James Constable’s Diaries by John Sewell

In June 1980, Edward Constable of Collaroy gave the Museum a set of his grandfather’s diaries covering years 1881 – 1899. Several years were missing. James used a “Letts No 35 Austral-asian Rough Diary or Scribbling Journal with a week at each opening of two pages, price one shilling.” He filled each day to the full, ending each day with a description of the weather. After copying, we sent the diaries to the Mitchell Library. Kate Boyce used the diaries in an article in our December 2000 Journal “James Constable – Boatman.” Now, recognising their insights into Moruya life, it is our intention to use them in more detail over several forthcoming Journals.

The Constable Family
John Oldfield Constable, his wife Ann and nine children arrived on the Tantivy on 3rd September 1854. They were a farming family from Norfolk. John, the eldest child, with whom James later worked, was 26 years old. James, the second youngest, was eight. They were a prolific family, occupying 14 pages of Kate Boyce’s Pioneer Directory – the sons fathered 63 new Constables. At a family reunion in Camden in 1989 and a second in Moruya in 1991, it was reckoned that John and Ann’s descendants would number near the thousand mark.

The Puntman
James, occupation “puntman”, was married by the Reverend Alfred Puddicombe at St John’s Church, Moruya, on 9th January 1878 to Isabella (Bella) Wyatt. Her father Elias was a punt operator, and an agent for the Illawarra Steam Navigation Company, living at Tuffwood, which is beside Preddy’s Wharf.

When the first diary opens on 1st January 1881, James was 34. His first child Alice was one year old and Isabella was pregnant with their second. It is not clear where the family were then living but it seems to have been between town and the Heads. The diary starts:

1881 January
1 Saturday. Circumcision. Dog licences to be taken out.

Pulled Foam down to Heads with Bella and Tottie. In the evening sailed all the way up. Very cloudy afternoon.

“Pulled”, used frequently in the diary, means “rowed”. “Foam” was a small sailing boat which he later sold. “Bella” would be his wife and “Tottie” could have been her 14 year old sister Charlotte.

The following week’s entries introduce his work with punts. He and brother John operated two punts, one big, one small.

“Took punt up with back freight. Discharged it”

“Took punt up to Tucks, got 30 bags corn. Brought punt back to town. Had head winds both ways”

“Down at the town loading, took punt down to Strahans”

“Took in corn and potatoes at Strahans then took punt down to the mud flat. In the evening rode Topsy home”

9 Sunday. Fire Insurance Ceases.
At home in the morning. Rode down to the Heads afternoon. Took punt to steamer in the night. Came home in the evening on Harry.

The punts picked up produce from farmers for transhipment to Sydney on the coastal steamers and in return took “back freight” from the ships to town or to the farms. It would be interesting to have the dimensions of the punts. They would be flat bottomed to work in shallow waters and wide enough to carry substantial loads. In his entry for 28th February, James reports that brother John sailed the little punt to Flood’s so they must have been fitted with masts and sails. There is an interesting report in the newspaper of 4th September 1886:

NEW PUNT.- On Wednesday last was quietly launched at Mr Goodin’s Glenduart saw mill a fine new punt, built by Mr Thos Gildea, to the order of our old friend Mr John Constable of Newstead. She appears to be well and faithfully built, will carry about 35 tons, and will be a great acquisition to the carrying trade of the river.

A trip to Sydney
On the 6th January, the diary records “Got carpet bag. Alice went to Sydney by the Bay.” Alice was his sister in law, Alice Wyatt.

13 Thursday. Left Moruya in Corrigan’s coach to Bay. Started to Sydney on SS Hunter at 7pm. Rain all night. Very rough seas.

14 Friday. Morning at sea. Passed SS Kiama at 8am. Arrived in Sydney at noon. Showery in the afternoon. Got dinner at Martindale’s then in evening dined at Captain McArthur’s. Slept at Collins Caledonian Hotel Pyrmont.

15 Saturday. At McArthur’s all morning. Alice and I went to see Harriet afternoon. See her at her place. At night went to the markets. Wrote a letter home.

16 Sunday. Morning went over to the Company’s wharf. Afternoon went to gardens with Alice and Harriet. Fine

17 Monday. Walking about Sydney all day. Bought one pot, one kitchener, one boiler, one drum of tar. Went to the play at
night with Robert and Johny. Had to walk over the bridge home. Kiama went to get repaired. Went to Kiss’s to look for vehicle(?) seen none to suit. Fine.


19 Wednesday. At Sydney walking about all day by myself. At Kiss’s saleyards and seen nothing that I liked. Went to see Harriet and Alice but the gate was locked – could not see them, but saw them in the town. At night with Robert went to Woolloomooloo to see Robert Trenant. Fine.

20 Thursday. Walking about Sydney all day, Johny with me. Afternoon to Kiss’s. In morning through Markets. Went to Museum afternoon with Harriet and Alice. At McArthur’s in evening. Southerly wind very strong in evening, a little rain. Very hot in morning.

21 Friday. Walking about Sydney all day. Left Sydney at 11 o’clock at night in SS Kiama. Fine passage to Wollongong.

22 Saturday. At Wollongong at 8 o’clock. Left Wollongong at 11 o’clock. Arrived Ulladulla at 6 o’clock in the evening, stopped there that night. A little rain that night. Went up the lighthouse and had a look at it.

23 Saturday. Left Ulladulla at 6 o’clock in morning. Raining. Arrived at Moruya at 12 o’clock. Came over the bar at 1 o’clock. Walked home. Rain.

