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# Who was Black Charlie?

MALCOLM WARD AND RUSSELL ROWLANDS

**B**Y THE side of the Tasman Highway where it crests after driving northwards up the hill from Orielton and before reaching Runnymede, has long stood a sign proclaiming Black Charlies Opening and for many years a pair of boots hung down from the sign. Many people driving past have wondered: who was this Black Charlie? Was he Indigenous? Was he an early settler of the Runnymede area? If not, then who? We believe we have found the most credible candidate to date, although indisputable evidence is still lacking.

## Previous candidates

A number of candidates for Black Charlie have been put forward in the past. One was Charles O'Connor. An account written at his death in 1907 stated that he had an Indian mother, that he was known as 'Black Charley' in life and that he settled on land in the area, on a grant given by Lieutenant-Governor Arthur.<sup>1</sup> O'Connor can be ruled out, as he was born around 1815 and arrived in Van Diemen's Land in 1829, and, as will be shown later, Black Charlie was on his farm certainly in 1825 and possibly five years before.<sup>2</sup>

Charles Octavius Parsons is another candidate. He became a prominent landholder in the Runnymede and Orielton areas and the Parson's Pass probation station, located at Black Charlies Opening, was named for him. After arriving in Van Diemen's Land in 1823, he was commissariat store-keeper at Macquarie Harbour and at Maria Island until 1829. He went to England and returned in 1831, later acquiring and naming both Camden farm on Fingerpost Road in 1839 and Runnymede farm in 1840.<sup>3</sup> Again, he could not have been farming in the area in the mid-1820s.



Black Charlies  
sign in 1967  
(TA, NS3195/1/4389)

Anne Shimmens in an online comment on her painting entered into the 2004 Glover Art Prize wrote that Black Charlie was a Tasmanian Aboriginal who worked on a chain gang in the 1830s and was 'known as being particularly distressed by this incarceration and punishment'.<sup>4</sup> No evidence was tendered and again, this is too late to be Black Charlie.

### **Earliest references to Black Charlie**

Settlers George Meredith and John DeCourcy 'Paddy' Harte are documented to have travelled from Great Swan Port to Richmond via 'Black Charley' or 'Black Charles', at least from 1826.<sup>5</sup> A key new document in this search is the journal of Private Robert McNally, found by Professor Pamela Sharpe in Ireland.<sup>6</sup> McNally wrote that his party arrived at 'Black Charlies' on 17 September 1825, where they camped the night, posting a sentry. Charlie gave them a meal of pork and kangaroo and some damper. They returned a month later; from these two visits, although McNally's geography can be hard to follow, it's evident that Black Charlie lived at Orielson, somewhere on the plain between Sorell and the hills that rise to Brushy Plains (now better known as Runnymede).

Another key reference is in George Augustus Robinson's journal on 16 January 1831 where the term Black Charlies Opening was first used in records we have. Robinson noted that it was called TRAN.MARROINE. MEN.YER by the 'Oyster Bay natives' and that Black Charlie had a farm on the plain below.<sup>7</sup>

So Black Charlie was farming on the plain below the opening (pass) at least by 1831 and was hosting soldiers as early as 1825. An Indigenous person

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is very unlikely to have been farming the land and providing hospitality to the military at this time.

It is interesting to note that George Lloyd in 1862 referred to ‘Black Charlies Gully’, where the Orielson Rivulet flows down from the pass, so the terminology extended beyond just the crest of the hill and down the gully towards Pittwater.<sup>8</sup>

