CHARLES ATKINSON
By Sally Hayles
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In 1828 Thomas and Charles Atkinson published a work entitled: *Gothic Ornaments Selected from the Different Cathedrals and Churches in England*. It would be reasonable to assume from this that the two men were related. And indeed, for some time I thought that they were. However, following extensive research I am now able to reveal the remarkable story of Charles Atkinson.

Charles Atkinson died in March 1837, aged 32, in Tasmania - then known as Van Diemen's Land – where he is buried in an unmarked grave. He had arrived there in May 1833. His brief stay was marked by both success and failure. However, Australian records provide some fascinating details about his life after he arrived, although the only information on his life pre-1833 is that which he gave to the Van Diemen's Land authorities about his working life in England.

I have not been able to find a record of his baptism – it is possible that he was born abroad - but tracing the births of his siblings immediately prior and post his birth makes it likely that he was born in either Hampshire, London or Essex.

Charles's parents were Thomas and Harriet (nee Jones) Atkinson. Thomas was the son of a City of London merchant called James Atkinson and Harriet was the third daughter of James Jones of Great Gearies, Ilford, Essex.

Charles was the third son of nine children born to Thomas and Harriet. His brother James Frederick moved to New South Wales in the 1841 and another brother, Edward Septimus, died in 1833 in the East Indies whilst serving with the Bengal Marines. The other children were Stephen, Harriet, Matilda, Frederick, Caroline and Emily Ann. Thomas Atkinson, Charles' father was one of three sons of James and Mary (nee Ford) Atkinson, all of whom seem to have been involved in the family's city of London business.

Records show that from at least 1792 the Atkinsons had been merchants in London working from America Square, Rood Lane, Fenchurch Street and Mincing Lane. They also had a wharf at Brown's Quay, off Great Hermitage Street in Wapping. Records of the criminal court at the Old Bailey London, show that they were dealing in hemp in 1797; in records from another court case in 1832, the Atkinsons describe themselves as ‘Russia merchants’.

The next we hear about Charles is when his name comes up in relation to Thomas Witlam Atkinson, Siberian traveller. Before leaving England, Charles was in partnership between 1827 and August 1829 with Thomas, as architects and surveyors working from 8 Upper Stamford Street, London. Thomas had recently moved to London from Yorkshire to set up in what was his first business as an architect. After showing early promise in design and drawing, he had been encouraged in his endeavours by the Spencer Stanhope family of Cannon Hall, Yorkshire, the estate on which he had been brought up and where his father was a stonemason. How the two men met we do not know, but it is likely they worked together on building projects before deciding to set up in business.

From the account he gave on his arrival in Van Diemen's Land, Charles seems to have started to work for the architect George Basevi in about 1824. Basevi's father was a well connected City of London merchant and Basevi himself had started his architectural and surveying business in London in 1820. He designed in both the neo-classical and Gothic style and perhaps is most well known for

the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge and the terraced houses of Belgrave Square, London. He was also responsible for much church building subsequent to the setting up of the Church Building Commission in 1818 to oversee the building of new churches throughout the United Kingdom. He was noted for his precision and attention to detail. He died in 1845 after a fall from a bell tower at Ely Cathedral. We know that Thomas Atkinson also worked with Basevi in Belgrave Square, so that is perhaps where the two men met.

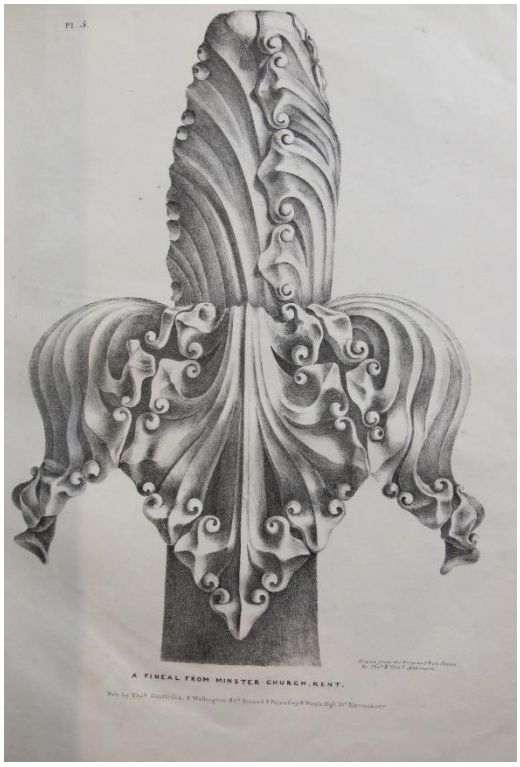
Charles told officials that he had also worked on various churches in England including: Greenwich, Ramsgate, Bowers Gifford, Stockport, Chadkirk and Hyde. Many of these were designed and built whilst he was in partnership with Thomas Atkinson. The Stockport/Chadkirk church could be St. Thomas Stockport (designed by Basevi), or more likely St. Chad, Chadkirk. The church at Hyde is likely to be St. George's and in Ramsgate it is St. George's. The Greenwich church was likely to be the now demolished St. Mary's, where building work started in 1823.

