Christopher Hall

a colonial career in Ross

Christopher Riley

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This evening I’d like to share with you the research I have done on my great-great grandfather, Christopher Hall. While in some ways the story of Christopher and his family may seem uneventful or even unimportant in the larger picture of Tasmanian history, their lives, in as far as we are able to recreate them, show us many things. Through Christopher I hope to introduce to you the life of a nineteenth century rural public servant, to show how his family found its place in a developing community, and to explore some of the of the many resources we have at our disposal.

My interest in the Hall family began when I was quite young. I found a box of old photos and a Victorian photo album in the house where my mother had grown up and where several of her siblings still lived. Being an inquisitive boy, I dragged the photos out and started asking questions. Who were all of these people? Where did they live? Can you remember them? Little did my long-suffering relatives know that those questions were to continue until today. Not long after my discovery, my mother and her sister, who was born in the 1890s, took me for a family tour around Ross, pointing out where their mother had lived, their aunt had her post office and where their father had worked as a blacksmith. Intrigued by the visit, I began a search for more information on these people and over the intervening thirty or so years I’ve been able to match a lot of names to the faces in the photographs and uncover a wealth of information on the Hall family.

Christopher Hall was born in about 1788 and by 1829, when he married Sarah Stead, he was working in the Yorkshire city of Leeds as a schoolmaster. They had a daughter there in 1832, and in April of the following year he and his family were given approval to migrate to Van Diemen’s Land under the Twenty Pound Advance Scheme. They departed Liverpool on the ‘Lady East’ towards the end of April 1833, only to have the ship damage itself on a bank, causing a delay of over six weeks while repairs were carried out. When the passengers were finally allowed back on board, they were joined by passengers from other ships which had been prevented from sailing, and a crowded ‘Lady East’ finally left England on the 15 June. I have not been able to uncover any clues as to why Christopher decided to emigrate at the age of 45. No official documentation or letters have survived which suggest why he chose to uproot himself and his young family, and although the world around him was undergoing a dramatic transformation thanks to the Industrial Revolution, it would be tempting to assume that things would not have been so bad for an educated man.

Not that he sold himself to the migration authorities as an educated man. All of his migration records list him as ‘weaver’ or ‘flaxdresser’. The regulations for the bounty scheme stipulated that ‘no advance will be made except to persons who are competent workmen in some of the ordinary mechanical arts …’, and Christopher must have been so intent on migrating that he falsified his occupation in order to receive an assisted passage. There do not appear to have been any repercussions from this. He was appointed a parochial clerk the year after his arrival, and when his first child to be born in the colony was baptised in Hobart in 1835 at Holy Trinity Church, at that time located in what is now known as the Penitentiary Chapel, his occupation was recorded as schoolmaster.

Among records held at the Archives Office of Tasmania there are two references to a letter of recommendation brought by Sir John Franklin when he came to Van Diemen’s Land as Governor in 1837. It was hoped that the recommendation would provide Christopher and Sarah with, in Sarah’s words, ‘a respectable maintenance’, and it was perhaps thanks to this letter that Christopher was appointed postmaster, schoolmaster and parish clerk in Ross. In June 1837, Christopher was instructed to ‘proceed without loss of time’ to Ross, with the promise of a modest annual salary ‘for the zealous and satisfactory performance’ of his duties. He was to receive
£40 as post-master, £25 as parish clerk and £25 towards the rent of a school house, with the option of collecting contributions from parents. What is interesting to note is that these positions were given to Christopher under the name of Charles Hall, an alias which he himself continued to use in his correspondence throughout his professional life. There is no suggestion in any of his other records that Charles was his real name. It most likely stems from the false information he gave in his immigration documentation and was used as an alias to separate himself from Christopher Hall the flaxdresser. ‘Christopher’ is also used in official correspondence and if the alias was noticed at all by his employers it appears to have been either accepted or ignored.