### **Charles Antonio or Antony**

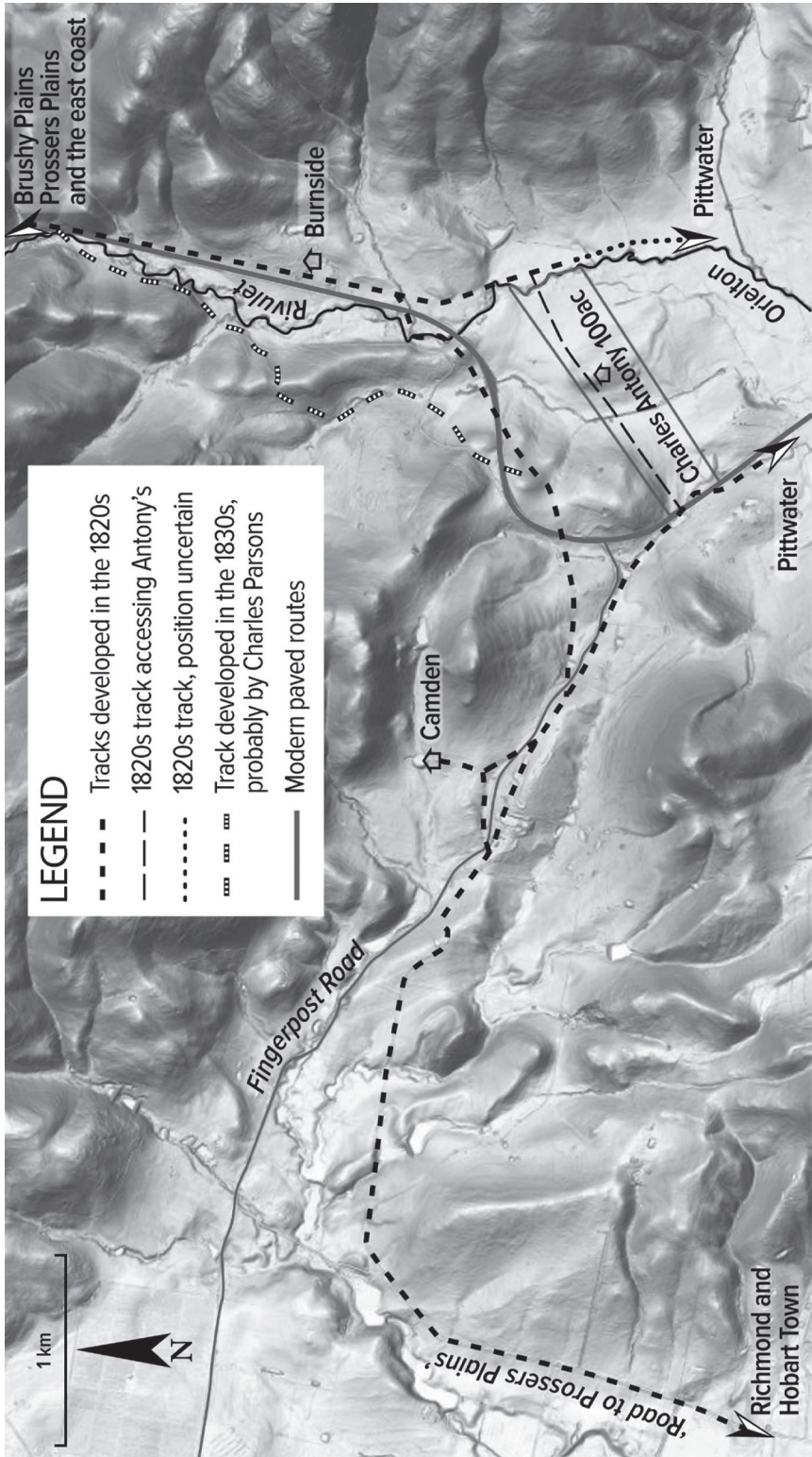
An early landholder in that area and the only one called Charles, was Charles Antony, who was granted 100 acres at the Orielson Rivulet in 1823, just south-east of the current ‘T’ junction between Fingerpost Road from Richmond and the Tasman Highway from Pittwater/Sorell.<sup>9</sup> Just about all travellers to the east coast would travel past this point, so Antony was ideally situated to provide hospitality and some overnight security for travellers to and from the east coast. Early maps show that there were yards and huts already on the land before the grant, and an ‘old hut’ was still surviving in the mid-1830s.<sup>10</sup>

