

## JAMES McKEOWN: FROM FACT to FOLKLORE and BACK AGAIN - Part 5

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Think back 20 years! What have you achieved in that time? For many of us, a large number of experiences, travels and interactions will jump to mind. Many will bring a smile, some will be embarrassing, others will contain deep regret. Over the last 4 parts of this series I have traced the first 20 years (1824-1844) of convict James McKeown's time in Australia in the hope of unravelling the range of mixed literature which exists about him and his capture by James Whalan which lead to the 'discovery of Jenolan Caves'. For Jenolan's story tells the links between Jenolan and McKeown are told romantically and fantastically.

*"McKeown realized the utter hopelessness of his position, Whalan and the troopers had him covered with their guns, the game was up. Gnashing his teeth with rage, his face livid with passion, McKeown uttered an awful curse. 'I'll kill you Whalan, when I get out of this' he hissed between his teeth as troopers put on handcuffs. But although he lived to return from a long term of exile on Norfolk Island, and to revisit the scene of his former exploits he never attempted to carry out his threat. On the contrary, he called on Whalan and asked for a nights shelter."* (1)

However, it is acknowledged that these stories are based on folklore and 'word of mouth' anecdotes. If the stories are true, and McKeown returned to Jenolan to "revisit the scene of his former exploits" (5), we need to discover where he returned from. Previous reports (2-4) in this series have confirmed that following his capture in the Jenolan Valley and conviction for horse theft, James McKeown was indeed incarcerated on Norfolk Island from 1837-1844. However, McKeown did not return to Jenolan directly from Norfolk as is often assumed (6). Rather, McKeown was included in the redeployment of convicts from Norfolk Island to Van Diemen's Land as part of the new, and seemingly radical, probation system which would drive the rehabilitation of the felons. Little is known of McKeown's time on Tasmania where he spent more time than when he absconded to the Jenolan Valley, where he crossed paths with many of the noted Tasmanian gentry and where he was involved in building in many of the colonies landmarks, many are still there today.

### James McKeown through Tasmania

In May 1844, McKeown boarded the *Lady Franklin* at Norfolk Island and travelled to Wedge Bay, Hobart arriving 6 June 1844 where he entered the Tasmanian probationary system. The convict assignment system, which McKeown had endured when in NSW, had been the subject of much criticism and review in Great Britain as being often too often lax in punishment and

