

Royal Western Australian Historical Society's
Annual Pioneers Memorial Service
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Commemorating Phoebe Hymus; a life

Citation by Robert Worsley Hymus

It is with an equal measure of caution, respect and pride that I speak to you here today. I am cautious because I know there are those amongst you who are more practiced and knowledgeable in the art of history than I am. Respectful, because of the patience, courage and wisdom of the pioneering people we commemorate. And proud, because these pioneers are my ancestors, our ancestors.

My name is Robert Worsley Hymus. My great grandfather was Daniel Hymus, one of the sons of Frederick and Phoebe Hymus. I had intended to talk to you at length about Frederick and Phoebe, and about their children. It is a fine story, one worth telling, but it has been told before, and by people more skilful than I. In no way though do I want to diminish the importance of William, Ann, Catherine, Frederick jnr, Daniel, Eliza, Susan, Elizabeth, and Sidney in this commemoration of a pioneering family; nor the contribution of the Moore's, the Birch's, the Moir's, the Bell's, the Smirk's, the Day's, the Hurst's, the Stirling's, and of course the succeeding generations of Hymus's to Western Australian history. Rather, I felt I could not do them all justice in the time available this afternoon.

My intention is therefore to focus on one person, on one life, that of Phoebe. I am of course very much interested in Frederick; he is after all my great great grandfather. We share the same name and the same blood. But as I researched the various sources for today's service, it was apparent that Frederick was assured of a place in history, as was his children, regardless of what was said by me.

Phoebe on the other hand, has had no voice. The more I looked into the historical record, the less there was. If anything was said about her, it was, to put it bluntly, not very flattering. How could this be? She had given birth to eleven children, journeyed across the world, and then survived the extremes of the Western Australian wilderness.

As a professional librarian, I am well acquainted with the vagaries of historiography - the difficulty of researching and writing history when the original sources no longer exist; when there is conflicting evidence; or no evidence at all. But in the story of Phoebe, I sensed a great injustice. It has been my experience that Hymus's tend to favour the underdog, and they certainly don't shy away from a fight. What better then, than to stand up for my great great grandmother. It is with respect that I speak on behalf of Phoebe. Any errors or omissions are mine and mine alone.

Phoebe Barrett was born on August 2 1804 at Great Thurlow, Suffolk, England. She spent her childhood and early adult life in this small rural village, just over six kilometres from another small village, West Wickham, where Frederick Hymus lived. On October 25 1828, Phoebe married Frederick at St Mary's Church, West Wickham. The ceremony was performed by The Reverend Wollaston. Phoebe was twenty four years of age.

The Reverend John Ramsden Wollaston was, according to noted historian Geoffrey Bolton, "a scholarly, reticent man... a conservative and traditionalist by instinct". He was part of a largely masculine world, where respectability was dependent upon dress and manners, deference to one's superiors, church attendance, and sober habits. Phoebe on the other hand, has been

described as having a lively personality and unrestrained manners. Today she we would be called vivacious. In an age when strong spirit was the universal drink, it is not surprising that a young sociable woman would be so easily affected by the occasional sip. None of this sat well with the reverend gentleman though. Religion at the time was a powerful source in holding the home together and women a subordinate place within it. Phoebe, according to the Reverend Wollaston, was a drunkard.

I question this. No doubt the reverend was a sincere man, whose generosity towards his parishioners is unquestioned. His scholarship gives him a valued and honoured place in Western Australian history. Yet, the views and prejudices of a conservative, rural clergyman should not be taken at face value. They were certainly not Frederick's views.

Frederick did, after all, marry Phoebe. Why would a quiet, peaceable man from a Quaker background marry a woman like Phoebe? I put it to you, that the very characteristics that the reverend judged so strongly were in fact, the essence of Phoebe's attractiveness. One need only look at the photographs of succeeding generations of Hymus women to appreciate their fine lines, proud bearing and strength of character. It does not surprise me that Frederick was attracted to a good looking, fun loving woman who did not necessarily meet the moral expectations of a clergyman.