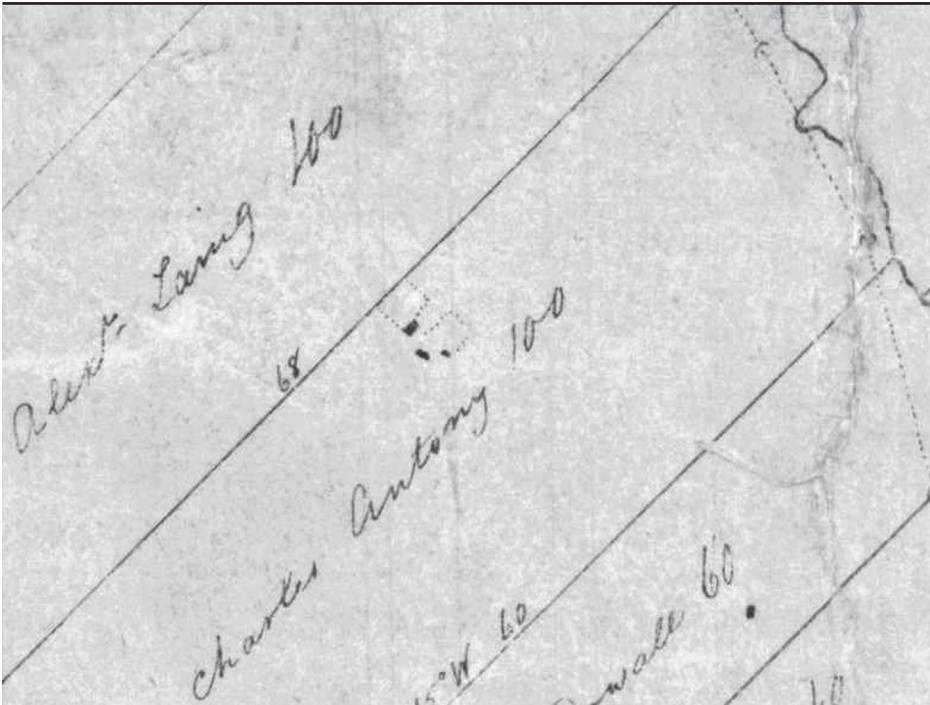
But what of the ‘Black’ appellation? A descendant of Charles Antony informed us (without our revealing why we were enquiring) that based on her DNA results and that of a descendant of another branch of the family whose only common ancestor was Charles Antony, that Antony was half southern Indian or Sri Lankan. This could well have earned him the title ‘Black’. An image of his daughter, Julia, appears to give credence to the story that the family is of Indian ancestry, but this of course is not definitive. There is also some evidence (see below) that Charles Antonio arrived from Bengal or the Cape of Good Hope.



Left: Julia Allen, née Antony (private collection)

Opposite: Map showing some routes in the vicinity of Charles Antony’s grant in the 1820s and 1830s, interpreted from property survey plans and LIDAR (LIDAR base image reproduced from the List on-line, produced by Land Tasmania, Department of Natural Resources and Environment Tasmania, © State of Tasmania. LIDAR penetrates vegetation to reveal a fine scale topographic relief map. Original map by Diane Bricknell)





Location of Antony's huts and yards, early 1820s. Refer to the map on the previous page for broader setting (Extract from TA, map PEM2, AF396/1/1062)

There are two conflicting lines of evidence as to Charles Antonio's arrival in Sydney. The first is an 1821 muster list which notes Charles Antonio as arriving free in Sydney from London in 1813 on the *James Hay*.<sup>11</sup> The *James Hay* was owned or chartered by Edward Lord, the former Marine and by then Hobart Town merchant. Lord had established an extensive estate at Orielson, just out of Pittwater and was on the vessel, bringing goods for sale in the colony. The *James Hay* first arrived at Hobart Town but was not allowed to land, due to an order forbidding imported goods to be sold, so they sailed on to Sydney.<sup>12</sup>

