identified on the plan and include, for the



21.

Attributed to Richard James Dowling (1820/22–1867), *occasional table*, edge detail. Segments of differently figured Huon Pine that radiate out from the centre. The segmented circles are delineated by string inlay bordered rope pattern banding. Similar detailed banding inlays were characteristic of Richard Dowling's work. Private collection, Queensland

width of the box, from the outer bands inwards "Huon Pine (Pronounced Youn), Myrtle, Musk (light) and Blackwood." The shorter panels on the side of the lid are the same timbers although labelled slightly differently: "Huon Pine, Myrtle, Light Musk and Blackwood."

The 20 segments radiating out from the oval cartouche on the top of the caddy are labelled (from the 12 o'clock position, clockwise to the 5.30 position) "Huon Pine, Sheoke [*Allocasuarina*], Blackwood, Musk, Myrtle, Huon Pine, Myrtle, Musk, Blackwood, Sheoke." The other half of the oval repeats this sequence.

At the base of the timber plan it reads "Sides of Raised Top - Dark Musk" and "Stars in front of box - Sheoke."



22.

Attributed to Richard James Dowling (1820/22–1867), *occasional table* column detail. The octagonally shaped, veneered column is in two sections. The lower section is slightly tapered and is subtended by a rounded moulding of Drooping Sheoak timber. The higher, taller and more tapered section of the column is subtended by a more strongly convex moulding of Blackwood. Private collection, Queensland

Furniture items

Historical descriptions of furniture made by Dowling make it likely that examples of his furniture may still exist but no labelled examples are known. Two extant items of furniture can be attributed to Richard Dowling. The first is the pole firescreen found in 1999 in northern Tasmania (plates 2, 17, 18, 19). It lacks a maker's label but is, in my opinion, definitely by Dowling's hand, as will be clear from the comparison photographs.

The screen consists of a picture frame holding a very fine wool, silk and beadwork image of a classically beautiful young woman with ringlets of blond hair surrounded by curlicues and other flourishes. The frame is mounted on a pole, which is supported by a two-height octagonal column on an octagonal base sitting on four, flat, turned bun feet.

The outward-sloping frame shows many of the same details seen in Dowling's labelled writing slopes. It is made principally of Myrtle burl, Huon Pine and burl Blackwood veneered on a cedar carcass. Around the outside arris edge of the entire frame, including the corner blocks, is a band of very fine parquetry mosaic rope inlay in a pattern exactly as seen on Dowling's labelled writing slopes. As with the writing slopes, the direction of the parquetry rope inlay edge banding reverses direction in the mid-centre of the run (plate 17).

The corners of the frame are blocks of burl Blackwood, visually square in outline. They are, of course, two-faceted to fit the shape of the outward-sloping frame. Between the corner blocks the frame is veneered in three bands. The outer band is Myrtle burl, the middle band is Huon Pine and an inner band is made of Vandyke triangles of contrasting coloured timbers: Blackwood and Huon Pine (plate 18). The interstitial joints between the bands are made of the same very fine string-inlay-edged feather pattern parquetry design as seen in Dowling's labelled writing slopes.

The octagonal column is in two sections. Each section is capped and subtended by a solid timber moulding. Both column sections are veneered: the upper section is burl Tasmanian Myrtle strung with fine lines of Blackwood; the lower section is burl Blackwood string-inlaid with fine lines of Huon Pine or Satinwood; both sections are inlaid in a cross pattern (plate 19).

The column sits on an octagonal base, veneered in three concentric bands. The inner band is birds'-eye Huon Pine, the central band is burl Blackwood and the outer band is Myrtle burl. The three bands are separated by lines of Dowling's distinctive string-inlay bordered feather banding. The inlay reverses in direction in the centre of each segment but is not

terminated by a square as the joints are not at 90 degrees.

Occasional table

Nineteenth-century documents mention tables made by Richard Dowling. To the best of my knowledge, only one table bearing some of Richard Dowling's distinctive parquetry pattern detailing and other signature features is extant.