Harriett was James’s 25 year old sister in law, the older sister of Alice Wyatt. Her address was c/o Rev. A Parkinson, North Victoria Terrace, Millers Point. She later married William Oliver in Sydney in 1886.

The Pilot at Moruya Heads at this time was Captain N.M. Tranent - probably Robert Tranent was a relation.

We know from notes at the beginning of the diary that James paid twelve shillings for his tar, eighteen shillings for his kitchener, 4s 6d for his boiler and 1s 6d for his pot, but he gives no clue as to the reason for the visit.

Both the SS Hunter, 309 tons, and the SS Kiama, 154 tons, were paddle steamers built in Scotland in the 1850s. Both were nearing the end of their active lives as coastal vessels.

Money and Work
In January, James writes “Received money for puntage the sum of seventeen pounds” but does not record who paid it. The brothers must have had a system of billing senders and receivers of the goods they carried and it may be that John as the senior handled the book work. Yet, presumably to cover his absence in Sydney, James writes on the 10th January “W. Green started to work for me” Two weeks later he writes “W. Green took little punt down from the town to Strahan’s for potatoes and then knocked off working for me.” Two days later: “Lent John 7 shillings to pay W. Green. We had to pay him twenty six shillings between us. I paid one pound and John six shillings leaving John in my debt seven shillings.”

Whatever the financial rewards, the work was hard, dictated by the turn ‘round time of the steamers which were not yet travelling to the town wharf.

February 1881
9 Wednesday Down at the Heads all day. Steamer came in in the evening. Started to unload the punts at 6 o’clock in the evening. Working all night. Brought big punt up at night. Got up at first daylight in the morning, discharged the two punts and took in some loading. Lodge night – did not go.”

10 Thursday Discharged back freight and took in some loading. Took us all day – had two punts. Just finished at dark.

21 Monday Discharged punts into Kiama. Started to work at three o’clock in the morning. Brought big punt up with back freight and discharged it. Took in 40 bags of bark from Killkley, 17 hides, 83 kegs butter. (83 - can that be right?)

An Active Life
James was a Freemason, a member of the Coeur de Lion lodge which, having accepted a tender of £83 from a Mr Dawson, was in the process of building its hall in Page Street. While not a regular attendee of meetings, he paid regular dues and on 23rd February, a special levy of fifteen shillings towards the cost of the new building. The entry for 24th March reads “Paid Thomas Walter 5 shillings, 4 shillings for arrears, 1 shilling for Widows and Orphans Fund.”
The week before, on February 17, James has an odd entry “Showgrounds sold for 22 pounds. Peter Flanagan bought them.”

The Moruya Examiner devoted columns to the show and the names of most of Moruya’s pioneering families appeared in the prize lists - but no Constables. However, James records for the 28th “Spent all day at the show keeping the door for Peter Flanagan.”


A Change of Jobs

On 14th February there is a cryptic note “Heard about job.” (A Pilot Station boatman called Woolley was resigning and returning to Sydney.) Then a week later:

22 Tuesday. Took little punt up to Tucks. W Green and I got 42 bags potatoes from George Tuck and 24 from Johny Tuck. Brought punt back to Gundary, back at 6 o’clock. John went to work on the Pilot Station. John in great glee.”

On the following Sunday, he notes “Sign papers, Capt Trenant.”

March 1881

Then on 2nd March “Got news to go to the Pilot Station to work......went to see W. Green to work in my place.”

3 Thursday. Started work on the Pilot Station. Commenced painting the house I am to live in.

4 Friday. Took the “Fleet Wing” over the bar. Washed the front of the house ready for painting. Whitewashed the kitchen ready for painting.

5 Saturday. Sold punt to John. Morning took the “Eliza” out over the bar. Afternoon pulled the boat to town, the Captain with us. Sold punt and “Foam” for 30 pounds.

So it appears that James immediately quit the punting business, while John, despite now working at the Pilot Station, kept the venture going. It took John until August to pay off the £30 in £5 instalments.

The Pilot Station

Captain John Ross was appointed the first Harbormaster/Pilot in 1860. Essentially his job was to find a way through the ever shifting sands of the river mouth for the coastal steamers. He and his boatmen had to be able to take soundings and place buoys to define safe channels through the bar. There was also to be a high flagpole from which signals could show when the pilot was available and safe entry could be made. The party lived in tents, short of food and water, for two years until more adequate housing was erected.

John Ross recognised the potential of Moruya granite and sent samples to Sydney. He was a leading exponent of the need to build training walls to channel the river flow. He built boats and wharves and organised a telegraph line to the Moruya Post Office. He died of apoplexy in 1871 and is buried at the Heads cemetery.

His place was taken by Captain N.M. Tranent who was to be the master of both Constables until his death in 1884.

A son is born

March 20 Sunday. Watching for steamer. Went past in a fog. The “Manly Moses” came in first. Went out sounding after the “Moses” came in. Willie came to tell me that Bella had a son. Rode home, stayed the night.

There is an entry “Paid Dr Boot 1 pound 1 shilling for my wife.” on 23rd February but no mention of Bella’s pregnancy. She was confined in a house in Gundary, attended by her mother and her sister Harriett, who had come from Sydney. James got there two days later to find Bella sitting in a rocking chair.

Mrs Wyatt went home to Tuffwood on the 30th and Harriett returned to Sydney on 7th April, the day on which “Bella came down to the Heads with her father and little Alice.” - but was the newborn Elias with his little sister?