

FREE RAILWAY PASSES

A NEW SOURCE FOR DATE OF ARRIVAL

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Pastkeys has always had a particular interest in opening up access to records which give leads to a person's date and/or ship of arrival and a new index of 23,899 entries has been completed which contains a wealth of personal detail, especially relating to movements around the Colony, and including in many cases a ship name.

The records were created under a scheme operated by the Immigration Department whereby persons seeking work could apply for a free railway pass but there are also many instances of applications by people who were natives of the colony or who had been discharged from hospital or prison. Applicants were required to provide personal information and, as with our previous indexes, either a full transcript (or, where lengthy, an abbreviated transcript) of the additional information in the records has been included in a remarks column. They are known as *Registers of Free Railway Passes* and are held at State Records NSW.

One of the pieces of information which officialdom required was time in Colony. Accordingly, even though these records were created in the 1880s, applicants' arrivals are anything from 12 hours to 50 plus years previously, so some persons would have arrived in the Colony as early as the 1830s. Although we have not researched any particular individual, presumably, given the time span, names in the records would include both convicts and immigrants. In the case of a reasonably short period, this of course narrows down the arrival date and reduces considerably the time involved in searching unindexed shipping records. When using the indexes however, it is important to note that in many cases the time in Colony relates to arrival in New South Wales from interstate. The records cover the following periods:

- January 1880 to October 1881
- August 1883 to June 1884
- January to August 1886
- July to December 1887
- October 1888 to May 1889
- 10th to 17th February 1892 (11 pages only)

The categories of information were: Name, Age, Occupation, whether married or single, if married, number of children (usually with location of wife and family), native place, destination, whether person could read and write (and, in the first register of the series, either the applicant's own signature or his mark, appears), and a remarks column usually noting whether a pass was granted or refused. Occupation as such is infrequently shown, but very often the location and type of work recently engaged in is supplied. The information provided varies over the period but generally is very good, often in the detailed entries amounting almost to a mini-biography of recent and not so recent

activities. We are sure that access to these records will enable some researchers to track the movements of those elusive ancestors who moved from place to place and hopefully fill in some gaps in a life history. Following are some examples in the records that illustrate the type of detail which the registers contain:

Years in Colony	Remarks	Destination
8 years	Refused; very impertinent; NSW, working on the Macleay 5 months on sawmills and on various coasting boats	Bungendore
8 weeks	Queensland; working last at Hudsons Bros & previously 3½ years timbergetting in Queensland	Bungendore
42 years	Navying, hodcarrying &c &c, general laborer about Sydney	Bathurst
20 years	Past 18months teaching at school at Wattle Flat near Bathurst	Nyngan
9 months	2 months bush clearing at Gosford & in the Produce Stores in Sydney 4 months; 36/- per week	Young
4 years	Working as cook and steward on coasting boats	Bourke
6 months	Married, wife in Italy, working on Illawarra Line	Nyngan
10 days	Outdoor patient infirmary; wife & 1child S Aust; past 9yrs in S Aust working on the train line £2 per week	Bungendore
4 days	Queensland, wife & 6 chn Victoria; past 6 mo in Queensland and previously in Wagga, his native place	Wagga
2 months	Scotland; per <i>Temanda</i> ; deserted from ship	Hay
3 years	Last 5 or 6 months working about Sydney, 13 mo in HM Gaol Darlinghurst	Hay
4 days	Wife & 3 chn at home, Scotland; per SS <i>Cuzco</i>	Bourke
28 years	Wife in NZ, chn in Mudgee; 4 months out of work	Mudgee
5 days	2 yrs in NZ, from S Africa	Bourke
20 years	Left Wellington 2 wks ago, working on railway, boots in hotel	Orange

As indexing progressed it became evident from the tenor of the clerk's entries in the remarks column that officials were not tolerant of applicants who claimed to have 'spent [or lost] all my money' but still sported a gold watch chain, 'came to see Sydney', or could not provide the name of the captain of the ship they claimed to have arrived on. This was confirmed when the 1886 volume was reached. Statistics for the year of passes granted and refused, destinations and states and countries of origin were recorded, followed by a notation that passes were refused to those who had previously received a

pass or who left employment in country districts to visit Sydney and spend their money – erratic individuals always travelling from one country district to another, men who from their general demeanour and conduct are not considered eligible being appearing well able to pay their own travelling expenses. It was clear that applicants were questioned very closely to ascertain the truth of the claim for assistance and often there is more detail in an entry for a man who has been refused a pass than for one granted.

There are many entries relating to aged and infirm individuals from various Sydney hospitals and asylums being granted a pass to go to friends or relatives such as uncle or brother.

As would be expected, the majority of applicants were from England, Ireland or Scotland or were a native of the Colony but of great interest was the significant number from a wide range of other places of origin: Fiji, Germany, Sweden, Denmark, Italy, China, America, New Zealand, Switzerland, Russia, India to name some. With minor exceptions, we have used Chapman Codes to record these locations. Particularly in the case of Germans or Italians, many appeared to have been referred by their consular office and a letter found loose in the register and addressed to G.F. Wise, Emigration Department Sydney gives an indication of how the system operated: “Sir, Will you be kind enough to grant to the bearers of this, who arrived lately from Germany, free Railway Tickets to Orange, as they have not got the means of paying the fares and they trust to get employment at the said place as farmers.” (Signed) Acting Consul for Germany.

There are many notations of ‘worked passage’ for recent arrivals. Large numbers of men were sent to Hay to work on rabbit eradication and there are quite a few references to men who had returned from the Kimberley diggings. Physical infirmities are often noted; for example, bad eyes, broken leg, blind man with boy etc. and it seems from some entries that letters evidencing discharge from employment or hospital were required to be produced.

Since completing our index, the Registers of Free Railway Passes have been microfilmed and Pastkeys’ index provides the film number and so opens up these most interesting records to researchers.