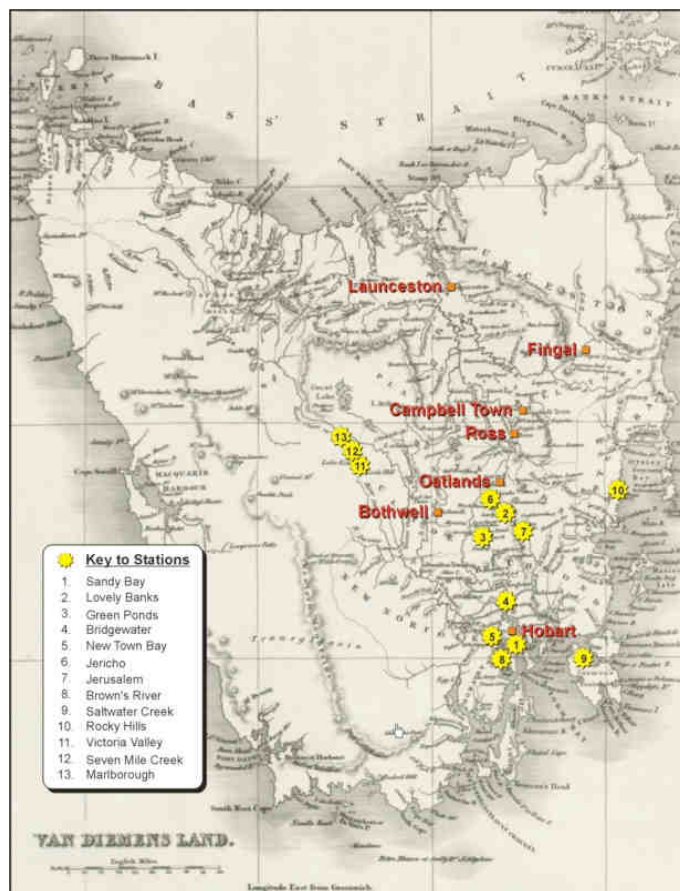
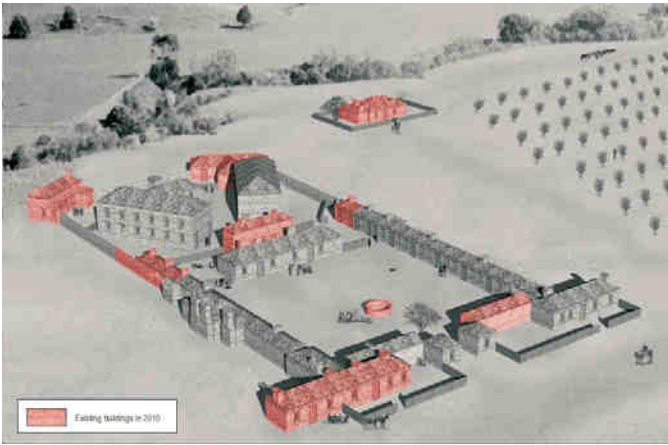
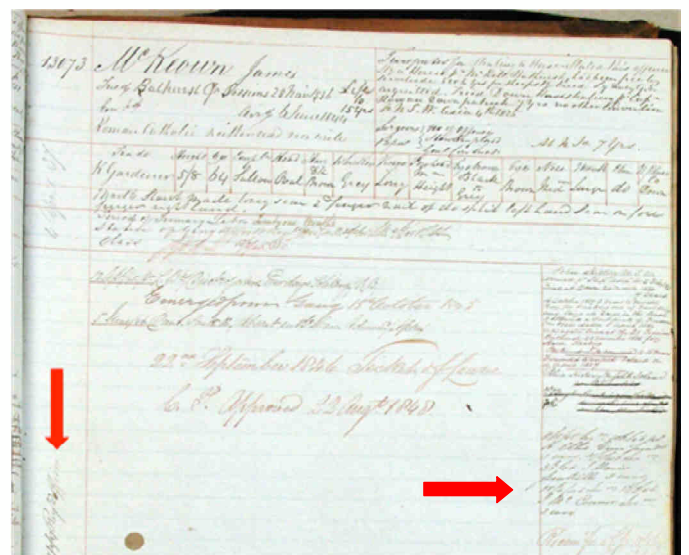


Figure 1. Tasmanian Probation Stations (7)

ineffective with convict reform. McKeown was an example of this ineffective penal philosophy. In 1839, a new system of probation was established with nineteen stations being established throughout the state (Figure 1)(7). In the Southern Midlands region, building was commenced in 1834 on 'Jerusalem' Probation Station, the remnants of which are still present in the village of Colebrook (Figure 2) (7). This is one remnant of 75 probation stations established within the colony. Convicts would progress through the probation system undergoing a regime of hard labour, religious instruction and education. This would take place in labour gangs through progressively less severe stages after which they would receive a probation pass, or ticket of leave, and become available for employment by settlers. Pass holders awaiting employment would remain at the probation stations undertaking public labour works, continued good behavior would earn a conditional pardon.



**Figure 2.** Jerusalem Probation Station (7) – red buildings are those still present today



**Figure 3.** The Convict Register of Male Convicts 1844, Tasmanian Archive (8). Red arrows indicate listing of assignments within the Tasmanian probation system.

as age 64 – which would have McKeown date of birth as 1780. Previous records indicate he was born in 1793. Given the other descriptive information for this convict corresponds directly with the James McKeown of Jenolan history, it is likely that this anomaly is clerical error (10).