It isn’t until the 1842 census that we find out where Christopher was living in Ross. In that census, he and his family were in a stone house owned by Thomas Macklow⁷. In 1831 Macklow earned his Ticket of Leave for his work as an assignee to George Augustus Robinson when Robinson was attempting to gather together the Tasmanian Aborigines. Macklow established himself as a wheelwright at Ross and in 1832 he applied for a grant of land, promising to build a house in stone measuring 36 by 14 feet. In 1835 Macklow mortgaged the land to William Hill and in 1836 he mortgaged it to Viveash. In the 1843 census, Viveash is given as the owner, and from a Supreme Court case it is clear that the Halls were still occupying part of Viveash’s land as late as 1851⁸. One building is clearly marked on an early survey of the township and a cottage still stands on this block of land⁹. It is probably in this house that Christopher raised his family, attended to his duties as parish clerk and ran his post office, school and shop before purchasing land on the opposite side of Church Street.

It may have been this same building which was the scene of an attack by the bushrangers Patrick Wallace and William Watson in September 1840. One evening Christopher’s wife, Sarah, and their eight year old daughter were sitting by the light of two candles in what they referred to as ‘the shop’ – Christopher had also started a small shop to supplement the family’s income – when a man came through the door and demanded tea and sugar, telling Sarah that he had no intention of paying for it. He then proceeded to bundle up a pair of boots and two pairs of moleskin trousers in a large handkerchief. While he was looking at some prints in the shop, Sarah’s protests were met with a gun appearing through the shop door. At this stage Christopher entered from the back door and tried to prevent the thief from stealing his pocket book from his desk. Ignoring the unsorted mail on the desk, Wallace made away with the pocket book containing £15, and while Christopher tried to stop him, Sarah made her way out the back of the shop with the bundle of booty and raised the alarm. Wallace and Watson had committed other crimes in the area and were soon apprehended. They were convicted of ‘burglary with violence’ and were sentenced to be hanged¹⁰. This episode had survived as a family anecdote, and although
several of the facts were wrong in the version of the story passed on to my generation, there were enough elements to lead to the documentation of the bushrangers' trial in Campbell Town. In September 1846, Christopher purchased a block of land on the eastern side of Church Street. The block measured 2 roods and 6 perches and cost £23. According to a note on an early survey of Ross, the Colonial Secretary approved a quarter acre block for a Church of England school in November 1844. This block of land was part of a plot which had been marked on an earlier map as the local pound and was subdivided by March 1846. Christopher chose Christopher Hall’s houses in Church Street.

to purchase the block next to the Church of England’s school allotment. It was on this block of land that he built two buildings, the smaller being the house sometimes referred to as 'Christopher Hall’s cottage' and the larger sandstone house next door. No documentation on the actual construction of these buildings has been found, but the assumption has been made that the smaller cottage was built first. They are both first recorded in the 1858 assessment roll and an ambrotype photograph, most likely taken in the 1860s, shows the larger building. It is clear from the photograph that the building served some official function, with a flagpole in front and a noticeboard by the main entrance. It is interesting to note that no connection between the larger building and the Hall family has survived in family or in local lore. The larger of the two buildings is substantial and suggests that Christopher enjoyed some financial success in his undertakings in the town. The fact that a picture was taken and is one of only two ambrotypes to have survived among the family photographs implies that the building was seen as a mark of the family’s achievements. The closest suggestion that this may have been a school comes from the recollection of a Ross resident who thought that the building was at one time a school for girls. In the 1858 valuation roll for Ross, the building is listed as being rented from Christopher Hall by a Miss S Cope. Subsequent rolls list the Hall family as owner occupiers, with various tenants in the smaller cottage. From 1872, Sarah Hall is listed as residing in the smaller house.

Although Christopher was in a financial position to buy land and build on it, money worries were never far from his mind. In fact, it is thanks to these concerns and their expression in numerous letters to government authorities that so much has been revealed about his life in Tasmania. Not very much is known about his time in Hobart, but the future must have seemed rosy when the family set off to Ross in 1837 with the promise of positions as postmaster, schoolmaster and parish clerk. By the end of the same year, however, the first of a number of disappointments
Christopher, along with several other men in the same position, was informed that his appointment as parish clerk would cease on 1 June the following year as a ‘consequence of the new ecclesiastical arrangements’. This must have been a severe blow to the family’s income. As the 1838 Blue Book points out, only three boys and two girls were attending the school and only £3 were taken in voluntary contributions. Ross was still a small community, with about 150 regular attendees at Sunday services at St Johns.

