

MEET MARY PHELAN

Mary and her baby were victims of a relentless and callous system.

Irish girl Mary Phelan came to Van Diemen's Land in 1832 in a cargo of young, respectable single women intended as servants for the respectable and wives for ex-convicts.

Two months after she arrived she did marry, to ex-convict Job Vowles. Their first child was born in 1833 but died soon afterwards.

Life was hard for families like Mary's. She was sentenced to death for stealing silver plate from a Hobart house, commuted to seven years to be spent as a domestic servant. Her second son, Thomas, was born in early 1837. A year later she received six weeks hard labour for swearing, and took Thomas into the Factory with her. Superintendent Hutchinson ordered that the baby be removed to the nursery, which meant that he would be instantly weaned.

Mary begged to keep him with her, as the Principal Superintendent of Convicts had given her permission to do, but Hutchinson would not relent. Her worst fears were realised. Within a few days, Thomas was desperately ill. His father was allowed to take him home but, despite Job's best efforts, the little boy died.

At the inquest, the Factory staff denied any responsibility, but the jury decided that his death was caused by conditions at the Factory and the way he had been treated. The newspapers thundered that little Thomas was 'the latest victim of the cruel treatment' of children at the Factory, and that the authorities must be held responsible. As a result, the nursery was moved to better accommodation but babies continued to die.



A scene from 'Her Story', performed daily at the Cascades Female Factory

Four months after Thomas died, Mary had two years added to her original seven year sentence for stealing a black hat. She was sent to the Launceston Factory, and there she received another seven years for stealing wine.

After one more minor offence, Mary stayed out of trouble and received her Certificate of Freedom in 1846. Job was dead, and later that year she married William Mumford, another ex-convict. In 1869 Mary died, aged 60.

Visit the Cascades Female Factory Historic Site to gain a sense of what convict women experienced.

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