Seven Mile Creek (20/10/1844 – 14/11/1844) was a Hobart town out-station which functioned between 1842-44. Despite being a short lived station which was auctioned in 1847, its convicts still managed to find themselves in mischief and before the courts – although the judge found it difficult to identify which one of the 300 men present at the station was responsible for the crime (11). (Figure 5)

Lovely Banks, (1/5/1845) (station 1839-45) Tasmanian mid-lands is rich farm country (12). McKeown was present with boy convict James Harrison (who also went to Rocky Hills). The report from Harrison life indicates that getting to these stations involved walks for days at a time. Travelling magistrates would also go between stations to deal with charges of insolence and disobedience (13). (Figure 6)

Rocky Hills (3/7/1845) (station 1841-48) – McKeown was noted as spending time at Rocky Hills probation station, an isolated centre 15km south of present day Swansea. Remnants of the probation system are still present

Tasmanian convict records (8) for James McKeown (Figure 3) record his passage through the probation system where he underwent placement in ten different Probation Stations from 1844 to 1847. Listed below are details of his time spent at these stations, the people he may have met and the tasks he contributed to whilst there.

Wedge Bay (2/7/1844) - Appropriation records (Figure 4) identify convict #13073 arriving at this convict depot (9). James McKeown, a kitchen gardener who had committed the offence of ‘stealing a horse’, tried in Bathurst and prior to that, County Down, Ireland. 21 months. Noted



**Figure 4.** (A) James McKeown placement at Wedge Bay (‘2/7/44 xxx WBay’) Probation Station (8) (B) Listing from the Appropriation Records for Wedge Bay Probation Station Tasmania 13 June 1844 (9).

A



B

**COMMISSARIAT.**  
**COMMISSARIAT OFFICE.**  
*Hobart Town, 24th May, 1847.*  
**BUILDINGS AT SEVEN-MILE CREEK.**  
 At 11 o'clock on Monday, the 31st instant, Mr. Stracey will sell by public auction, at his rooms, Elizabeth-street—  
 All the Buildings belonging to the late Convict Station at the Seven-mile Creek, as they may then stand.  
 Immediate possession will be given, and payment required in cash on the fall of the hammer.  
 Further particulars may be ascertained on application at the office of the Auctioneer.  
**GEORGE MACLEAN, Deputy Commissary-General.**

C

*John Lord, Israel Eckerley, and Frederick Hunt, robbing and assaulting Isaiah Aston, a servant of W. S. Sharland, Esq., of the London Marsh. At Hamilton prosecutor had previously identified the men, who belonged to Seven Mile Creek probation station; but, strange to say, he could not recognise them in the Court. Part of the stolen property was found on one of the prisoners; but the jury had no other course but to acquit them, according to the directions of His Honor, who said that there was no case for the jury; any one of the 330 thieves and felons belonging to the same station were as likely to have committed the offence.*

**Figure 5.** Seven Mile Creek: (A) "20/10/44 7MC,"; "14/11/44 7 Mile Creek" (8)

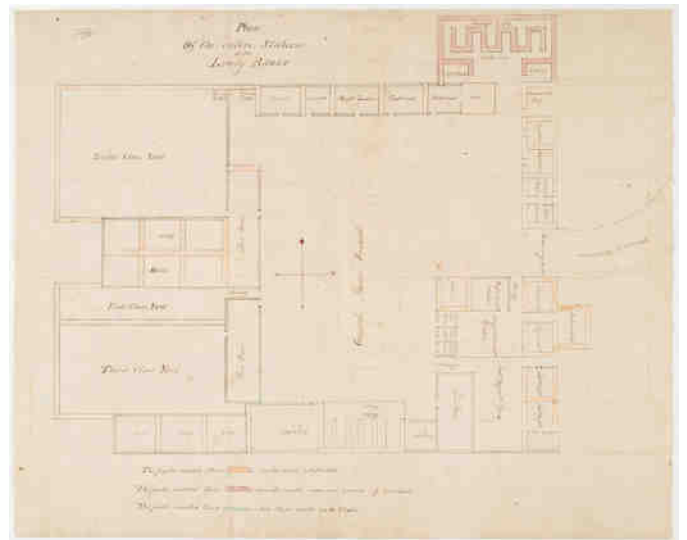
(B) *The Courier* (Hobart), Saturday 22 May 1847 (11)

(C) *The Courier* (Hobart), 8 March 1845 (11)

