

Croker Prize for Biography

Entry 1504

Frederick Francis Fowler
And the Lunatic Reception
House Darlingtonhurst

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In many respects Frederick Francis Fowler's story is typical of a thousand tales that could be told about intrepid, and sometimes foolhardy, working class immigrants who risked everything to find way out of the poverty and rigid class structure of nineteenth century England.

In the absence of a birth or baptism record, it is difficult to know exactly when Frederick was born. Over the course of his long life he gave conflicting accounts of his age in official records, and it seems that he was somewhat creative in this regard – sometimes representing himself as older, and sometimes younger, whenever it was convenient to do so. He was certainly born in Exeter, Devon, probably around 1826.

On 16 May 1844 Frederick married 19-year-old Caroline Webb in the parish church at Bothenhampton, Dorset.¹ Frederick was employed as a groom and he claimed to be “of full age” although this is unlikely. Caroline and Frederick had three children; Ann, born in 1845 in Bridport, Dorset,² Frederick John born in 1848 in Dorchester,³ and Harry born in 1850 in Weymouth.⁴ Tragically Caroline died soon after Harry's birth from puerperal mania,⁵ a rare acute mood disorder associated with childbirth.⁶

A month later Frederick was in the village of Bothenhampton visiting friends.⁷ His 5-year-old daughter Ann was with him, but two-year-old Frederick John was living with his maternal grandparents in Honiton⁸ and four-month-old Harry was with another relative in Ottery St Mary.⁹

Frederick Fowler met Mary Ann Giles on a visit to St Peter Port, Guernsey in 1854. They were married on 13 August 1854 at St Peter Port, and on this occasion Frederick stated (probably truthfully) that he was 28 years old.¹⁰ Later that year Frederick and Mary Ann immigrated to Australia as assisted immigrants on the *Queen of England*, arriving in Sydney on 9th January 1855.¹¹ Accompanying them was Frederick's elder son, Frederick John, now 6 years old. Frederick Francis Fowler is described in the List of Immigrants as a 28-year-old groom and coachman who could both read and write, unusual accomplishments for a man of his background at the time. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported on the arrival of the *Queen of England* that the passage had taken 100 days from Southampton carrying 374 Government immigrants, and the commander of the ship, Captain Pearson, was one of ten people who had died on the voyage. The immigrants were nearly all English “and the greater portion of them are mechanics”,¹² a term used to describe a person fully qualified in one of the lower forms of handicraft, but not yet a master tradesperson.¹³

The following year Frederick's daughter Ann, now eleven years old, travelled unaccompanied to Sydney aboard the *Edward Oliver*.¹⁴ Harry, his youngest child from his first marriage, never made the journey to Australia and continued to live in England until his death in 1889.

Mary Ann and Frederick had five children, all born in Sydney; Richard (1856),¹⁵ Eliza (1858),¹⁶ Henrietta (1859),¹⁷ Archibald (1862)¹⁸ and Emma (born and died 1864).¹⁹

For his first few years in the colony Frederick lived in Duke Street, Sydney and worked as a coachman.²⁰ Then in 1862 he secured a position as a prison warder at Darlinghurst Gaol, and so began his career in the Civil Service of New South Wales.²¹

During the 1860s there was a great deal of controversy generated in the colony by the practice of incarcerating people with mental health problems in prisons because of the lack of any other suitable place to keep them from harm.²² An Act²³ was subsequently passed to enable the establishment of the Lunatic Reception House at Darlinghurst, an unattractive name for the lovely stone building that was completed in 1867.

This listed building, situated on a triangle of land bordered by Bourke, Forbes and Burton Streets, eventually became the Caritas Centre, an annex of St Vincent's Hospital. It suffered from some unsympathetic renovations and additions over the years and more recently was sold and incorporated into a residential development.