These church projects, financed by the Church Building Commission, were springing up all over the place at the time, as the clergy responded to the massive movement of the population from the countryside into the cities. Many were in the fashionable neo-Gothic style and it was no surprise that these two ambitious young men should decide to publish a book for use by fellow architects and builders. In 1828 they began issuing monthly folios that built up into what became *Gothic Ornaments*. A total of 44 plates were eventually published, all drawn from the original by Thomas and Charles. Dr Ann Compton, Honorary Fellow of Glasgow University, believes that the plates are intended as sample patterns for masons as the publication shows no scale nor exact location.

There were bosses, brackets and arches from Ely Cathedral, cornices from Canterbury Cathedral, finials from Minster church Kent and a capital from Westminster Abbey amongst the drawings. *The Examiner* newspaper reported on 9th November 1828:

"*This is a lithographic work, publishing in parts, containing various Gothic ornaments, some of them grotesque enough, others very elegant, all selected from different cathedrals and churches by Messrs. Thomas and Charles Atkinson, architects.*"

Ultimately there were to be three publications of the work, the first under the byline of both men and two published subsequently under Thomas's name. The likelihood is that Thomas published under his own name after the dissolution of the partnership with Charles in August 1829. Again, the reason the two men dissolved their partnership is not presently known.



Pages from Gothic Ornaments

After the dissolution of the partnership, Charles may have continued to work with Thomas on various church projects. However, on 6th December 1832 he is listed as a cabin passenger on the *Hibernia*, sailing from Liverpool, via the Cape of Good Hope, to Van Diemen's Land and Sydney. The voyage was to turn into a terrible disaster. On 4 February 1833, 1100 miles off the coast of Brazil, a fire broke out and the ship sank, with the loss of 150 lives, almost all of whom were emigrants to Australia. Less than 100 survived, including Charles, after spending a week at sea in open boats.

The survivors, including 69 who were picked up by a convict ship, were taken to Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, where relief funds were raised to allow them to continue their voyage to Australia in the specially chartered ship, the *Adelaide*, which eventually arrived in Van Dieman's Land on 19th May 1833.

Why did Charles go to Van Diemen's Land? In 1832 it was essentially a prison for UK convicts who worked as agricultural labourers or on public building works. It had been a penal colony since 1803, although in 1820 British Government policy began to favour wealthy private settlers. They would be granted land, depending on the amount of money they brought with them, and assigned convicts to work for them. This land grant system ended in 1831 when an Emigration Commission was set up mainly to attract single females and family men with practical skills. Charles was probably attracted there because of the potential it offered him to make a living practising his architectural and surveying skills in an expanding colony.

The English press at the time presented Van Diemen's Land as something of a rural idyll. For example, *The Ipswich Journal* of 1st June 1833 reported:

"*nothing more strikingly exemplifies the prosperity of the colonialists at Van Diemen's Land than the character of the advertisements in the different newspapers...the papers are filled with advertisements of stage coaches, omnibuses, carriers wagons etc...and all other advertisements which are usual in a land of trade and plenty, including notices of horse races, balls, charitable functions etc*."