A



B



C



**Figure 6.** Lovely Banks: (A) "1/5/45 LBanks" (8)

(B) Ground plan of prison buildings, Tasmania, 1842-1848 showing entire station at the Lovely Banks, July 4, 1848 (13)

(C) 1946 aerial photo of archaeological remains of Lovely Banks Probation Station, Tasmanian Lands Department (13)

including the Three Arches and Spiky dry stone bridges, the former being built in 1845 when McKeown was there. (Figure 7) (14). William de Gillern was in charge of Rocky Hills probation station until Charles La Trobe, Lieutenant Governor of VDL (1846-47) visited at the end of 1846, writing a scathing report of the 'utter abandonment of all order and decency observable at Rocky Hills' (15) La Trobe concluded that 'The necessity of making an example of all those participating in this disgraceful state of things was acknowledged, and steps



A

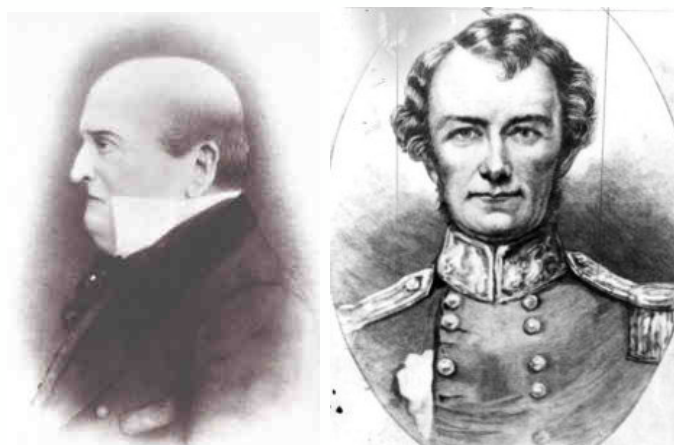


B

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C



D

**Figure 7 . Rocky Hills:** (A) "3/7/45 R Hills" (8)  
 (B) Rocky Hills, Swan Port, V.D.L., a deserted probation station by Fredrick Mackie. National Library Australia (16)  
 (C) Convict built bridge at Mayfield Bay a few hundred metres south of the convict probation station at Rocky Hills (16)  
 (D) William de Gillern (left) and Charles La Trobe (right)

taken to effect a thorough change in the superintendence and management of the station'. He summed up by saying that 'the station has little to recommend it but its inaccessibility' (15).

Green Ponds (11/11/1845 – 10/1/1846), now known as Kempton, a probation station was established between 1840-41 was once a thriving centre of industry boasting a flour mill, brewery and numerous hotels and coaching inns. Many tradesmen, along with McKeown were assigned to William Henry Ellis, an ex-convict who had made it in the colony, establishing various businesses including a commercial inn and had just completed building Dysart House designed to meet the needs of the more upper class traveler (Figure 8) (16). Dysart House



A

**B**  
**GREEN PONDS.**—There is no settlement in the colony that has been so much improved as Green Ponds, during the last four years: retail stores, where the public are served as cheap as at Hobart Town, are there in abundance; travelling accommodation is equally good, Mr. Ellis has built a hotel superior to anything of the kind in any of the colonies; and, although last not least, Mr. Flexmore has erected a steam flour-mill, an unspeakable accommodation where water cannot always be made available. Here the Rev. Mr. Otter, of the Church of England, and the Rev. Mr. Beazley, of the Independent body, attend to their respective congregations with diligence, and the consequence is seen in the superior standard of morals which exist in this settlement.