The Reverend Wollaston had a lot more to say about Phoebe in his journals - none of it good. I maintain though, that the historical record has misjudged her. She was, I believe, a strong willed, affectionate woman, devoted to her husband and children, as evident from her experiences after she left England.

By early 1840, Phoebe had had eight children. Frederick was a skilled thatcher and builder with, we are told, many respectable connections. Since the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815 until the late 1830s, there had been an agricultural recession throughout Great Britain. This may have been a good part of the reason for Frederick's and Phoebe's decision to become members of the Western Australian Company's settlement scheme. The Western Australian Company was launched in 1839 with a view to establishing a settlement on the Leschenault inlet, a few miles from Bunbury. The settlement was to be called Australind. Frederick and Phoebe with their children left Gravesend on December 18 1841 on board the Diadem. After a difficult voyage (11 people died), they disembarked at Australind on April 10 1842. Phoebe was thirty seven years of age. She had eight children; the eldest was twelve, the youngest not quite two. Moreover, Phoebe had undertaken this journey half way around the world, in the final months of pregnancy. She gave birth to Caroline on April 18, eight days after arriving. Within weeks the baby had died.

Further hardship followed as the new settlement struggled in vain to provide work, shelter and food for the several hundred people who had committed themselves to Australind. Frederick acquitted himself well, obtaining work from the Reverend Wollaston by thatching the roof of the Picton Church, and the following summer, assisting a surveyor on a property some distance from the settlement.

In early 1843 hardship turned to tragedy. Frederick was involved in an incident that at this point in time, is best described as an affair of honour. It would seem that Phoebe was at the centre of this incident, and rightly or wrongly Frederick defended his honour and that of Phoebe's, by shooting a long time friend, James Everet, in the leg. Frederick was imprisoned at the Round House, Fremantle for twelve months with hard labour.

Phoebe did not go unscathed. Her character was viciously attacked and her suitability as a mother seriously questioned. Severe censure quickly followed any deviation from the 'good'

woman role model. A woman's total duty was the preservation of family life. Her own comfort and happiness mattered little.

And how unhappy it must have been for Phoebe. Alone for a year in an environment where other less disadvantaged settlers were themselves barely able to survive, she had to fend for her family, and contend with an establishment that was at best, uncaring. The Reverend Wollaston acted in what he regarded as the best interests of the children, but he offered no support, nor a kind word to Phoebe.

Sometime before 1848 Frederick and Phoebe moved their family to Mowerinup, a farm on the Serpentine River, half way between what is now Rockingham and Mandurah. The farm was owned by Governor Hutt, and Frederick was hired to work this property. I visited this property when I was a child. It is well situated on the coastal plain between the river and the sea. My aunt, Pat Chester (nee Hymus), reliably informs me that Mowerinup was a favourite place of the Hymus family. My aunt recalls successive generations of Hymus's hunting there, herself included, as well as my grandfather Worsley and his father Daniel. The availability of wild game and plentiful seafood no doubt made life a little easier for Frederick and Phoebe.

But let us picture for a moment a two room limestone cottage, with a dirt floor and no windows, that was home to Phoebe and her family while they were living on this property. In summer, the heat, flies and mosquitoes would be a torment. In winter, the cold, strong gales and heavy rain would make life uncomfortable to say the least. The problems of hygiene, of keeping food fresh, of obtaining adequate clothing, and of maintaining equipment were accepted as a way of life. Added to this were the inherent dangers of living in a wilderness. In April of 1847 two of the children were attacked by a wild boar and badly mauled. Flooding from the Serpentine River and bushfire were risks the Hymus family had to face each year. One must also reflect on the isolation that confronted the family, especially Phoebe. The rugged terrain and distance from other settlements at Fremantle and Mandurah would have made travel hard work. The companionship of other women would have been rare.

Phoebe gave birth to two children at Mowerinup. More than likely she did this without the assistance of a doctor or a midwife. She was probably aided though, by aboriginal women from the Murray River tribe, for it is a significant point that the Hymus family were on good terms with the Murray River tribe and its leader Winjan. The children of both groups played together and Pat Chester can recall that her grandfather Daniel, hunted with an aboriginal warrior called George, Winjan's son. Two of the Hymus girls, Eliza and Susan became so fluent in the aboriginal language, that as adults they served as official government interpreters.