The next line reads:

"*The Aborigines are proceeding favourably to civilization under the kind treatment they receive at King's Island*." (off the north-west coast of Van Diemen's Land)

Not mentioned, of course, in these glowing testimonials was the fact that the indigenous population had been almost wiped out in what became known as the Black War. The size of the incoming colonial population, land alienation, hunting with dogs, the introduction of martial law in 1828 and new diseases all had a catastrophic effect on the Aborigines. The ensuing violence meant that very soon they had been decimated. Events were so far out of sight and so little reported, it is hard to judge how much Charles knew about what life was like in Van Diemen's Land when he set sail.

Charles's original plan must have been to set himself up in business as an architect, surveyor and builder. However, the sinking of the *Hibernia* and the consequent destruction of all his papers, books, drawings and equipment in the shipwreck must have been a major blow. He arrived in Van Diemen's Land with nothing.

On 29th May 1833, he wrote to the territory's Governor, Sir George Arthur, explaining his predicament and his work experience in England. A relief committee set up for the *Hibernia* survivors recommended that Charles be given a position. John Lee Archer (1781-1852), engineer and architect, suggested that Charles could be an architectural assistant. Archer was very influential, being responsible between 1827-38 for all government buildings. Clearly help with the buildings and plans was needed and Charles's stated background fitted the bill.

In the meantime, Charles began work on a set of pioneering lithographs, *Views Through Hobart Town*. We can see from the title page that it bears a distinct similarity to the title page of *Gothic Ornaments*.

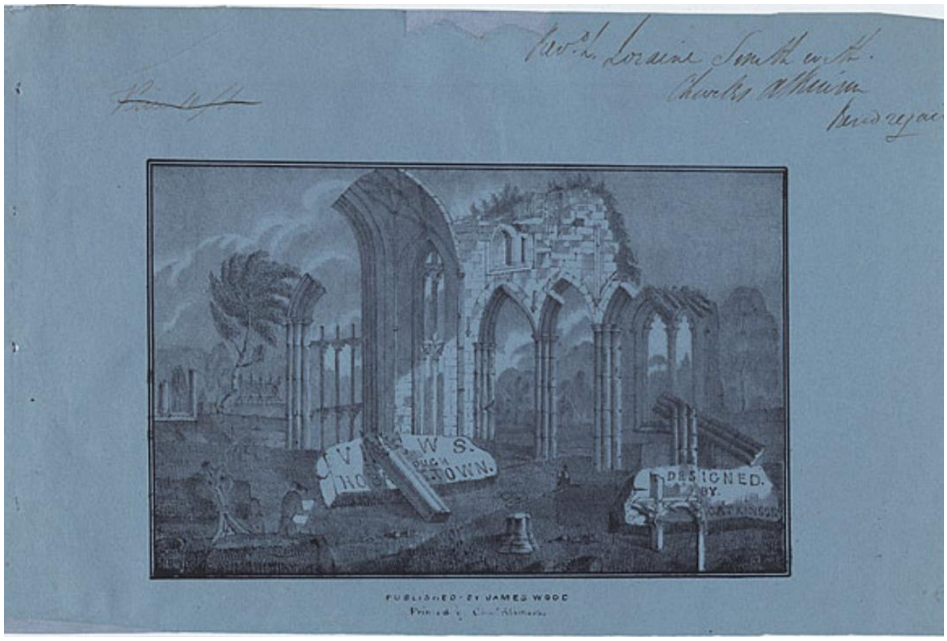
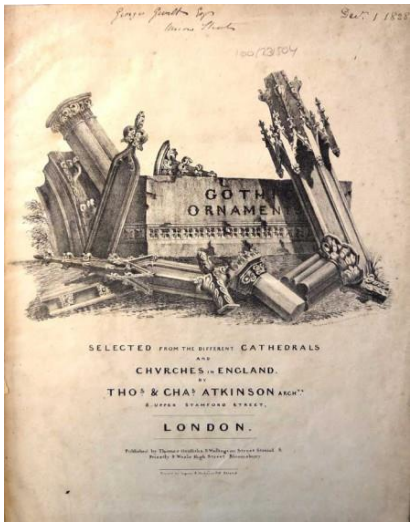