B

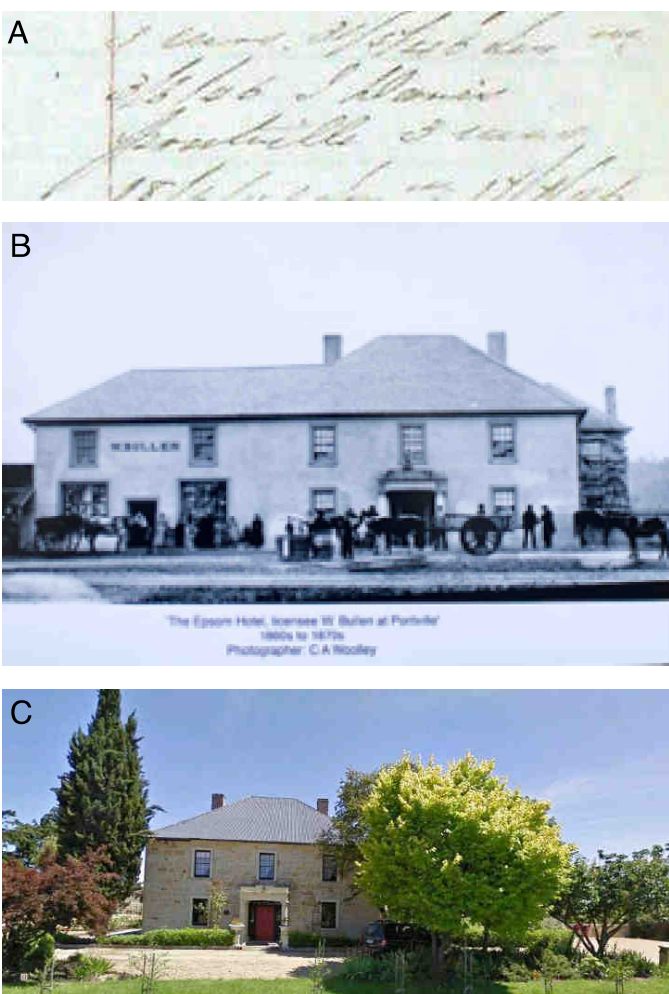


C

**Figure 8. Green Ponds:** (A) "11/11/1845 to 10/1/1846 W.H. Ellis Green Ponds 3 weeks" (8)  
 (B)Colonial Times (Hobart, Tas 1828-1857), Tuesday 7 October 1845. (16)  
 (C) Dysart House today (17).

was owned and recently sold by food critic, journalist, festival entrepreneur and bon vivant Leo Schofield (17).

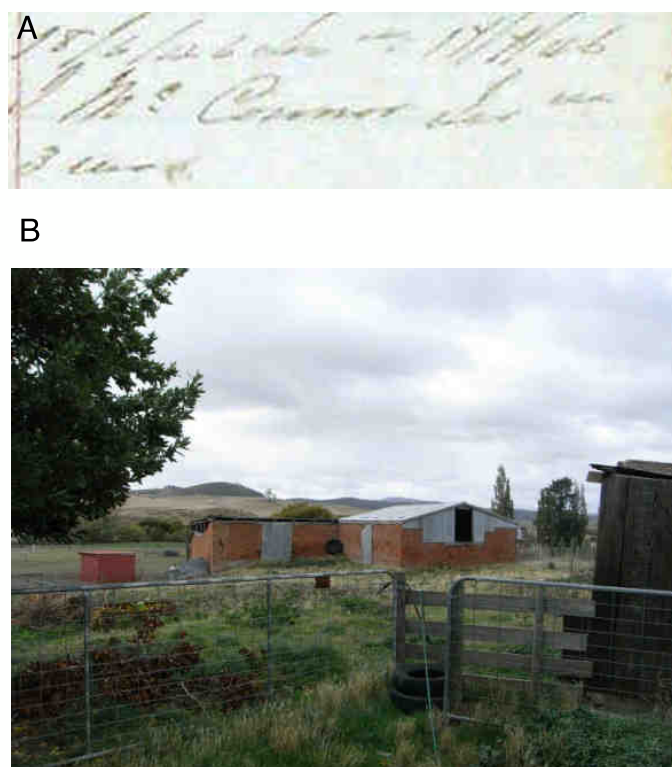
Pontville 31/2/1846 – 3/6/1846 (station 1830-47) was the next probation station for James McKeown when he was assigned for three weeks to John Davis licensee (1839-1859) of The Castle Inn and Brighton Hotel, presently known as Epsom House (18) (Figure 9). Davis also ran The Regulator coach service to Hobart. Epsom House, with its ball room and ‘Methodist chapel’ was the social hub for Pontville, which itself was a major centre on the major transport highways through Tasmania. Davis was not removed from trouble and found himself before the courts which in 1843 William Cook was found guilty of having stolen 71 silk handkerchiefs, valued at £17 from Davis store (19). Davis was also a witness in one of Australia’s first civil lawsuits for ‘slander’. The case of Richardson vs Armytage in 1844-46 (20) heard how Davis, at the behest of his wife, removed his children from the school run by Mrs Eleanora Richardson, a young widow of "considerable personal attraction" leading to the school’s ruin. This was on the