The second arrival possibility is given in records of the appearances in 1823 and 1826 of Charles Antony / Charles 'Antonia' respectively at the Supreme Court in Hobart Town. These cases will be discussed below, but against the names the notation 'Union' is given. This can only be a vessel, and it also has a connection with Edward Lord.<sup>13</sup> The *Union* arrived in Sydney from Bengal in 1810 and again in 1811 from the Cape of Good Hope, each time coming via the Derwent.<sup>14</sup> This second time it attempted (and unlike the *James Hay*, succeeded) to illegally offload cargo in Hobart Town.<sup>15</sup>

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Given Antony's indicated heritage, the arrival from Bengal on the *Union* is an attractive scenario, but the arrival from the Cape on the *Union*, or from London on the *James Hay* cannot be discounted. In any of those scenarios, the connection with Lord no doubt influenced Antonio to settle and then apply for land in the Orielton area. Lord may have even encouraged it, as a means to obtaining more land under his sphere of influence. Or the connection may have been slightly later, as Charles Antonio is clearly documented as accompanying Lord from Sydney to Van Diemen's Land in 1814 as his (free) servant.<sup>16</sup>

Charles Antony married eighteen-year-old Mary Macduel, mostly known as Doolan, in 1817. She was tried in Ireland in 1815, sentenced to seven years' transportation and arrived in Sydney on the *Canada* and then the *Henrietta* to Hobart Town.<sup>17</sup> Their first child Julia was born in 1818.<sup>18</sup>

In 1819, Charles Antonio was documented as having 12 acres of wheat, 87 of pasture, an acre of beans and potatoes, 35 cattle and 155 sheep.<sup>19</sup> He was evidently already on his later-granted 100-acre block at Orielton and seems to have been doing well. In 1820 he won a tender to supply 1000 pounds of meat to the government.<sup>20</sup> Or perhaps he was not doing so well. In February 1821, Antonio and Thomas Anglim were indicted on a charge of stealing 270 sheep from Charles Jeffries, who had land to the south at Pittwater. They were acquitted in the Supreme Court two years later, the prosecution lacking enough evidence.<sup>21</sup>

During the time between his indictment and trial result, it seems that things became difficult for Antony, not least because he was possibly overlooked from being awarded tenders to supply meat to the government due to the suspicion of stealing livestock. In early 1822, Robert Lathrop Murray, sometime legal agent for Edward Lord, gave notice that he would sell up Antony's farm, for debt (a mortgage, probably from Lord).<sup>22</sup> Probably this was not possible as Antony did not yet have title to the land. So Murray instead assigned the debt to John Riseley (the brother of Maria Riseley, Edward Lord's wife and shrewd businesswoman).<sup>23</sup> Antony's grant of 100 acres belatedly came through in 1823.<sup>24</sup> Then followed a complex series of mortgages and assignments, a sale of Antony's land (including a house, barn and crops) and two adjoining blocks in 1830 and it was finally sold to Hobart attorney George Cartwright in 1833.<sup>25</sup> Cartwright then put a land claim in, probably to get a 'clean' title. This was awarded in late 1834 and the new block was surveyed, finally measuring just over 258 acres (a 25 per cent bonus over the area of the original claims).<sup>26</sup>

What was happening in the Antony household during this time? His wife Mary's certificate of freedom was advertised in February 1823 but

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from there things went downhill, especially for her.<sup>27</sup> Her conduct record post-release lists offences ranging from absent from lodgings, drunk and disorderly and acting as a prostitute (dressed in men's clothes) from July 1823 to April 1829.<sup>28</sup> During the same period, Antonio and John Kane pleaded not guilty to stealing a steer in September 1825. Antonio and 'Cane' were discharged from prison by proclamation of the Supreme Court in May 1826, so they must have spent some period in gaol.<sup>29</sup>