On 1 July 1868 Frederick Francis Fowler was appointed as the first Superintendent of the Lunatic Reception House Darlinghurst and Mary Ann Fowler was appointed Matron.²⁴ The following are extracts from a lengthy report in *The Sydney Morning Herald* written soon after the Reception House was opened:

“The Receiving House, now complete, is an erection of an ornate character, substantially built of Pymont stone, the external appearance being calculated to produce anything but a depressing effect upon the minds of those unfortunates who may have occasion to be brought within the gates ... (It) does not bear the outward aspect of a “gaol”, and contrasts strongly with the long, gloomy walls and massive gate of the Darlinghurst prison opposite.”²⁵

The article goes on to praise the efficiency, cleanliness and good order maintained by Frederick Fowler and his wife, and applauds the fact that the staff appeared to be looked upon as friends by the inmates. Another article written three years after the opening of the Lunatic Reception House says, “Mr Fowler has the constant superintendence, for which he has ably qualified himself in the course of many years’ performance of similar duties, under very great disadvantages, within the walls of the gaol.”²⁶

In his annual report of 1877, the Inspector of the Insane, Dr Frederick Norton Manning, also describes the structure that Frederick Fowler lived and worked in:

“The building is pleasing exteriorly, is complete as regards accessories and offices, and the details of construction have been most carefully studied, so as to conduce to the safety of the patients without any appearance of restraint. It contains rooms for eight male and eight female patients with suitable accommodation for the Superintendent and staff ... The dormitory accommodation provided for each sex is as follows: 1 room for 3 patients, 1 room for 5 patients, 1 room for 1 patient. The latter is padded and is the only room in which violent cases can be placed.”²⁷

In 1871 Frederick Fowler's annual salary was £100 and Mary Ann was paid £60. They lived in the Reception House building and were allowed "rations of provisions, fuel and light".²⁸ The following year Frederick's salary was increased to £140, although the Matron's salary did not change.²⁹



*The Lunatic Receiving House Darlinghurst, circa 1870*³⁰

Mary Ann Fowler died from chronic stomach and liver disease in May 1871, aged 39.³¹ Annie, Frederick's daughter from his first marriage, immediately took over the duties of Matron,³² a position that she held until her father remarried an Irish widow named Eliza Ann Douglas on 9 March 1872 in St Barnabas Church of England, Sydney.³³ Frederick's new wife then took over as Matron of the Receiving House on 1 April 1872.³⁴

Frederick and Eliza Fowler remained Superintendent and Matron of the Reception House for the next 20 years. A major reform to the NSW Lunacy Act of 1878 occurred in 1881 enabling magistrates to remand a suspected lunatic to the Reception House for observation for up to fourteen days without certification, after which they were to be committed to an asylum or discharged.³⁵ Over the years the Reception House has been the temporary home of some well-known Australians, including Henry Lawson and Captain de Groot.³⁶

On 30 September 1892 Frederick and Eliza Fowler retired as Superintendent and Matron of what was now known as the Reception-House for the Insane, a name that some bright government official must have thought was an improvement. At the time of their retirement Frederick was receiving an annual salary of £240 and Eliza was receiving £75.³⁷

Frederick's 30 years of government service qualified him for a pension³⁸ and he retired to 83 Victoria Street, Petersham³⁹. After his third wife, Eliza, died in 1896⁴⁰ he moved to Melbourne where he continued to receive his pension, which in 1907 was £140-7-0 per annum.⁴¹

Apparently undeterred by the death of three wives, Frederick married for the fourth time in 1912. He was living in East Brunswick and claimed to be 67 years old although, in fact, he was at least 86. His new wife was a 45-year-old spinster named Mary Ryan from County Clare who was living at his address and was probably his housekeeper.⁴²

Frederick Francis Fowler's story ends with his death in the Melbourne Hospital on 8 April 1914 at the age of 88.⁴³ The groom and coachman from the lower classes of English society had taken his chances in the colonies and transformed himself into a respected and successful civil servant. He was buried in the Melbourne General Cemetery in Carlton and his grave slab, although tidy, is now barely legible and surrounded by a low rusted and broken wrought iron railing. He was survived by only three of his eight children – Frederick, Eliza and Henrietta – although he is the ancestor of many subsequent generations of Australians.