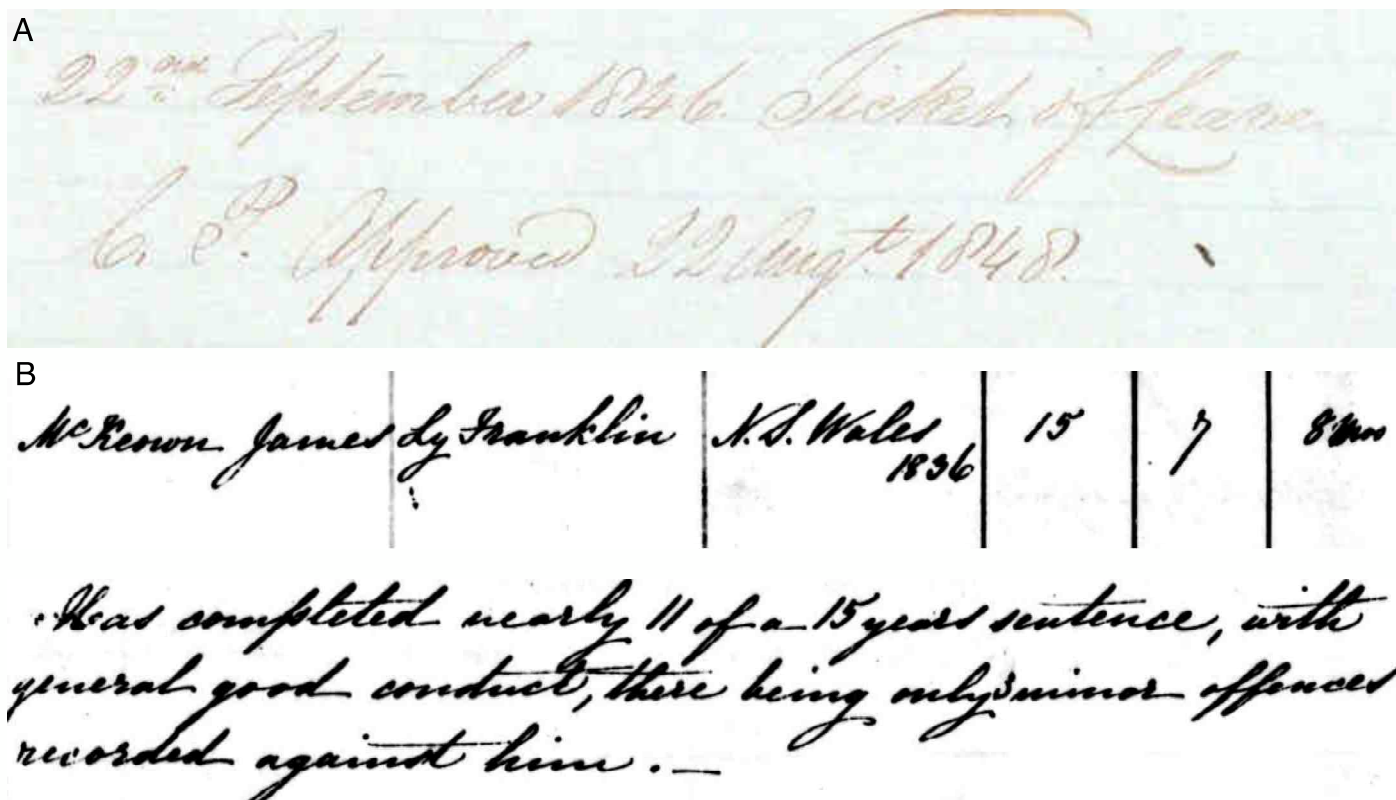
**Figure 9.** Pontville: (A) “31/5/1846 - 3/6/1846 J Davis Pontville 3 weeks” (8)  
 (B) Epsom House, Pontville 1860-70 (18)  
 (C) Epsom House today ([www.epsom.com](http://www.epsom.com))