A second blow came in 1839 after the establishment of the Board of Education. Because so few children were attending his school, state funding of £25 was withdrawn, and in an attempt to replace his lost income Christopher began operating a small shop. In 1842, Christopher still had nine pupils, but the shop was losing business to competition and he was relying on his £40 salary as postmaster. In the hope of attracting more students, Christopher requested that the government consider building ‘a more suitable house with a separate room for a school’. His appeal to the Governor met with a reply stating that he should address his proposal to the Board of Education.

In 1845 the small shop was to cause him difficulties with the law when he was accused of selling bread under the standard weight. A constable from the Ross watchhouse had complained of another Ross baker’s bread and asked Christopher if he had any for sale. Christopher later wrote ‘I was at the time keeping a few things for sale but did not want to sell bread. I had no baker and having a large family my wife had enough to do without making bread for sale’. He nevertheless sold the constable a loaf, presumably from his own family’s supply, and soon found himself charged with a breach of the Weights and Measures Act. He was tried and found guilty in Campbell Town. A short time after the trial, Christopher wrote to the Colonial Secretary claiming that he had been wrongly charged. The fine of one pound was refunded, but he was still required to pay 9/6 in court costs.

Christopher’s 1852 request for an increase in his salary as postmaster reveals some interesting facts about his work: ‘I am kept up 5 nights in the week until near 12 o’clock to receive and dispatch mails and then have to get up at 4 or 5 in the morning to receive and dispatch’. He informed the Colonial Secretary that his salary was decreased from £40 to £35. The Colonial Secretary’s request for information on Christopher Hall and his performance as postmaster uncovered several instances in which Christopher came into conflict with the Postmaster General and local residents. As a punishment for these conflicts, it was decided that he would remain at his current salary and be recommended for an increase to come into effect from the beginning of 1854. At least this conflict did not have the same consequences as the difficulties he had experienced with his neighbour Anne Lowe a number of years beforehand. The climax of ongoing trouble which involved broken goose eggs and uprooted fruit trees was Anne Lowe emptying the contents of her chamber pot in Christopher’s face.

Christopher’s worries about money appear to have continued until the end of his career. An entry in the index to correspondence of the Colonial Treasurer between July 1857 and December 1860 refers to a letter from Christopher enquiring about compensation if he were to retire. Unfortunately, the file has not survived. Christopher did retire at the end of March 1864 and was replaced by his wife, Sarah. He had written a will in 1858, but in the introduction to a codi
in October 1864 he described himself as ‘being of sound mind but feeling my end approaching’\textsuperscript{28}. He died two months later and was buried in the Ross cemetery on 14 December 1864.

Although a lot of information about Christopher has survived in correspondence with government offices, hints are also given as to facets of his character in other sources. The only physical description we have of him is the following passage from the memoirs of Margaret Mickle, a past student of Christopher who returned to her native Scotland, from where she sent the Halls a photograph of herself, a photograph which had puzzled me for many years until I found the following description of her school days on the internet:

‘He was a singular looking man with very bushy dark eyebrows which met. My brother was always making desperate efforts to sketch his appearance on the slate instead of doing his sums. My own dread was that my own eyebrows might grow to be like those and when opportunity offered I carefully clipped mine with scissors! … we got along very quietly, perhaps in dread of a long black ruler the Schoolmaster used to prop his nose upon while he kept an eye upon us all: this was the position my brother so often vainly tried to portray\textsuperscript{29}.

We know that the topic of abolishing transportation must have been discussed in Christopher’s family. In the early 1850s he signed an anti-transportation petition\textsuperscript{30} and in 1855, one of his daughters married a Ticket of Leave man\textsuperscript{31}. Interestingly, another daughter was to later marry a man who, according to Henry Button in his Flotsam and jetsam, became ‘conspicuous during the anti-transportation struggle as a defender of the system, in favor of which he drew up "thirty-nine articles," and in consequence was dubbed "39" \textsuperscript{32}. Two books belonging to Christopher have survived the tests of time. One is an 1809 edition of Samuel Johnson’s dictionary, and the other is a manuscript book with transcriptions of music in Christopher’s own hand. Although a member of the Church of England himself, his wife was a Wesleyan, and some sort of religious tolerance must have been established in the home as some children were baptised in the Anglican Church and others according to Sarah’s nonconformist beliefs. Several of the children continued to worship in the Methodist Church at Ross as adults.