Such a relationship is notable, not just because of the respect both peoples had for each other, but because it stood well outside the context of general aboriginal/white relations. Indeed, it is all the more significant today as Australian society attempts to deal with the issue of reconciliation. On December 11 1852 Frederick died at Mowerinup aged 49. At some point during 1853, Phoebe moved her family to Rockingham where they proceeded to take up land. In 1855 William, the eldest son, was granted title to twenty acres, and as a result, the Hymus family was one of the first, if not the first family to settle permanently in Rockingham. Life would have been better for Phoebe, now that the family owned their own property. Tragedy in these pioneering days though was never far away, as Elijah the second youngest child was killed in 1859, aged fourteen years, as a result of a fall from a bullock wagon.

In the early 1860s Phoebe went to live with her eldest daughter Ann, who had married in 1856, and was now living in Hay St Perth. Phoebe died there on July 30 1864. She was buried at this cemetery on August 2 1864, her sixtieth birthday.

Throughout her life, Phoebe Hymus had to contend with a regular cycle of birth and death that was close and personal. As Jean Northover notes in her article on women and colonial settlement, "families at this time, continually experienced marriage, birth and death in close proximity within the isolated living conditions of the family home". Phoebe was not alone of course, she had her children and she had Frederick - a remarkable man by anyone's standards. But she did face great hardship and many difficulties in an Australian bush that was essentially wilderness country. All of this at a time when social services were non-existent and a woman's worth was measured by men in authority.

That Phoebe faced these challenges, with patience, fortitude and courage is a fair indication of her true worth. I doubt that Phoebe would have fared so well, if not for that lively and unrestrained spirit she demonstrated as a young woman. It is ironic that during his 1853 tour, Archdeacon Wollaston noted that Phoebe brought six of her children, in a cart, to his service at Mandurah, and that the eldest son William, arrived well dressed, riding a fine horse excellently equipped. The Archdeacon was pleased that Phoebe was so well provided for.

Throughout all these life experiences Phoebe Hymus's voice is silent. She left no diary, no letters. None of us have heard her voice, seen her photograph or a portrait of her likeness. But if she did not leave us words, she did leave a legacy more lasting and more valuable - her children. Phoebe not only provided her children with the physical necessities of life, but she clearly had given them the emotional security, spiritual guidance, and necessary education to lead fulfilling, successful lives themselves, as they continued to pioneer Western Australia, and become leaders in their own communities.

The finest tribute to Phoebe is the presence of her great grandchildren, and great great grandchildren here today.

It is I think fitting that I close now with extracts from a letter written by Phoebe's eldest daughter Ann, to her sister Catherine informing her of their mother's death.

My dear Sister,

It is my mournful duty to inform you of the Death of our dear Mother. She departed this life on the 30 July and was buried on the 2 August, it was her birthday. 61 years old. I believe she has gone from a world of sorrow and sin to a world of everlasting happiness, where all tears are wiped from her eyes. May our end be as peaceful as hers was. A few mornings before she died she was asked if she was afraid to die. She said "On no I believe my sins are all pardoned. I have been talking to Jesus all night". She is my all from that time until her death. She never seemed to have any fears. She felt herself a great sinner. She believed Jesus to be a Saviour. Mr Innes the Independent Minister visited her. She was always so pleased to see him and old Mrs Birch frequently came to see her. No one that saw her could help liking her, poor dear. She was so patient. I am sure she was a great sufferer. For two days and two nights before she died she could not lie down in bed at all. What a blessing to know that her sufferings are all over. I am so thankful that I was permitted to see the last of her, although I did not think to part with her so soon, it would have been a great pleasure to have had her with us a few years at least but God's will was otherwise... I enclose a piece of dear mother's hair for you and Elizabeth. Give my love to her as I cannot write this time except the same for yourself and Alex, he looks very serious.

God Bless you all. Your loving sister Ann Birch

Ann died on May 9 1909. She is buried with her mother.