basis of a letter circulating through the local society produced by Mr. George Armytage, a gentleman of considerable property, which was claimed to have been written by Richardson ‘which the most common prostitute would not have written’ (20). The letter was proven to be a forgery based on Mrs Richardson’s inability to spell being the mitigating evidence.

Jerusalem 18/6/1846 – 17/7/1846 (station 1841-48) probation station was listed on Tasmanian heritage register in 2010 as much of the original station still exists, although as private residence now (Figure 2) (7). The buildings, made of fine sandstone are still mostly present today (21). In 1846 James McKeown was assigned for John McConnon, (Figure 10) where they were involved in work building a jail and courthouse. There were 800 convicts working in the area for a few years with many working in the quarries and coal mines. Jerusalem had a hospital and a chapel, along with the usual barracks and kitchen quarters. After the probation system failed and was abandoned in 1848 McConnon became the freehold owner of Jerusalem station in 1856, called it ‘Jerusalem House’ (22). The township was revived by the coming of the railway and was given its present name of Colebrook in 1894.



**Figure 10.** Jerusalem: (A) “18/6/1846 – 17/7/1846 J McConnon Jrsm 3 weeks” John McConnon, Jerusalem (8)  
 (B) Jerusalem today (21)



**Figure 11.** Conditional Pardon for James McKeown (A) Note on Convict Conduct Records (8)  
 (B) Convict Record, NSW, for convicts returning from Norfolk Island (23)

### The Conclusion of James McKeown's Detention

James McKeown eventually received his next Ticket-of-Leave on the 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1846 (Figure 11) (8, 23) granting him freedom to work and live within a given district of the colony before his sentence expired. Subsequently, it is noted in McKeown's appropriation record that he spent time working in 'P.M.' 18/3/1847 (unknown location) as well as the garrison towns of Campbell Town 23/3/1847 (station 1836-49) and Ross 8/4/1847 (station 1839-51) (image not shown) (8). A Conditional Pardon was finally awarded to James McKeown on 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1848, which marked the conclusion of his criminal detention, but prevented him from returning to England or Ireland (23).

The census of 1851 (24) records a 'James McKoan' living alone in a bark hut in Spring Hill Bottom, across the main highway from Jerusalem in the middle of the Tasmanian midlands where Jenolan's James McKeown spent his time in the probation system. The spelling of the name is not untypical for McKoan and McKeown to be linked and it is interesting that his occupation is listed as 'gardener', he was a convict with a ticket-of-leave and he was between the age of 41 and 60 – which fits the situation James McKeown would have found himself at that time. However, if this census record is the James McKeown whose capture led to the discovery of Jenolan Caves we can discern a few other interesting pieces of information: (i) he lived alone, but was listed as being 'married', (ii) he now considered himself to be of the Church of England, not Catholic and (iii) he likely did

not have too much capital, let alone desire, with which to travel. (Figure 12)

So, did James McKeown "revisit the scene of his former exploits" (6) as is often considered? Unlike the other convicts and freeholders James McKeown listed in his records as being his 'keepers', we see here in 1851, 27 years after his arrival in Australia, a man with little to show for himself by way of wealth nor human relationship. To meet with his captor as previously quoted, he would have had to travel soon after the 1851 census, James Whalan died in 1854. Charles Whalan was alive and well. However Jeremiah Wilson would have been a new arrival to the colony of NSW and but 12 years old in 1851. In 1866, when Jeremiah officially took up service as 'Keeper of the Caves', James McKeown would have been at least 73 years old and rather 'battle weary' one would presume.

Many a tale has been told about James McKeown and his involvement with Jenolan history. Some of the more fanciful tales will be addressed in the next installment of this series and historical context will be provided to accept, deny or clarify what truth these tales have within them.