Three more children, Charles, Mary and William, were born between 1820 and 1825.<sup>30</sup> The distress of the circumstances of their parents is evident when in a census list of children in 1828, they are all designated as living in Davey Street and the mother 'a common prostitute'.<sup>31</sup> She was described as a 'sad, notorious and drunken character' and was in gaol at hard labour in November the same year.<sup>32</sup> In 1830, application had been made for one of the children to be admitted to the precursor of the Kings Orphan School, but this was declined.<sup>33</sup> The Davey Street address nevertheless hints that they could have been admitted as a family to Bellevue in Davey Street, which was the girls' orphanage prior to the opening of the site at New Town.

Although George Augustus Robinson, in his journal on 16 January 1831, wrote that he came to 'Black Charlies farm' it seems likely that Charles Antonio (if he was 'Black Charlie') was not on the land then, or perhaps he was hanging on as a tenant farmer.<sup>34</sup> By 1830 Henry 'Nickolls' (various spellings) was in possession of Antony's block and the two to its south, and he sold the lot to George Cartwright, as described above.<sup>35</sup> Antony's land continued to be known as 'Antony's Farm' in 1832, so he may have still been there.<sup>36</sup> Later, the property passed into the hands of the Hodgson family, who owned other land in the area, including Burnside, immediately to the north. Joseph Hodgson sold it under the name Summer Hill in 1877.<sup>37</sup>

Anthony appears to have moved to the Launceston area as he was fined there for being drunk in 1833 and 1839.<sup>38</sup> Richard Allen married Charles' daughter Julia Antonio in May 1832 – she was just 14.<sup>39</sup> They went to live at Bothwell, where the Allen family married into several other clans such as the Norths and Bowdens. Charles must have gone to live with them, as he died there on 21 May 1843 and is buried at St Luke's, sharing a plot with Julia and Richard, who died in 1866 and 1882 respectively.<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusion

While there is no written connection of the names Charles Antony and Black Charlie, the evidence of the location of Antony's farm's location, mentions in journals and letters in the timeframe and his apparent heritage

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all point strongly to the fact that they are one and the same. Given the current debate in Tasmania over the assigning of inappropriate names of Tasmanian Indigenous people to place names, this may resolve one of the possible cases.

Who named Black Charlies Opening? As noted, it was called that in Robinson's journal in 1831. A possible candidate is John DeCourcy 'Paddy' Harte who passed this way in the 1820s and was credited by John Erskine Calder as giving the colourful names to a number of features along the route, such as Paradise, BreakNeck and Burst my Gall, to use Calder's terminology.<sup>41</sup> The origin and time of the first installation of the boots beneath the sign 'Black Charlies Opening' remains a mystery.

The authors would welcome any correspondence on this article.

Dr MALCOLM WARD is a retired geologist, now a history researcher and writer based in Orford. [malcolm.ward@utas.edu.au](mailto:malcolm.ward@utas.edu.au)

RUSSELL ROWLANDS, now retired, was a 50-year resident and farmer at Runnymede. His family first purchased land in Brushy Plains/Runnymede in 1839. Russell recently completed a history of European Settlement at Runnymede and would welcome enquiries on this at [rrowlands@iinet.net.au](mailto:rrowlands@iinet.net.au)