In 2018 Andrew Simpson advertised an "Exhibition Table" describing it as "An Important Exhibition quality Huon Pine, Casuarina and Satin Box veneered Occasional Table attributed to Richard Dowling, O'Brien's Bridge, Tasmania, 19th century patina with restorations" (plate 20).

This table with star-pattern top shows many of the distinctive characteristics of Richard Dowling's work, including high quality workmanship. The table-top differs from signed Dowling pieces by being in the round, which necessitates design changes. However, some of Dowling's distinctive 'signature' is present in the use of parquetry mosaic, string inlay bordered banding, contrasting coloured or *chatoyance* timbers and delineation of areas with detailed-design inlays (plate 21).

The top of the table is parquetry inlaid in five concentric circles, each delineated by a band of rope pattern inlay with a plain string inlay band to both sides. The centre is a 32-pointed star of a dark-coloured *Allocasuarina*, set into Huon Pine. Outside that is the first delineation line of string-bordered rope inlay, followed by a ring of 32 more star points of what appears to be light-coloured Blackwood (sapwood), set into an unusually lace-like, figured timber identified by a wood technologist as Satinwood (which my wood samples usually show as very plain satin-like figure possibly indicating that the example in the table is what is called spalted). Outer concentric rings are segments of contrasting, differently figured and *chatoyance* Huon Pine.

The column has some common features with the firescreen. It is in two height sections, both octagonal, of different widths and both expertly veneered (plate 22). At the base and between the two sections are mouldings similar to the mouldings seen

in similar positions on the firescreen. The lowest collar solid timber moulding appears to be *Allocasuarina verticillata* (Drooping Sheoak). The table sits on a Huon Pine veneered tri-form base.

The table column is veneered in a very similar manner to the column of the firescreen. It is less highly decorated than the firescreen as it lacks the diamond pattern string inlay seen on that piece. Unlike the firescreen, the column tapers towards the top.

These differences are easy to understand when we remember that the firescreen is designed to be seen from the front, with the column a significant feature, whereas the table is designed to be seen from the top, with the column a secondary visual feature.

Summary of attribution evidence

Solid stylistic evidence exists for attributing these two items of furniture to Richard Dowling. The outside edges of the firescreen show Dowling's characteristic micro-mosaic aris-edge rope inlay. The base of the firescreen shows Dowling's characteristic micro-mosaic feather banding inlays with adjacent string inlay. In my view, that makes it virtually certain that the firescreen was made by Richard Dowling.

The high quality of the workmanship seen in the circular top of the occasional table, combined with the style of the star design, the string inlay bordered detailed banding between circumferential rings of timber segments and the common design features of the columns support the attribution of the table to Dowling.

Timbers in unlabelled items

Some unlabelled items possess the same timbers, inlay bandings and workmanship as Dowling's labelled writing slopes, which justifies their attribution to him. However, others have attributed to Dowling some items that include imported timber species. I have not been able to examine those examples to form a view as to their maker.

Dowling might have made commission pieces in timbers selected by the buyer, but all Dowling's labelled pieces use only Australian, especially Tasmanian, timbers,

which indicate that he was part of the colonial movement keen to promote the colony's unique timbers. This is corroborated by Governor Denison choosing to send one of Dowling's tables back to England as an advertisement for the superb Tasmanian timbers.⁵⁶ Further, the items that we know Dowling himself exhibited publicly during his lifetime, the "inlaid writing-desks and dressing-cases" at the 1861 Victorian exhibition, made much of the fact that they were made "of colonial wood".⁵⁷ Unless labelled examples exhibiting exotic timbers come to light, I regard it as unlikely Dowling made them.

Conclusions

We now know more about Richard Dowling as a person – where he came from, who he married, how many children he and his wife Jane had, the areas where he lived and worked and his relocation to Victoria. Because of the location of the marriage and his description in the records of the births (and one death) of his children it is certain that the Richard Dowling "Carpenter," who married in 1849 was the cabinetmaker who made the writing slopes and labelled some of them "R Dowling, O'Brien's Bridge VDL".