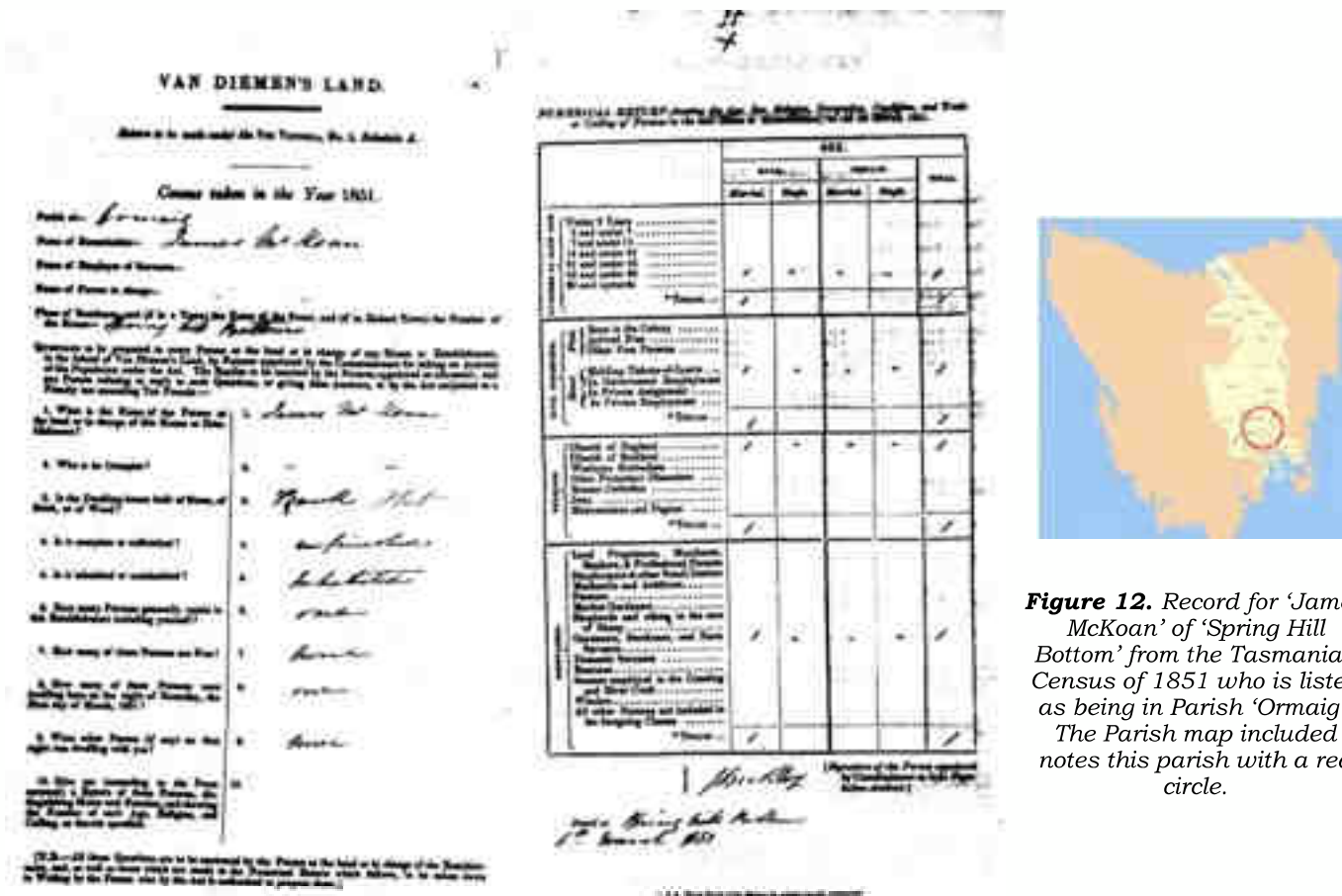


Figure 12. Record for 'James McKeown' of 'Spring Hill Bottom' from the Tasmanian Census of 1851 who is listed as being in Parish 'Ormaig'. The Parish map included notes this parish with a red circle.

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