While searching through records in the Archives, it became increasingly apparent that Christopher’s situation as a holder of multiple official posts in a rural area of the developing colony was not unique. Just as he held the positions of postmaster, parish clerk and schoolmaster, so too

Post office, Church Street. This property was purchased by Elizabeth and Sophia Hall in 1872. Sophia remained here after the construction of the new post office, and it is most probably here that she ran the 'Railway Store'.
did other educated men who had migrated to Van Diemen’s Land. It is not unusual to come across others who were appointed to several official posts in a town, suggesting that men with some reasonable level of education were at a premium and could often fulfil several roles in a community. From a genealogical point of view, this employment pattern often leads to the discovery of several official appointments once one has been found.

As mentioned earlier, Christopher’s wife became postmistress in Ross in 1864 and held the position until 1875. In some ways, Sarah’s time in Ross followed the same pattern as that of her husband. A ‘gentle Englishwoman’\(^33\), she was employed at various times as schoolmistress, worked in the family’s shop and may have also acted as midwife. William Ferrar, a local landowner, notes in his diary at the birth of a son in 1851 and a daughter in 1853 that ‘Mrs Hall’ of Ross attended the births\(^34\). Sarah’s name appears in references to renting land in Ross, presumably for their dairy herd\(^35\), and we know from an 1875 complaint concerning the late delivery of a telegram that, in the rather derogatory words of the complainant and competing shopkeeper in the town, ‘they sell a few things’\(^36\).

Sarah’s daughter Sophia took over the store, known in the 1870s as ‘the Railway Store’\(^37\). The post office was passed to another daughter, Elizabeth, who had been appointed telegraph operator at the beginning of the service in Ross in 1865\(^38\). Elizabeth remained in the post office until 1905 when she moved to Hobart and during her time as postmistress she saw the construction of the well known Ross post office building\(^39\). On 10 August 1888, William Baillie of Hobart was informed that he had won the tender to build a new post office in the town\(^40\). According to the letterbook of the Public Works Department’s northern inspector, the first inspection of the site took place on 3 September 1888, and although most of the building seems to have been fairly much completed by March 1889, a final inspection did not take place until 13 September 1889\(^41\). Within five years there were plans to move the post and telegraph office to the Ross railway station, at which time Elizabeth’s employment would cease. In her reply to this threat to her employment, Elizabeth indicated that she and her assistant would be ‘rendered homeless after so many years of service’ and a note of support from local residents pointed out that a move from the ‘handsome new building in the main street’ to the railway station would be an inconvenience to the people of the town\(^42\). Luckily, the plans never saw fruition. Christopher’s youngest son Francis also stayed in Ross. He owned several blocks of land around the town and worked at various trades during his life. He has been recorded as butcher, wheel
different times and was remembered by one late resident of the town as being very keen on horses.\footnote{43}

As we follow the fortunes of the Hall family through the 1800s, the development of Ross from a small Midlands settlement to a well established town is revealed. Surprisingly, no mention is made of some of the things which we now associate with the town. The bridge over the Macquarie River, which was completed the year before the family moved to the area, is not referred to at all. Nor are the large numbers of convicts who passed through the town. The closest we come to references to the penal system as it manifested itself in Ross is the family of Escort Constable George Lowe, neighbours of the Halls, and an establishment Christopher refers to in 1849 as ‘the station’, presumably the Female Factory, which Christopher supplied with fresh milk from his dairy herd. Horton College survives in a family story which claims that Christopher taught at the school. No records have been found of his employment there and it seems unlikely that a Wesleyan school would have engaged an Anglican schoolmaster, even during the times when the college was having difficulties finding suitable staff. What we do find is a well-defined social structure attempting to follow social models transplanted from Britain. Among the local pastoralists, the well known landowners of the area such as the Kermodes and Keaches appear in connection with Christopher and his family. The Kermodes added their name to several letters in support of the Hall family over the years, and several photos of Kermode family members have been handed down. Reference is often made to what seems to have been a vibrant business community from the 1830s. There were inns, shops, blacksmiths and other trades which supported the town and neighbouring farming districts. Christopher, in his public roles, would have had contact with all of the community and may have enjoyed a sometimes uneasy place in this colonial social structure. One last thing that I would like to mention is how effective the channels of communication were during the nineteenth century on this main postal route in the colony. Just as today, letters sent from main centres such as Hobart were delivered in Ross the next day and vice versa. The dates on correspondence show that even before the introduction of the telegraph in 1865, an exchange of letters could take place and a matter be resolved or business conducted within a matter of days. By the time the Halls left Ross in the early 1900s, the town had its own council, had established a public library, and supported various gentile social activities such as the Ross Flower Show.