There is no doubt that he was a highly expert designer and master craftsman who made writing slopes between 1849 and 1861. Existing labelled pieces show that he used only Australian timbers in his work, which stand proudly among the best Australian craftsmanship. The evidence presented here from 19th-century records and extant examples of furniture with Dowling's distinctive work and design motifs show that he also made larger, parquetry veneered tables and other fine furniture items. We know that Dowling exhibited some of his furniture at Government House, Hobart (although newspapers misattributed them), which may explain the lack of a label on them. I speculate that items made as commissions rather than stock items were also not labelled.

We still lack definitive information about Richard's arrival in VDL and where he was trained to such a high level of skill. Wherever he was trained, Richard Dowling was very expert in the manufacture and

use of Tunbridge Ware-like mosaic inlays in rope, feather and string inlay designs. Cutting, assembling and gluing the very small components of those inlays, then fixing them into position requires very great accuracy and a high level of skill by the cabinetmaker. The known centre of such workmanship was near Tunbridge Wells in the UK, but no evidence has yet been found to show that Richard trained there or in any other of the number of manufactories producing that ware in the UK or Ireland.

There are confusing records of a number of men named Richard Dowling being in Hobart in the period 1846 to 1858. One came as a convict and there is a record that he became a free man, but the evidence suggests that he was not the cabinetmaker.

Disconcertingly, I can find no records of the arrival in Hobart of any men (other than the convict) by the name of Richard Dowling between 1846 and 1852 although there are departure records for a number of men with that name leaving Van Diemen's Land during that period.

Richard disappeared from the Tasmanian records after either 1857 or 1858 (the latter if it was his insolvency that was reported). We now know that Richard and Jane went to Victoria, where they lived for eight or nine years, and that both of them died in 1867, a couple of months apart, and are buried in Queenscliff cemetery in an unmarked grave.

Labelled examples of Dowling's work have been used as a basis for the attribution of very similarly made writing slopes as well as unsigned items including a box, a tea caddy and two items of furniture. Newly rediscovered 19th-century records of the fact that Dowling made furniture provide further support for the furniture attributions.

NOTES

1. BDM Victoria, death reg. no. 6537/1867, <https://my.rio.bdm.vic.gov.au/efamily-history/5d438fec4b3c532324f56c59/record/5c65379c4aba80ac31084ae7?q=efamily&givenName=Richard%20James&familyName=DOWLING> accessed 2 Aug 2019.
2. Van Diemen's Land was formally re-named Tasmania on 1 January 1856.
3. K Fahy & A Simpson, *Australian Furniture, Pictorial History and Dictionary 1788 – 1938*. Casuarina Press, Sydney 1998, p 46 & pl 85.
4. Mossgreen Auction, Melbourne 22 Feb 2015

- lot 139.
5. <http://americanmarquetrysociety.com/Marquetry.html> accessed 29 May 2018.
 6. <http://www.antiquecollector.uk.com/articles/tunbridgeware.htm> accessed 14 Jul 2018.
 7. Y. Barber, "Digitisation for Researchers", *Australiana* 41.2, 2019 p 44.
 8. <https://www.linc.tas.gov.au/how-to/Pages/Names-Index-content.aspx> accessed 29 May 2018.
 9. A. Alexander, *Glenorchy 1804-1964*, sketches and maps by Mollie Tomlin, Glenorchy City Council 1986 p 5.
 10. *Ibid* p 7.
 11. *Ibid* p 5.
 12. *Ibid* p 12.
 13. See n 1.
 14. Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office: Registrar Generals Department, Register of Marriages, RGD37/1/8 1849 [https://stors.tas.gov.au/RGD37-1-8\\$init=RGD37-1-8p129j2k](https://stors.tas.gov.au/RGD37-1-8$init=RGD37-1-8p129j2k) accessed 20 March 2018
 15. J. H. Allan *An history of the Church of England Parish of Glenorchy and associated districts*. Church of England Parish of Glenorchy, 1969 p 30.
 16. Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office: Registrar Generals Department, Register of Marriages, p 111, CON52-1-3 <https://stors.tas.gov.au/CON52-1-3p041j2k> accessed 21 Mar 2018.
 17. Some convicts' marriage applications were not approved.
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 29. <https://guides.slv.vic.gov.au/interexhib/1861to62> accessed 7 Aug 2019.
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What's in a name?