¹ Marriage Certificate of Frederick Fowler and Caroline Webb, 16 May 1844

² GRO Birth Index, Ann Elizabeth Fowler,
<http://www.freebmd.org.au/cgi/information.pl?cite+Yz5fVwAXrJnyudM7ykh%2BEQ&scan=1>
accessed 8 May 2015

³ Birth Certificate of Frederick John Fowler, 10 August 1848

⁴ 1851 England Census, Harry Fowler, Ottery St Mary, Devon, Class RG 9, Piece 1477, Folio 14, p. 21, GSU roll 542819

⁵ Death Certificate of Caroline Fowler, 9 March 1851

⁶ Puerperal Mania, <http://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/puerperal+mania> accessed 27 April 2015

⁷ 1851 England Census, Frederick Fowlor, PRO Reference HO107; Piece: 1861; Folio: 154; Page: 7; GSU roll: 221009

⁸ 1851 England Census, Frederick Fowler, PRO Reference HO107; Piece: 1863; Folio: 132; Page: 23; GSU roll: 221011

⁹ 1851 England Census, Harry Fowler, Ottery St Mary, Devon, Class RG 9, Piece 1477, Folio 14, p. 21, GSU roll 542819

¹⁰ Letter from JW Foster, Dean of Guernsey to Mr FR Young, Arncliffe dated 1 October 1983.

¹¹ The State Records Authority of NSW, <http://srwww.records.nsw.gov.au/indexes>, accessed 8 May 2015

¹² *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 January 1855, p. 4, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article12964164>
accessed 22 April 2015

¹³ Hall Genealogy website – Old Occupation Names, <http://rmhh.co.uk/occup/m.html>, accessed 9 May 2015

¹⁴ The State Records Authority of NSW, <http://srwww.records.nsw.gov.au/indexes>, accessed 9 May 2015

¹⁵ NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Birth Registration No. 423/1856 Fowler, Richard F

¹⁶ NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Birth Registration No. 448/1858, Fowler, Eliza A

¹⁷ NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Birth Registration No. 2346/1859, Fowler, Henrietta

¹⁸ NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Birth Registration No. 470/1862, Fowler, Archibald

¹⁹ NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Birth Registration No. 2891/1864, Fowler Emma M; NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Death Registration No. 1975/1864, Fowler, Emma M

²⁰ Sands Directory: Sydney and New South Wales 1861 p. 166

²¹ New South Wales Blue Book for the year 1871, published 1872, Sydney

²² Wallace, D, "A History of the Lunatic Reception House, Darlinghurst", *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 1992; 26:307-315

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- ²³ Act of Council 31 Victoria No. 19 to amend the Law for the Care and Treatment for the Insane
- ²⁴ New South Wales Blue Book for the year 1871, published 1872, Sydney
- ²⁵ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 November 1868, p.5, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article28422129> accessed 24 April 2015
- ²⁶ Oliver, TJ, "The Lunatic Reception House at Darlinghurst", *NSW Medical Gazette*, October 1871, pp. 8-9
- ²⁷ Manning, FN, Inspector of the Insane, Report for 1876, NSW.
- ²⁸ New South Wales Blue Book for the year 1871, p. 32, published 1872, Sydney
- ²⁹ New South Wales Blue Book for the year 1872, p. 35, published 1873, Sydney
- ³⁰ State Library of New South Wales, d1_05750
- ³¹ Death Certificate of Mary Ann Fowler, 12 May 1871
- ³² New South Wales Blue Book for the year 1871, p. 32, published 1872, Sydney
- ³³ Marriage Certificate of Frederick Francis Fowler and Eliza Anne Douglas, 9 March 1872
- ³⁴ New South Wales Blue Book for the year 1872, p. 35, published 1873, Sydney
- ³⁵ Wallace, D, "A History of the Lunatic Reception House, Darlinghurst", *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 1992; 26:pp 307-315
- ³⁶ Wallace, D, "A History of the Lunatic Reception House, Darlinghurst", *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 1992; 26:pp 307-315
- ³⁷ New South Wales Blue Book for the year 1892, published 1893. Sydney
- ³⁸ Journal of the NSW Legislative Council, 1895
- ³⁹ Sands Directory: Sydney and New South Wales 1895 p. 593, Fowler, FF
- ⁴⁰ NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Death Registration No. 9061/1896, Fowler, Eliza
- ⁴¹ NSW State Pensioners' list of 1906/07
- ⁴² Extract of Marriages Solemnized in the District of Richmond, Melbourne No. 1299, Frederick Fowler and Mary Ryan, 3 October 1912.
- ⁴³ Extract of Deaths in the District of Melbourne East No. 6362, Frederick Fowler, 8 April 1914