I would like to spend a few minutes looking at some of the information sources I have used in my research. One of the most valuable genealogical lessons I have learnt is that the people whose
lives we attempt to reconstruct are much more than mere long-departed ancestors or entries on a database. They were people just like us and their stories deserve our careful attention and respect. That respect should also be extended to living descendants and other researchers. It may seem ironic that the study of past generations should bring us into new relationships with the living, but for me, the hours spent talking to relatives have been one of the most rewarding aspects of my interest in genealogy. It never ceases to amaze me what some of my older relatives have remembered. Some have shared what they thought were insignificant stories from sea voyages in the 1850s, others have told stories they were always afraid to tell about the black sheep of the family, and there are others like my mother, who has shared anecdotes about her grandfather, a Scottish convict who arrived on the last transport in 1853 and who must have been among the last remaining ex-convicts when he died in his nineties in 1924. As the number of people who retain a living memory of our convict past is now very small, these memories are particularly significant to me. It is important for us to spend time listening and recording these anecdotes. Even if they are not historically correct, they could, as in the Halls’ encounter with bushrangers, lead to the discovery of an unexpected adventure in your family’s past. They may also prove revealing other ways: the fact that a certain tale was told and retold suggests that it was an important part of a family’s culture, and the way a story has been remembered and passed on may give the researcher some insight into that culture.

It is also worth taking the time to become familiar with local archive and library collections. If you are researching someone who has slipped from living memory and about whom little is known, government documentation may well prove to be the most valuable source of biographical information available, providing insights into the lives of our ancestors far beyond those which we might expect of this sort of record. I would never have expected such an evocative picture of an evening in the Ross post office in 1840 to have emerged from the statements of Christopher, Sarah and Martha Hall at the trial of Wallace and Watson. To locate this kind of information and make the most of collections such as the Archives Office of Tasmania can sometimes be very challenging. Researchers need to gain a basic understanding of the government departments which created the records and work out what contact the person they are investigating might have had with the mechanisms of government in their day. Archives and library collections can also hold potentially valuable sources of information such as personal diaries and letterbooks. A lot of this searching has become a lot easier with the introduction online searching on the Archives Office website. Armed with that database, the State Library’s catalogue and the comprehensive indexes of the University of Tasmania Archives, the persistent Tasmanian researcher can look forward to a lifetime of what will hopefully be fruitful searching. At the risk of sounding too much like a librarian, I would also like to point out the value of advanced searching techniques on the internet. Most search engines such as Google offer advanced search options and they can dramatically improve search results. I have also recently had some success with the Teoma search engine, finding new sources to explore. The online environment is changing all the time, and it can be very demanding on our time and patience, but I’m sure we have all experienced the thrill of making contact with people researching the same family or finding information on our ancestors like Margaret Mickle’s childhood memories of her teacher.