Well, not as much as one might hope. We know from his death record that Richard James Dowling, cabinetmaker, of O'Brien's Bridge, came from Castleconnell, Ireland. Discovering his birth and early life is difficult, because many Irish records have been lost. Irish botanist and historian E. Charles Nelson writes:¹

Irish records were largely burnt in 1922² during the civil war, when the Four Courts in Dublin was destroyed by fire. This means that most civil records and many church records (especially of Anglican (Church of Ireland)) parishes no longer exist. Roman Catholic records often do not exist simply because they were never kept. So, finding anything about him is going to be pot luck. Finding anything pre-1841 when the first census was taken is almost a lost cause.

Four men named Richard Dowling are recorded arriving in Australia. None of their details fit our cabinetmaker.

An assisted immigrant

*A Return of the Disposal of Immigrants by the Ship Charles Kerr from Limerick arrived at Sydney on the 8th January 1839*³ (Return) lists Richard Dowling, 26, from Castleconnell, Ireland, who travelled with his wife, 19. The Irish government had chartered the *Charles Kerr* to transport assisted migrants.^{4,5} He was described as a 'Carpenter' on the ship's register when it arrived in Sydney. The Return shows that Richard was initially employed in Sydney by the Government.

This cannot be our cabinetmaker. He was already married and 26 in 1839, so would have been 36 in 1849, when our cabinetmaker married Jane Eyres with a stated age of 29 years (although his death certificate suggests he may have been 27).⁶

I have found no other assisted immigrants of the same name.

Was he a convict?

Three convicts named Richard Dowling were transported to Australia in the early 1800s. Their details do not match our cabinetmaker. One was English, another came from Castleconnell in Ireland, while he and the third were both tried in nearby Limerick City.

The first convict Richard Dowling arrived in Sydney in 1800.⁷ He was tried in Somerset in 1798 and sentenced to 14 years.⁸ Sent to Sydney on the *Royal Admiral*, he was most probably the convict who was hanged in 1814 for stealing cattle.⁹

Another Richard Dowling, from near Castleconnell, born in 1812 or 1815, was a house servant who was tried in Limerick City in 1838 for receiving stolen goods and sentenced to seven years transportation. He was married with one child, and transported to Sydney.¹⁰ What happened to him is unknown. However, a house servant seven to 10 years older than our Richard is an unlikely candidate for the expert cabinetmaker in VDL.

A third convict Richard Dowling¹¹ was sentenced for receiving stolen goods (linen) at “Limerick City, 14 May 1839: 7 Yrs” and arrived in Hobart on 3 March 1844. On arrival he was documented as “Roman Catholic Can Read and Write” and trade as a “Coachman” aged 33 (so born in 1811). This Richard Dowling was first sent to Norfolk Island in 1840. He was transferred to Hobart on 14 February 1844 via the *Maitland* and gained his “Free Certificate 461” on 14 May 1846. The same conduct record records that he was extensively tattooed with Catholic religious symbolism including a crucifixion scene.

Other sources suggest that his conduct record may contain some inaccuracies. The *Limerick Chronicle* records on 18 May 1839 p 4¹² that Richard Dowling was convicted on 10 May and sentenced to seven years transportation for “stealing a number of brass plates and knockers off the doors of several inhabitants.”