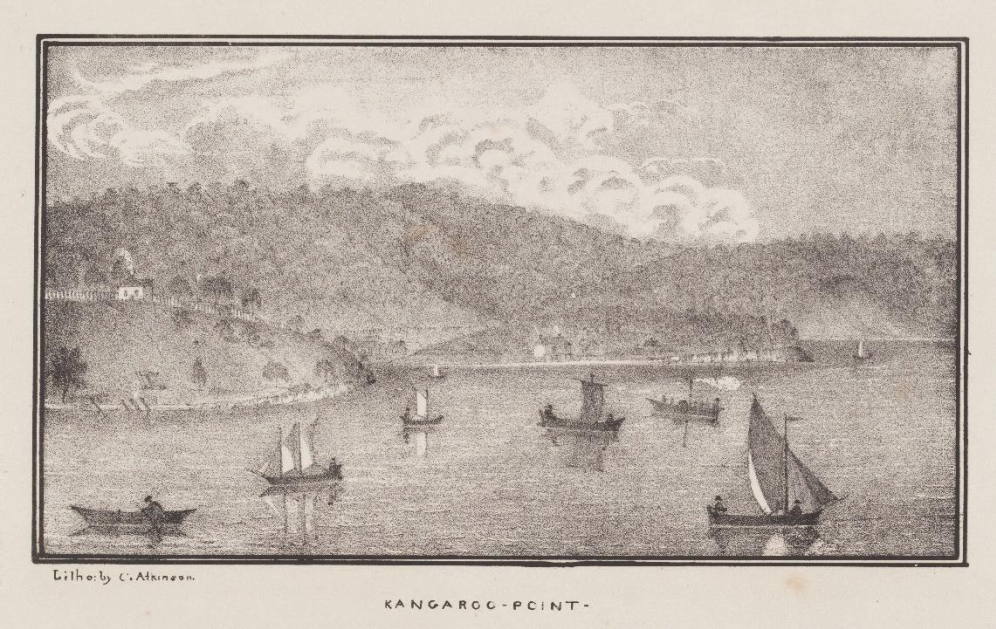
Image courtesy of the National Library of Australia



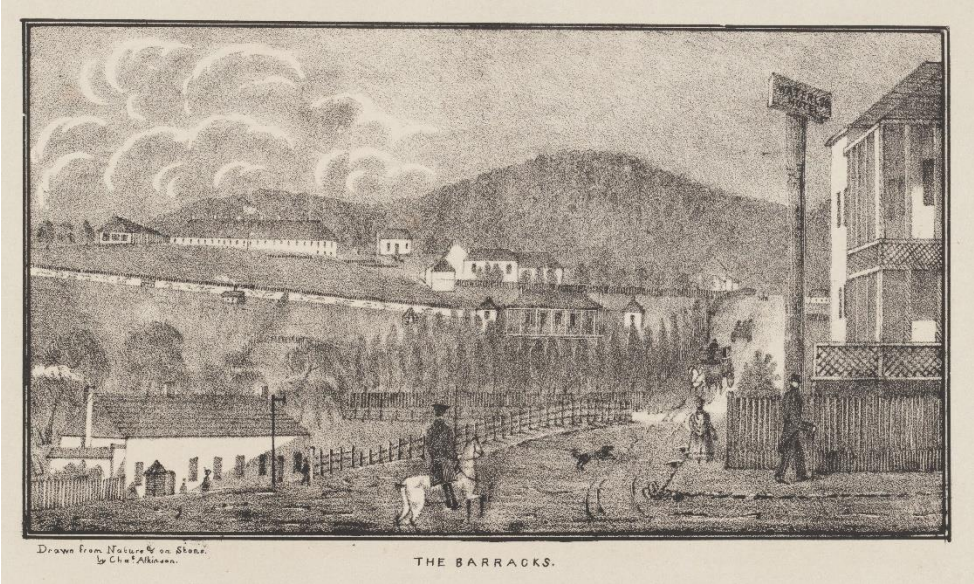
A comparison of the two title pages shows striking similarities

The artist in the left foreground of the title page of *Views Through Hobart Town*, likely to be Charles, is a personal touch. He must have been delighted to find a lithographic press in Hobart and wasted no time in embarking on a project familiar to him. The press had been brought to Hobart in 1829 by James Wood, a legal clerk.

The Austral-Asiatic Review (Hobart Town) of 3rd September 1833 announced the publication of the first set of four lithographs engraved on stone by Charles. These first four lithographs comprised: T*he seat of His Excellency Lieu. Gov. Arthur, The Barracks, The Treasury* and *Kangaroo Point*. They were priced at 10s 6d or 7s 6d, depending on size.



