

MEET LOUISA: Mother, businesswoman and mystery (Part 1)

Louisa is the matriarch of the extended Peterson/Uhr family in Australia, and it would be wonderful to have a complete picture of her life.

But as so often happens in family history, there are some significant and indeed tantalizing questions for which we do not yet have definitive answers.

In fairness we also have some amazingly personal glimpses into her life (including a fascinating “personal appearance” as a key witness in a trial at the Old Bailey that involved piracy and ostrich feathers).

And overall, we probably know more about her life than one might reasonably expect to know about an ancestor who lived at the turn of the 18th /19th centuries.

She emerges as a strong woman who challenges our perceptions of a woman’s life during this period, achieving through the complex circumstances of her life an unusual degree of independence.

Perhaps it’s ironic that the greatest mysteries surround her birth and her death. (See article [Farewell Louisa](#)).

To begin at the beginning...

Louisa Ker was the daughter of John Ker, a Chelsea-born fan painter and bookseller. She was almost certainly born before John’s marriage (1788) to Anne Phillips, a popular novelist of the period, who also grew up in Chelsea. Most family members believe that Anne Phillips was Louisa’s mother, but this cannot currently be proven, given that there are various possibilities for her baptism in London (and a remote possibility that she was born and spent her infancy overseas – Cardiff Corvey, by John Gladstone Steel).

The situation is complicated by the recent discovery that John Ker had been married, as a minor, to the well to do and significantly older daughter of his father’s landlord – Charles Shapley. John is known to have fathered a son to Mary Shapley (born shortly after their marriage in 1781) and then to have deserted them in 1784.

Some evidence suggests Mary survived in poverty for several decades, her property having passed to her husband. Interestingly her father Charles, who’d been a prosperous Thames lighterman and coal merchant, was buried in the original parish church at Chelsea (now Chelsea Old Church) and his grave was one of those recently examined by a team of archeologists. His skull is held by the Museum of London Archaeological Services and forensic testing confirms his prosperous lifestyle.

It is tempting to link this desertion to John’s entering into a relationship with Anne Phillips and the subsequent birth of their daughter Louisa (1784 or 1785). But it’s also possible that there was an intermediate relationship that produced Louisa. In his *Breach of Promise* pamphlet, John Ker adds weight to this theory by describing his son James (b.1790) as “the only surviving child of the present Mrs Ker”. (See article [Breach of Promise](#)).

To the Churchwardens and Overseers of the Poor of the Parish of
St Luke Chelsea in the said County

Whereas it appears unto us whose Names are hereunto set and
Seals affixed two of his Majestys Justices of the Peace for the said
County as well upon the Complaint and Application of the
Churchwardens and Overseers of the Poor of the Parish of St. Luke Chelsea
aforesaid in the County aforesaid as upon due proof upon oath
before us made that John Kerr late of the Parish of St. Luke
Chelsea aforesaid in the County aforesaid Fan Mounter hath gone
away from his Place of abode at Chelsea aforesaid into some other
County or Place and hath left Mary his Wife and John their Infant
Child upon the Charge of the Parish of St. Luke Chelsea aforesaid the
Place of their last legal Settlement And that the said John Kerr hath
as House in the said Parish of Chelsea (in right of his Wife Ma [...]
aforesaid) Tenanted by Mr. David Egleton held by him at the
Yearly Rent of Eleven Pounds Whereby to ease the said Parish
of the said Charge in whose or in part . . .

The childhood of Louisa Ker was also unusual. She had at least two siblings (or half siblings): James born 1790 and Anne Harriot (born 1799/died 1800) but she and James and their parents possibly spent some time living in Fleet Prison. Her father was certainly there as a debtor in 1794, in the section reserved for families, where prisoners lived in relative freedom and comfort while working to pay off their debts.

It was not uncommon for tradespeople and others to end up in debtors' prison (the father of the novelist Charles Dickens spent some years in Marshalsea Prison (as did Louisa's future father in law Gregory Peterson) and during a period of war in the late 18th century, luxury trades such as fan production were particularly vulnerable.