Other discrepancies rule out this

Irish convict as our cabinetmaker. It is unlikely that a coachman would have the training to be a cabinetmaker. His conduct record gives no indication that he was a skilled tradesman as he was put to field labour. The record also states he was “Married”. On Norfolk Island he was punished on 24 June 1840 for “Careless field labor”. On 31 December 1841 he was punished for “Refusing to Bathe”. In 1845 he was given four days solitary confinement for “Misconduct talking to a prisoner charged with Larceny” and later that year he was again admonished. All that indicates a pretty rough and disreputable character without trade skills useful in the colony.

Educated or skilled convicts were usually recognised by the Colonial Government and put to work at their trade. A cabinetmaker would have been tasked with making furniture and useful items for the government. Lawrence Butler is a well-known example of that approach.¹³

The convict’s age argues against his being our cabinetmaker: he would have been 38 by 1849, while Richard Dowling the cabinetmaker was 29 when he married Jane Eyres. Nine years is a big discrepancy and he was already married by the time the record was closed in 1846. As well as being illegal, bigamy was a mortal sin, so no devout Catholic would risk going to hell.

Was he a free settler into Hobart?

No Richard Dowling appears in the lists of free settlers arriving in Hobart; One explanation for a lack of detailed immigration records is that “until 1854, many unassisted passengers (particularly steerage passengers) were not listed individually on a passenger list.”¹⁴ Unless those passengers were listed in a newspaper or other list of the day, there may be no record of their arrival.

Summary

A possible family relationship of the men (at least three) by the name of Richard Dowling from Castleconnell and nearby who came to Australia is

intriguing but may never be known. However, the name Richard was commonly used for males in the various Dowling lineages, which, coupled with the loss of Irish records, makes it hard to trace the VDL cabinetmaker’s origins.

We have no definite records for the arrival of Richard Dowling, cabinetmaker of O’Brien’s Bridge. We can speculate about a possible family connection with other Castleconnell woodworkers, but there is no proof.

Richard probably came as a free settler and travelled steerage, so there is no record of his arrival.

NOTES

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Design elements in Richard Dowling's work

Labelled examples

Several clearly discernible design elements appear in labelled Dowling pieces and can be used to identify his work. Dowling's distinctive, complex, multi-part, Tunbridge Ware-like mosaic banding inlays are the most critical and are essential elements in attributing an item to Dowling. The labelled writing slopes have all the design elements listed below:

- Extensive use of Tasmanian decorative timbers in parquetry patterns.
- Radial star inlay centres and sometimes radial quarter star/fan corner decoration.
- An arris edge 'rope' inlay pattern of very small pieces of alternating different coloured timbers in a single-angle striped array. Possibly unique to Dowling's work in Australia, the angle of the stripe reverses at the midpoint of the run. This 'rope pattern mosaic inlay' is seen on the outer arris edges of every one of Dowling's labelled writing slopes that I have seen.
- Distinctive mosaic feather banding (sometimes called herringbone or chevron pattern) like two rope bandings side by side but at opposite angles to each other – looking like the barbs in a feather or a herring's ribs, referred to here as feather inlay banding. Dowling's own version of this is always bordered on both sides by a line of either dark or light timber string inlay. The longer runs of Dowling's string-inlay bordered feather banding inlays always reverse in direction/angle at the mid-point (short, vertical runs of the banding on the ends of writing slopes often did not reverse direction). In rectangular items the run is terminated by a small square block of contrasting coloured timber that is the same width as the combined feather and string inlay band.

- Sections of different timber veneer inlays are always separated by a line of one of Dowling's distinctive bandings.
- Rectangular faces of writing slopes have squares of differently coloured or different *chatoyance* timber at each corner.
- Writing slopes have a twelve-pointed star inlay to the centre of the top, with each point comprised of two different-coloured timbers.
- Escutcheons are inlaid timber in a shield-shape.
- A set of small drawers hidden under the pen and ink compartment, concealed with a spring-loaded catch built into the side of the writing slope. The drawers have ribbon pulls, not knobs.

