From Wigan, she endured
Richard de Grijs (Sydney, Australia)

In the smoky, coal-dusted lanes of 1830s Wigan, Rachel Sarah Atkinson made a decision that would tear her life apart. Born around 1818, Rachel was one of countless working-class women caught between harsh morality and sheer survival. Almost inevitably perhaps, by 1837, unmarried yet pregnant, she faced the full weight of society's judgment in a town where servants were easily dismissed and charity was scarce. And when she tried unsuccessfully to take the life of her newborn daughter Rebecca, she became—in the eyes of the law—a criminal…

But Rachel was also a victim—of poverty, of shame, and of a world that offered no mercy to girls who overstepped its boundaries.

Her trial at the Lancaster Assizes on 25 March 1837 ended with a conviction for "attempt[ing] to murder her infant aged one month".[1] Yet the baby girl lived. And so did Rachel—but at a cost. Although our Wigan servant girl initially received a death sentence, her punishment was commuted to seven years of transportation "across the seas", to Australia. It was a lenient sentence by the standards of the day. She was young, literate and a first-time offender. Perhaps the court sensed her desperation; perhaps the jury flinched at the thought of yet another noose.



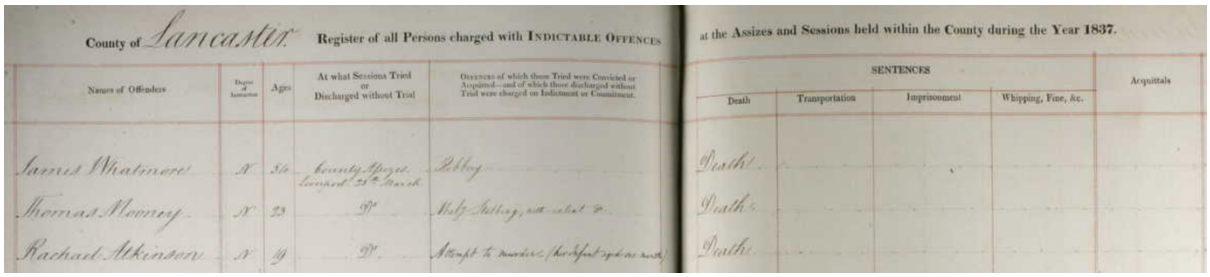
Lancaster Assizes in session, 1664. (Out of copyright on account of age. Source: https://quakerstrongrooms.org/lsf-se-48-lancaster-assizes-gf-etching-by-robert-spence-lr/)

Her punishment was exile: from home, from family, from her native Wigan.

On 17 July 1837, Rachel embarked at the London docks on the convict ship *Henry Wellesley*, sailing under captain Edward Williams. The India-built, 304-ton barque carried 139 women and their children into the great unknown, halfway around the world. For five long

months, Rachel endured the cramped, disease-ridden quarters below deck as the creaking vessel laboured across the oceans. When she finally stepped ashore in Sydney on 22 December 1837, she was a bondwoman in a foreign land.[2]

Official records show her as "Rachael" Atkinson, 19, single, Protestant, able to read, a country servant from Wigan. Five feet 1¼ inches (1.56 metres) tall, ruddy and freckled, brown-haired, with chestnut eyes and a scar on the middle finger of her right knuckle.[3] But behind that soulless catalogue of traits hid a young woman, alone in the fledgling Antipodean colony of New South Wales, with a baby in her arms and a sentence to serve.


County of Lancaster. Register of all Persons charged with Indictable Offences at the Assizes and Sessions held within the County during the Year 1837.

Names of Offenders	Degree of Instruction	Ages	At what Sessions Tried or Discharged without Trial	Offences of which those Tried were Convicted or Acquitted—and of which those discharged without Trial were charged on Indictment or Commitment.	SENTENCES: Death	Transportation	Imprisonment	Whipping, Fine, &c.	Acquittals
James Whatmore	R	30	County Assizes. Lancaster 21st March	Robbery	Death				
Thomas Mooney	R	23	Do	Wilful Setting, [illegible]	Death				
Rachael Atkinson	R	19	Do	Attempt to murder [illegible]	Death				

Excerpt from the Criminal Registers (1791–1892) in England and Wales showing "Rachael" Atkinson's conviction at the Lancaster Assizes (third entry). (Source: Ancestry library edition/State Library of New South Wales, Sydney; not in copyright).