Charles Atkinson *Kangaroo Point* 1833, paper lithograph, 14.8 x 24 cm, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra



Charles Atkinson, *The Barracks 1833*, paper lithograph, 14 x 23.9 cm, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

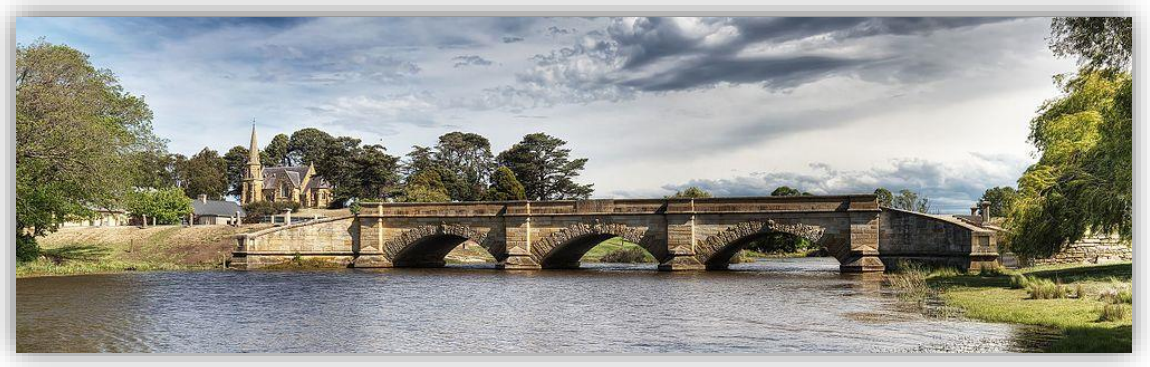
In October 1833 a second set of four lithographs was published: *The Commissariat Store, Macquarie Street, Elizabeth Street* and *The seat of Captain Wilson J.P. and The seat of Dr. Scott*. These were available to buy either as sets or individually at 2s 6d. The second set was not so well received on the grounds that they seemed to have been hastily executed. According to the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, "Atkinson's lithographs captured much of the colony's primitive harshness, in strong contrast with contemporary French prints which depicted Hobart as a sophisticated city."

Charles Atkinson, *The seat of Captain Wilson JP, The seat of Dr Scott 1833*, paper lithograph, 14.4.x 23.8 cm, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

A few months later, in October 1833, the Legal Council of Van Diemen's Land announced that new churches were to be built in Ross and Campbell Town and that £1,000 had also been put aside for new bridges and that the larger portion of that sum would go to the building of a new bridge over the river Macquarie at Ross, to replace the wooden bridge which had finally collapsed in March 1831. Given his experience, in November 1833 Charles was appointed as superintendent of the convict road party for the Ross Bridge, where his duties included reporting to John Lee Archer's office on progress.

The sandstone bridge is notable for the beautiful and unique carvings to its 186 keystones that can still be seen decorating its arches today. They can be found on both sides of the bridge, even in some places which cannot easily be seen by travellers. There are depictions of local people, writhing animals, fantastic creatures and lions' heads.

Who was responsible? Two convicts Daniel Herbert (transported for highway robbery) and James Colbeck (transported for burglary), are credited with most of the carving work. Both were given full pardons for their work on the bridge. Herbert died in Tasmania, but Colbeck, who had worked as a mason on Buckingham Palace in the 1820s before he was transported to Van Dieman's land, returned to England and died in Dewsbury, Yorkshire in 1852.



Ross Bridge over the Macquarie River as it is today

Carvings on the keystones of Ross Bridge

There don't appear to be any records relating to the design and execution of the carvings, which were not remarked upon at the time. Charles seems to want to take credit in altering Archer's overall design of the bridge (it may well be that those alterations were not carried through), but makes no mention of the carvings in correspondence

As for Charles, his performance during his tenure at the bridge came under increasing criticism, particularly for the time it was taking to build. Letters appeared in the *Hobart Courier* in January 1835 attacking him for having allowed convicts, including Colbeck, to engage in paid work for settlers on their properties when they should have been working on the bridge. Charles replied that such work had not taken place on his watch.