Attributed examples

Items that I attribute to Dowling may not have all of the above elements but all have some of the essential inlay and banding characteristics. They also combine some other distinctive design features. These attributed pieces could provide a link to some of the general-purpose boxes that may be attributed to Dowling. In items that I attribute to Dowling, the most significant departure from the set of characters seen in writing slopes is the substitution of string-inlay bordered rope banding for his feather banding. The best example of a 'missing link' between signed items and attributed items is the tea caddy in the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in Launceston (**plates 14–15**). It has many of the characteristics of labelled items and some of the characteristics seen in attributed boxes. Interestingly, it shows Dowling's design flexibility. Because the lower faces of the sarcophagus shape are tapered, they are not rectangular as in the boxes and writing slopes, but rhomboidal. Dowling followed the same design principles in the tea caddy as the rectangular faces but instead of squares of differently coloured or different *chatoyance* timber in each corner, he has used rhombus-shaped blocks. Similarly, the terminal block at the end of his feather inlay is a rhombus instead of a square block.

Jane Dowling

Richard's wife Jane Dowling née Eyres (1819/21–1867) seems to have been a volatile character who was often involved in conflicts with other women in a similar social position to herself. Researching her story revealed some useful information about her husband and his work.

Jane's convict conduct record reveals that she had been convicted four times before being transported.¹ Jane was convicted on 30 November 1846 for stealing cotton cloth and money, with her trade given as "Laundry Maid". Her conduct record states that she was a Protestant, that her "Native Place" [birthplace] was Bolton and that Jane could both read and write.

Both her origin and literacy level may be errors. Being able to read and write does not accord with Jane's occupation of laundry maid, nor with how she 'signed by her mark' with a cross on her marriage certificate. Jane's death certificate states that she was born in Manchester² but Bolton and Manchester are close, about 18 km by foot today, so the apparent conflict may not be significant.

I cannot find a record for the birth of a Jane Eyres in Bolton or Manchester around 1819–1821. Before 1837 birth and baptism records in the UK were kept regionally and depended upon the local clergy for accuracy, reliability and the survival of records. However, Ancestry.co.uk includes census, baptism and birth records that list four females named Jane Eyres born around that time:³

1. a baptism in Lineham [Lyneham], Wiltshire, on 26 September 1819.⁴ Lyneham is 245 km from Manchester, so an unlikely match;
2. a baptism on 21 May 1820 at Deverill Hill, Wiltshire⁵ about 290 km from Manchester and an unlikely match;
3. a baptism on 16 Nov 1821 in Louth, Lincolnshire,⁶ about 160 km;
4. a baptism on 6 March 1822 in

Leek, Staffordshire (father John, mother Ann).⁷ Leek is within 50 km of Manchester, though in the opposite direction and further from Bolton.

Any or none of these may be the woman who married Richard Dowling.

Jane was a convict in 1849. She served her full seven years, obtained her ticket of leave on 27 April 1852 and her conduct record notes “Free Cert 13 December 1853. Herself”.

The UK National Archive, Kew^{8,9} contains information about Jane while on board the *Cadet* on her voyage to Australia. C. R. Kinnear MD, Surgeon Superintendent on the *Cadet*, reports that Jane was put on the ‘sick list’ on 11 September 1847 for sores that Kinnear attributed to syphilis. He observed

she was of a cachectic habit and had evidently led a very profligate life.

Kinnear appears to have had a judgemental attitude and little sympathy for his patient, applying a disinfectant solution of chloride of lime to the sores. “Cachectic” refers to a pathological condition of general ill health with emaciation, today usually associated with cancer or a chronic infectious disease.¹⁰ However, malnutrition can produce the same condition.

While it is impossible to diagnose definitively after such a long time and without seeing the patient, medical practitioners I have consulted suggest that Kinnear’s diagnosis was probably incorrect. Both these professionals and online information about syphilis^{11,12} say that obvious sores (mucous membrane lesions) occur about four to 10 weeks after infection, and are signs of the secondary stage of the disease. Those sores heal by themselves, so, if it had been syphilis, Kinnear’s treatment would not have had any real effect.