Yet in New South Wales, a new chapter began, one shaped not by shame but by resilience.

Within a year, Rachel applied to marry Henry Jackson, a 34-year-old Yorkshireman who had arrived as a convict aboard the *Countess of Harcourt* in 1824. Their application, recorded in the colonial registers, notes that the consent of Rachel's assignees—the Newcastle Female Factory, a workhouse for female convicts—was required before the ceremony could proceed.[4,5] Nonetheless, in 1838 she married Henry in St. Andrew's Church, Patrick Plains (now Singleton), and became Rachel Jackson, wife, settler and, before long, matriarch of a sprawling family. Rebecca had sadly died earlier that year, on 19 January.

Rachel and Henry lovingly made their home in the Hunter Valley north of Sydney. Their lives were marked not just by survival but, more importantly, by astonishing resilience. Rachel gave birth to 11 additional children, including her triplet sons Thomas, William and Henry, who were reportedly born on the side of a country road. It is tempting to imagine Rachel, still in her early twenties, alone and in labour, drawing on every ounce of the strength that had carried her from Wigan's workhouses to Australia's unforgiving bush.

Seven years passed and her sentence came to an end. Rachel and Henry never returned to England. They had no need to. In New South Wales, they built a life far removed from the dark courtrooms and alleys of their past. The children grew up as free settlers, and the couple's descendants spread, across the Hunter region and far beyond. By the time Rachel passed away, she was no longer known as a convict, but as a settler, a mother and a survivor.

Rachel died at Marrowbone, near Cessnock (New South Wales), on 14 October 1904, aged 86. Her official cause of death was "senile decay", suggesting that she died of old age, her body gradually failing after a long life. Her son Isaiah, by then aged 44, signed her death certificate. She was buried two days later at the Ellalong Church of England cemetery.

Rachel had spent 67 years in New South Wales. And yet, her story began—and in some ways remained—in her native Lancashire.

Wigan, with its mills, mines and tightly bound social codes, shaped her early life and her fate. It was a place where domestic servants lived at the mercy of their employers, where pregnancy out of wedlock meant ruin and where the law saw women's desperation not as tragedy but as crime. In the north of England, infanticide was not uncommon among servant

girls. Their options were few, and their shame was weaponised by society. There were no pensions, no childcare, no mercy. The birth of a child outside of marriage could mean the end of a woman's life as she knew it.

Rachel's act did not end her infant daughter's life, but it exiled her. And in doing so, it opened the door to a different future, one forged in pain but also in persistence.

Today, Rachel Atkinson's name appears in genealogies, in convict records, in faded court transcripts. But her story lives on most vividly in the lives of her descendants. Some know the full story; others know only fragments. But all of them owe something to that frightened young woman from Wigan who boarded a ship in 1837 to an unknown future, with nothing but a baby and a second chance.

Rachel's life cannot be reduced to one desperate act. It spanned continents, decades and generations. Behind every statistic in a court record is a beating heart and, sometimes, a quiet triumph.

Rachel Atkinson left Wigan with a sentence, but her legacy speaks of survival, not shame. History remembers her conviction; her family remembers her strength.

[1] Lancaster Assizes Papers, 4 April 1837. "Orders for the commutation of death sentences to transportation". Shuttleworth, Dallas & Crombleholme, Solicitors of Preston, 1341–1890. DDCM/1/48, Lancashire Archives.

[2] Convict Transportation Registers Database 1787–1867. State Library of Queensland. Australian Joint Copying Project. Microfilm Roll 90, Home Office HO11/11, p. 96.

[3] Convict Indents, 1788–1842. Fiche No. 730. State Archives and Records of New South Wales via Ancestry.com.

[4] Australia Marriage Index, 1788–1950. State Archives and Records of New South Wales via Ancestry.com.

[5] Registers of Convicts' Applications to Marry, 1826–1851. Ancestry.com.