During his time working on the bridge Charles also crossed swords with Dr Barry Cotter. Cotter had arrived in Van Diemen's Land in 1830 from Ireland as a 23-year-old Assistant Colonial Surgeon. In 1834 Charles became dissatisfied with Dr Cotter's attention to his convicts and wrote letters of complaint to the Colonial Surgeon in Hobart and to the Colonial Secretary, John Montagu. One letter related to what Charles thought was the unnecessary death of a convict working on the bridge. Charles believed that Cotter's lack of medical attention to the convicts was slowing down the progress of the work. Cotter was later dismissed but it was also the opinion of the Chief Police Magistrate, Matthew Forster, that Charles was "a very improper person to have control of convicts in any shape whatever".

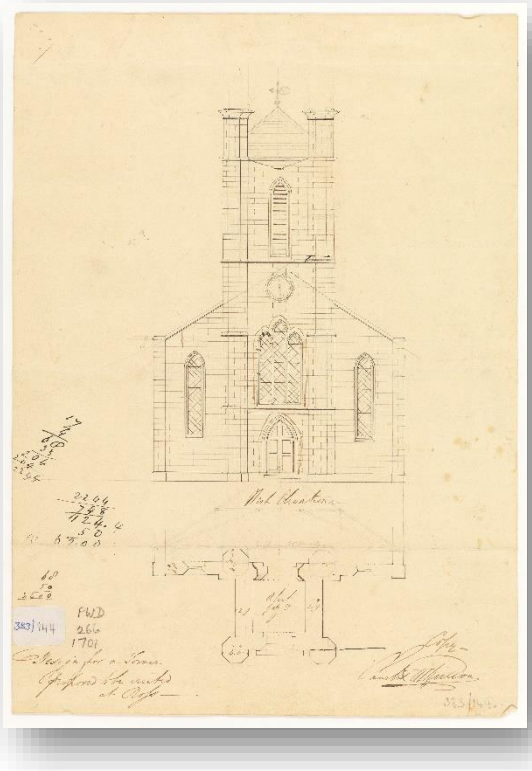
The delay and cost of the bridge were quickly becoming a public scandal. *The True Colonist: Van Diemen's Land Political Despatch and Agricultural and Commercial Advertiser* of 15th January 1836 reported: " *there never was in any colony a greater scene of abuse and waste of public labour than existed and still does exist at Ross Bridge where some hundreds of men have been for several years been employed in erecting a bridge....when this bridge is finished it will have cost nearly £20,000.*"

Charles was finally sacked from the project in June 1835 and the project was handed over to Capt. William Turner of the 50th Ordnance Regiment, which was based in the town. The bridge was finally opened by Lt. Governor Arthur on 21st October 1836.

In "*The Engravers of Van Diemen's Land*" by Clifford Craig, published in 1961, there is a chapter entitled "Charles Atkinson, Artist on Stone". Craig states: "Atkinson's association with the Ross Bridge, which must have lasted until 1835, is one of extreme interest". He cites a letter from Charles to Colonial Secretary Montagu in which he says he is giving Colbeck directions on the bridge construction.

There is perhaps a link to the bridge in Charles's background which has not been explored. We know that Charles had clearly studied ornamental decoration in detail and so might have been able to advise the convicts Herbert and Colbeck on their work, even after he left the project, as he was still living in the town. A more detailed study of these lithographs and the carvings of Ross Bridge would be of interest.

Having been dismissed from his post building the Ross Bridge, Charles was now looking for new work. Several years before, in October 1833, the Legislative Council of Van Diemen's Land had proposed the construction of new churches in Hobart, New Town, Oatlands, Ross, Hamilton, Richmond and Campbell Town and a Presbyterian church in Hobart. Charles was now appointed to build two of these, St. John's Anglican church in Ross and St. Luke's in Campbell Town. He may also have submitted a plan for the Presbyterian church which became St. Andrews.