Convict transports took about four months to sail from England to Australia.¹³ The *Cadet* departed England on 9 August 1847,¹⁴ and Jane’s sores appeared about a month after departure and nine months after her conviction. For the sores to have been second stage

syphilis, it would have meant that Jane was infected with the disease *after* her conviction and maybe after embarkation. More likely causes for the sores were an infection of Phthisis (tuberculosis) or chronic malnutrition. Multiple sores could also have been what were known as school sores, a bacterial skin infection common in children and the undernourished.

Once she arrived in VDL, Jane seems to have kept on the straight and narrow until 2 May 1850. Then Jane Dowling, was fined five shillings for “using indecent language”.

Trouble erupted on 19 April 1855. Jane fought with her neighbour, Mrs Agnes Bailey,¹⁵ about a dress Jane had sold to Agnes but for which Jane claimed she had not been paid. The *Colonial Times* reported the hearing in the Kangaroo Point Police Office:¹⁶

Female Quarrels – Mrs Jane Dowling, of O’Brien’s Bridge, yesterday charged Mrs Agnes Bailey, her neighbour, with assaulting her with a stick, on the 2nd April ... The charge was that Mrs Bailey had bought a dress of complainant which she had not paid for, and that Mrs Dowling tried to tear it off her back, by which the squabble was caused, Mrs Dowling being further an aggressor by throwing water over her debtor. The evidence was contradictory, and ... [the record is incomplete].

The same month, Jane had a dispute with Agnes Daley; a misprint for the same Agnes Bailey, formerly Agnes Currans, who had married Joseph Bailey. Agnes was a ticket-of-leave convict, sentenced to seven years’ transportation on 24 April 1851 for stealing a watch, with two previous convictions for stealing shawls and money. Agnes had arrived on 26 January 1852¹⁷ and had been in trouble since her arrival, having absconded twice. Her conduct record noted that she had “hard” eyes. Agnes was convicted on Jane’s charge as described below:¹⁸

Mrs Jane Dowling, of O’Brien’s Bridge, yesterday, at the police court, preferred a charge of misconduct against Agnes Daley, a passholder [convict with a ticket of leave], residing in the same place, for grossly abusing her on the 16th inst.

Mr Fenwick, the presiding magistrate, found the defendant Agnes Daley/Bailey guilty and sentenced her to one month’s imprisonment.¹⁹ The court record is significant for Richard’s story because it mentions that he made tables.

Jane next appears in the records in Queenscliff, Victoria. On 31 December 1860 the *Geelong Advertiser*²⁰ notes that Mrs Henry Reed, wife of a pilot for vessels entering Port Phillip Bay, engaged Jane Dowling to assist her with the birth of her child. Mrs Reed also engaged a chemist, Edward Lane, for medical assistance. Mrs Reed died giving birth and Lane was committed for manslaughter.

In March 1866, Jane brought a charge against Mary White for abusive language.²¹

Jane Dowling v Mary A. White – For abusive language... The evidence went to show that very improper language was used on both sides. The plaintiff just as bad as defendant. The Bench dismissed the case.

In April 1866, Jane accused Esther Podger of abusive language in the Queenscliff police court.²² That case was postponed and the outcome is unknown.

There are no more references to Jane until her death in Queenscliff in 1867. Births, Deaths and Marriages, Victoria²³ records that Jane was a “Lodging House keeper” and died aged 48 years on 31 January 1867 from “First, inflammation of stomach, Second, ulceration and perforation. Duration 4 weeks”. In modern terminology, Jane’s cause of death was a “ruptured peptic ulcer” – a gastric ulcer which has eaten through the stomach lining. This could have been dealt with only by urgent surgery. Neither Jane’s nor Richard’s deaths were related to what would be expected from tertiary syphilis.

Jane's stated age at death would make her year of birth 1819. That age agrees with Jane's convict conduct record but not with the marriage record, which gave her age as 28 in 1849, equating to being born in 1821. Jane may have deliberately understated her age at the wedding to pretend that she was younger than Richard.