As I draw to a close this evening, I’d like to return to the box of photographs which sparked my interest in genealogy. Although the majority of the people in the photographs could be identified by my older relatives, there were some which meant nothing to them. No name had been scribbled on the back or the face had faded from memory. Over the years as I have pieced together the story of the Hall family, I’ve been able to identify all but two of the photographs’ subjects. I am sure that these remaining pictures will reveal their secrets, too, just as I am sure that there are many stories waiting for us all to uncover in the family anecdotes we’ve yet to hear, the information we’ve yet to discover in Tasmania’s rich library and archival collections, and the fellow researchers we’ve yet to meet.
Endnotes

1. The National Archives (UK), CO 384/32 reel 4102
2. See, for example, Archives Office of Tasmania, CUS 30 page 318
4. Archives Office of Tasmania, CSO 50/11 1837 and NS 349
6. Archives Office of Tasmania, NS 373/75
7. Archives Office of Tasmania, CEN 1/7 page 79
10. Archives Office of Tasmania, LC 84/1 and GO 44/1; Cornwall Chronicle, 26 September 1840 and 16 January 1841; Launceston Courier, 11 January 1841
11. This family story had survived in the following form: 'One day two bushrangers came to the post office in Ross. One of the Hall women was behind the counter. Before the bushrangers demanded money she was able to kick the mailbag to the back of the post office where one of her sisters picked it up and ran.
12. Archives Office of Tasmania, LSD 360/10
13. Office of the Recorder of Titles, DPIWE, Survey of Ross, map number 89400
14. Office of the Recorder of Titles, DPIWE, Survey of Ross, map number 89397
15. Archives Office of Tasmania, NS 373/75
16. Archives Office of Tasmania, CSO 50/12
17. Archives Office of Tasmania, CSO 8/68 1567
18. Archives Office of Tasmania, CSO 8/68 1567
19. Archives Office of Tasmania, CSO 24/111 3601
20. Archives Office of Tasmania, LC 83
21. Archives Office of Tasmania, CSO 20/2/51
22. Archives Office of Tasmania, CSO 22/144/3057
23. Archives Office of Tasmania, CSO 24/111/3601
25. Archives Office of Tasmania, CSO 24/111/3601
26. Archives Office of Tasmania, TRE 3
27. Hobart Town Gazette
28. Office of the Recorder of Titles, DPIWE. Christopher Hall’s will is not included among the wills held by the Archives Office of Tasmania
29. "Recollections of early days in Van Diemen's Land c. 1836 - 1846, written April 1892" www.rootsweb.com/~austash/articles/micklediary.htm
30. University of Tasmania Archives, S 14/15
31. Sarah Amelia Hall married Angus McKay at Ross in 1855. In 1862, Martha Jane Hall married Ammiel Holding, also known as Charles Williamson.
33. "Recollections of early days in Van Diemen's Land c. 1836 - 1846, written April 1892" www.rootsweb.com/~austash/articles/micklediary.htm
34. Archives Office of Tasmania, NS 1954, WM Ferrar Letterbook and Diary 1840-1853
35. See, for example, Archives Office of Tasmania, LSD 3 4076
36. Archives Office of Tasmania, TRE 1/1788
37. From an inscription in: Frederick Arnold, Oxford and Cambridge: their colleges, memories, and associations (London: Religious Tract Society, [1873]). Archives Office of Tasmania,
38. TRE 1/1/788; AUD 17/5 page 22
39. Archives Office of Tasmania, CRS p234 1/5216 folios 199 and 606
40. Archives Office of Tasmania, PWD 96/2
41. Archives Office of Tasmania, PWD 4
42. Archives Office of Tasmania, TRE1/1/2459
43. Mrs Keach, Ross, 1981
44. www.teoma.com
Christopher Hall
born c 1788
died 1863 Ross, Tas

Sarah Jane Stead
bap 1810 Otley, Yorkshire
died 1883 Ross, Tas

Martha Jane
1832 Leeds, Yorkshire ~ 1920 Sydney, NSW

James Henry
1835 Hobart, Tas ~ 1894 Launceston, Tas

Sarah Amelia
1837 Ross, Tas ~ 1896 Westbury, Tas

Christopher
1839 Ross, Tas ~ 1921 Trentham, Vic

Mary Ann Sophia
1841 Ross, Tas ~ 1904 Ross, Tas

Elizabeth
1843 Ross, Tas ~ 1928 Hobart, Tas

Agnes
1846 Ross, Tas ~ 1863 Longford, Tas

Francis
1849 Ross, Tas ~ 1915 Launceston, Tas
The picture on the front cover shows Christopher Hall’s property in Church Street, Ross, in the 1860s.