Charles' plans for St John's church tower,
Ross, courtesy Tasmanian Archives

In a letter to the Colonial Secretary of 13th July 1835, only weeks after he had left the bridge, Charles stated that St. John's "will be a monument of fame to me". In a certain way it was. Even before

building had started it gave rise to some vitriolic exchanges in the *Colonial Times* in 1836 with an anonymous correspondent named Quassia (a shrub whose extract was once used as an insecticide) who alleged that Charles' quote of £800 compared to two other quotes of £1500 and £1400 was bound to end in disaster. In another letter Quassia railed: ''*Mr. Atkinson does not think it necessary to have walls perpendicular, one hangs this way another that; in short, a splendid concatenation of stones, mud and bricks has not been seen for a long time... the Church at Ross and I am afraid the one at Campbell Town also will be a disgrace to science*.''

A further letter of from Quassia said that most of Charles's actions were born of a self-conceited stupidity which characterized most of his actions. St John's at Ross was completed after Charles's death in 1838, but, as predicted, had to be demolished in 1868 owing to its poor construction.

St. Luke's in Campbell Town was designed by John Lee Archer – who designed the Ross Bridge - with Charles appointed building contractor. Later it was found that there were few foundations and significant work had to be done to rectify it, as a result of which the church was not consecrated until 1850.

Clearly Charles was desperate to find out who Quassia was. In a letter to the Colonial Secretary in 1836 he wrote that it had been suggested to him that it was Roderic O'Connor. O'Connor had arrived in Van Diemen's Land in 1824, where he was appointed Land Commissioner and Inspector of Roads and Bridges. This powerful man was well known for his outspokenness and willingness to argue with individuals, using the local press to air his egotistical and bombastic views. Charles was unwilling to think it could be him.

In September 1836 Charles wrote to the Colonial Secretary about the possibility of renting or buying land towards the east coast, as within about three months he would have completed both churches but would find himself penniless. He reported that the buildings had ruined his creditworthiness, the Quassia letters had seriously injured him and that gaol might be his next abode. His request was refused as Governor Arthur had no power to grant land.

In the light of the difficulties in 1836 with the building of the two churches and the personal attack from Quassia, combined with the death of his mother in April 1836, we can only guess what the future held for Charles. Early in 1837 he had an accident and had to have both legs amputated. He died in Campbell Town on 21st March 1837. An announcement in the *Launceston Advertiser* on 23rd March said he had died aged 32, ''sincerely regretted by his numerous friends.''

He left a will executed during his illness, although there was not much in it. Besides his church contracts, which he left to his principal creditor, he left a number of personal bequests, mostly books and papers, to members of the Emmett family, including a "jewell box shortly to arrive from England'' for Emmett Snr, perhaps the same box left to him by his mother under her will. The executor of his will was Henry James Emmett Jnr of May Farm, River Tamar, gentleman. The Emmett family had arrived in Van Diemen's Land in 1819 and Henry Emmett Snr became the Chief Clerk in the office of the Colonial Secretary, and although a prominent public servant, he had his own financial woes. In 1836 Charles, at the bequest of Henry Jellicoe, had drawn up a plan for a cottage to be built on land belonging to Jellicoe and leased to Henry Emmett. To a Dr Strang (who had replaced Dr Cotter as Assistant Surgeon) "for his kindness during his illness", he left his duelling pistols.

The will was proved in Launceston in November 1840 and described Charles as a builder. His personal goods did not exceed £100 and included pillows, decanters, plates, a kettle and curtains. He was insolvent and he directed Emmett to draw upon his uncle, James Atkinson of 31 Russell Square

London, for his funeral expenses. James in fact had pre-deceased him in October 1836 having left a bequest to Charles of £50.

Charles's dream of a new and successful life in Van Diemen's Land was beset with misfortune but within months of arriving with nothing to his name, he had produced lithographs which are nationally regarded. The problems at Ross Bridge cannot have all been his fault and his dismissal was probably due to his inability to control an unruly group of convicts. In his anxiety to make his name he seems to have quoted disastrously low for the two churches, leading to substandard work and his financial downfall. Had he recovered from the accident, would he have been able to restore his name and fortunes in Van Diemen's Land or would he have returned to London to start a new phase of his life? The only biographical information about Charles is a file at the Royal Institute of British Architects which was deposited in 1978 by Hobart lawyer George Deas Brown. His business partner Thomas Witlam Atkinson achieved fame in his lifetime as an artist, architect and explorer but is now almost forgotten. Perhaps Charles would have escaped a similar fate!

Sally Hayles
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