The Queenscliff Historical Museum suggests that the lodging house that Jane kept was in a house called Sefton²⁴ in King Street, Queenscliff. Three houses in a row had been built by or for the pilots who guided ships into and out of Port Phillip Bay. The house next door to Sefton, Alikum, was the home of pilot Henry Reed and his wife Martha, who had called upon Jane to attend her at the birth of her child.

Jane left behind her husband, Richard (who reported her death) and three living children, Catherine Elizabeth, 16, Sarah Jane, 9, and Richard Thomas, 4.

Nine months after Jane's death²⁵ "Kate Dowling, a respectable looking young girl" was before the police court in Geelong charged with thefts in Queenscliff. She was sentenced to one month's imprisonment. There is no proof that this was Catherine Elizabeth.²⁶

Summary

Jane Dowling was obviously a strong-minded woman who stood her ground and fought to defend what she believed were her rights. Having come from an impoverished background, then being convicted and transported for theft, she found a new life in Australia. However, the difficult economic conditions during the 1850s and 1860s meant that she and Richard had to work hard to keep themselves and their family fed. Jane's bad language and disputes with other women could be seen in 21st-century terms as a borderline personality disorder. However, if we consider her background and the conditions in our fledgling colonies, such behaviour may have been much more common. When people are struggling to survive they do not always have the fortitude to be 'genteel'. Jane and Richard stuck

together through the good times (servants for a convict woman!) and the bad times and then died fairly young after a hard life, but, as I see it, she stood her ground along the way.

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NOTES

1. [https://stors.tas.gov.au/CON41-1-15\\$init=CON41-1-15p55](https://stors.tas.gov.au/CON41-1-15$init=CON41-1-15p55) accessed 21 Mar 2018.
2. BDM Victoria, death reg. 3260/1867, <https://my.rio.bdm.vic.gov.au/efamily-history/5d438e6a4b3c532324f56c39/record/5c65379c4aba80ac31084296?q=efamily&givenName=Jane&familyName=DOWLING> accessed 2 Aug 2019.
3. Ancestry includes other people named Jane Eyres who either gained the name Eyres by marriage, or who appear in death or census records as living in the UK after Jane Eyres/Dowling left on the Cadet. These can be excluded.
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6. https://search.ancestry.co.uk/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&dbid=9841&h=160974607&tid=&pid=&usePUB=true&_phsrc=UaG5&_phstart=successSource.
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12. <https://www.cdc.gov/std/syphilis/stdfact-syphilis.htm>.
13. https://jenwilletts.com/convict_ship_edden_1840.htm.
14. See n 3.
15. Agnes Currans, 20, servant, was married to Joseph Bailey, 26, labourer, on 14 September 1852 by the Reverend W R Bennet (who had officiated at Richard and Jane's wedding) at Kensington Chapel. [https://stors.tas.gov.au/RGD37-1-11\\$init=RGD37-1-11p235](https://stors.tas.gov.au/RGD37-1-11$init=RGD37-1-11p235).
16. *Colonial Times* 19 Apr 1855 p 2.
17. [https://stors.tas.gov.au/CON41-1-32\\$init=CON41-1-32p47](https://stors.tas.gov.au/CON41-1-32$init=CON41-1-32p47).
18. *Colonial Times* 28 Apr 1855 p 2.
19. Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office: Convict Employment Records p 212 (1849-1853) CON30-1-2: <https://stors.tas.gov.au/CON30-1-2p152.jpg> accessed 14 Apr 2018.
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21. *Geelong Advertiser* 29 Mar 1866 p 3.
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24. <https://vhd.heritagecouncil.vic.gov.au/places/120617> accessed 2 Oct 2019.
25. *Geelong Advertiser* 29 Oct 1867 p 3.
26. BDM Victoria records a Catherine Dowling married Edward Maher in 1875, while Sarah Jane Dowling married Chas Rosenthal in 1889.



Dr David Bedford

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