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 *Mercury*, 18 December 1907.
- 2 *North West Advocate*, 16 December 1907; J. Davies, 'Circular Head Pioneers – Charles, Agnes and Patience O'Connor', *Circular Head History Journal*, 3/3, July 1991.
- 3 Aldridge to Parsons (1839) deed 2/2420; Bilton to Parsons (1840) deed 2/3434, Land Information System Tasmania, <https://www.thelist.tas.gov.au/app/content/home> (The LIST).
- 4 A. Shimmens, *Black Charlies Opening*, <https://www.johnglover.com.au/product/black-charlies-opening/>
- 5 Tasmanian Archives (TA), NS123/1/1 #23 and #25, *Meredith family papers*, George Meredith to Mary Meredith, 25 April and 10 October 1826.
- 6 Robert McNally journal, early draft transcription kindly supplied by Professor Pam Sharpe, Robert Hogan and Sarah Randles; Robert McNally project, in progress. Original at National Library of Ireland, MS13264/5.
- 7 N.J.B. Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, Launceston, 2008, p.349.
- 8 G.T. Lloyd, *Thirty-Three Years in Tasmania and Victoria*, London, 1862, p.188.
- 9 TA, *Grant of 100 acres to Charles Antony*, LSD354/1/5, p.32.
- 10 TA, *Map - Pembroke 2 - showing grants and landholders including Sorell Rivulet, Iron Creek and Pitt Water*, AF396/1/1062. TA, *Map - Pembroke 27 - plan of the property of George Cartwright, Orielson Rivulet, road from Richmond and various landholders*, AF396/1/1087; *Hobart Town Gazette*, 30 October 1834.
- 11 National Archives, *New South Wales male and female, 1821*, AJCP reel 65.
- 12 A. Alexander, *Corruption and Skulduggery; Edward Lord, Maria Riseley and Hobart's Tempestuous Beginnings*, Dynnyrne, 2015, pp. 101–102. *Sydney Gazette*, 3 April 1813.
- 13 Alexander, p.112.
- 14 *Sydney Gazette*, 14, 21 January 1810, 2 March 1811.
- 15 *Sydney Gazette*, 23 March 1811.
- 16 *Sydney Gazette*, 5 February 1814.
- 17 TA, *Marriages in the district of Hobart*, RGD36/1/1 p. 57. TA, *Mary Doolan conduct record*, CON40/1/3, p.12.



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  - 19 State Records of New South Wales, NRS 1260 [4/1224–25, 4/1227], Hobart muster of 1819, district of Pittwater.
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  - 22 *Hobart Town Gazette*, 23 February 1822.
  - 23 *True Colonist*, 25 September 1840. *Hobart Town Gazette*, 11 March 1825.
  - 24 TA, Grant of 100 acres to Charles Antony, LSD1/1/5 p.32.
  - 25 Fereday to Nickolls (1830) deed 1/460, Nikolls mortgage (1830) deed 1/795 and Nicholls to Cartwright (1833) deed 1/2770, The LIST. *Hobart Town Gazette*, 11 March 1825.
  - 26 *Hobart Town Gazette*, 30 October 1834. TA, Pembroke map 27, AF396/1/1807.
  - 27 *Hobart Town Gazette*, 22 February 1823.
  - 28 TA, *Mary Doolan conduct record*, CON40/1/3, p.18. *Tasmanian*, 21 November 1828.
  - 29 TA, *Minutes of Proceedings in Criminal Cases*, SC32/1/1 pp. 107, 152. *Hobart Town Gazette*, 3 June 1826.
  - 30 TA, Charles: RGD32/1/1 p. 44; no birth record for Mary, but see census later; William (baptism, three years old): RGD31/1/1 p. 2419.
  - 31 TA, *Census of children*, CSO1/1/918, pp.80, 86.
  - 32 *Tasmanian*, 21 November 1828.
  - 33 TA, *Minutes of the Kings/Queens Orphan School*, SWD24/1/1 pp.227–28.
  - 34 Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, p.349.
  - 35 Nikolls mortgage (1830) deed 1/795; Nicholls to Cartwright (1833), deed 1/2770, The LIST.
  - 36 *Colonist*, 30 November 1832.
  - 37 Reynolds to Hodgson (1866), deed 5/4479, The LIST; *Mercury*, 19 June 1877.
  - 38 *Colonial Times*, 27 May 1834, *Cornwall Chronicle*, 23 March 1839.
  - 39 TA, Marriages in the district of Green Ponds 1832, RGD36/1/2 p.69.
  - 40 Headstone, St Luke's church cemetery, Bothwell.
  - 41 State Library of Victoria, Calder Papers, Box 88, p.59.