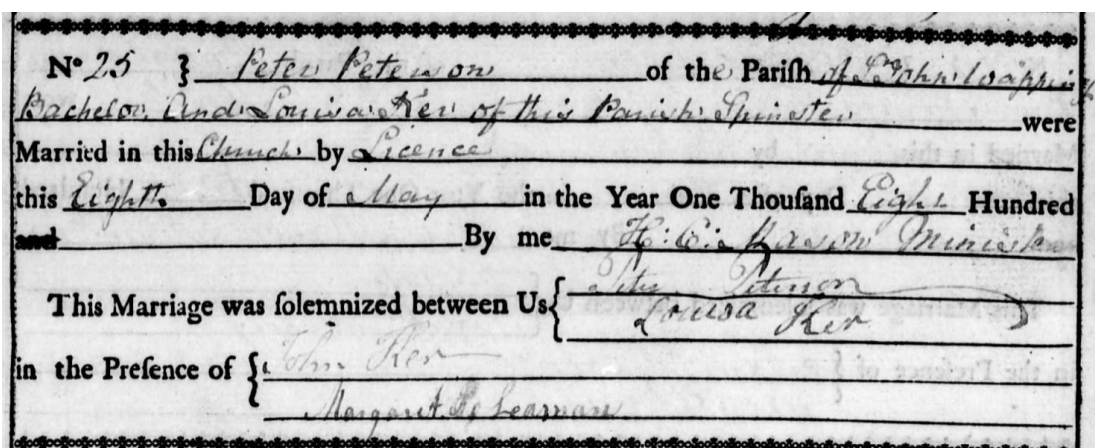
John Ker's business difficulties as a fan painter happened at a time when his father Andrew could no longer work in the family business because of failing sight. We know that Andrew entered the Workhouse at Chelsea in 1793 because he was "almost blind". He died there in 1796. His wife Eleanor ("very feeble") entered with him and died in 1794.

By the late 1790's, Anne Ker had begun her career as a popular romantic novelist and the family was probably living in the Lambeth area on the southern bank of the Thames. John Steele's research suggests that by then, John was also working as a stationer and bookseller, with premises north of the river in Holborn and Soho. (See [Interactive Map](#) in Resources) (See [Acknowledgements](#) in Resources for John Steele)

Louisa's First Marriage

Given the uncertainty over Louisa's date of birth, we cannot be sure of her age at the time of her first marriage to Peter Peterson on 8 May 1800. Theoretically she could have been as young as 12 (and thus possibly born around the time of John and Anne's marriage) but it is more likely she was 14 or 15. Evidence for a younger age may come from the fact that her first child (Mary Louisa, the future wife of Richard Jones) was not born until 1803.

Though John Steele relates a family tradition that Louisa and Peter eloped to marry, this seems unlikely in the strict sense, since the parents of both parties were involved in the wedding (parental permission was required as both Peter and Louisa were minors).



Also contrary to family tradition (which has Peter as a mariner from Orkney) is the fact that Peter's parents, Gregory and Margaret Peterson (nee Hagerty), were long established residents of Wapping, in the eastern part of London beside the River Thames. At the time of their marriage in 1779 at St Dunstan, Stepney, Gregory was a mariner. Peter grew up in Wapping Dock Street in Wapping (1791 Land Tax record), and by 1800 the family were running an inn and a slopsellers business in the area.

'Slop' referred to the readymade clothing worn by sailors, so both businesses reflected the character of the docklands area in which they were situated.

Since this area was north of the Thames, it remains possible that Louisa met her future husband after running away from home, but her father John was a witness at the wedding, which took place at St Mary Magdalene, Bermondsey (south of the Thames and close to the residence of Louisa's parents).

After the marriage, Louisa and Peter lived in the Wapping/Tower Hamlets area north of the Thames and appear (from their daughters' baptism records) to have been involved in the Peterson family slop business.

In the early years of their marriage, they are known to have lived in London Street in the "Hamlet of Ratcliffe" in the south eastern corner of the Parish of Stepney. This area had once been known as 'Sailor Town', a bustling area of warehouses, small businesses and probably fairly mixed residences clustering round Ratcliff Stairs, from where many famous sea voyages had begun. In character it could probably be compared to The Rocks in Sydney or Salamanca Place in Hobart. (Hobart even had its own "Wapping" in recognition of the similarity).

In 1794 almost half of Ratcliff had been destroyed in a major fire. At 3pm on 23rd July, an unattended kettle of pitch boiled over at Clovers Barge Yard, setting it on fire. The flames quickly spread to a nearby barge loaded with saltpetre, a substance used to make gunpowder and matches. It exploded, and burning fragments were scattered in all directions. Fires spread to timber yards, rope yards and sugar warehouses., and within a few hours the fire had destroyed 453 houses leaving 1,400 people homeless and displaced. Tents were erected to provide temporary housing while buildings were rebuilt. Quite possibly the Peterson family lived in one of these new houses.



Only traces of the old hamlet now remain, as the area was cleared for the building of the Regent Canal in 1820, which later became the current Limehouse Basin. Further clearance took place in the early 20th century for the building of the Rotherhithe Tunnel under the Thames.

There were three known children of Louisa's first marriage: Mary Louisa born 1803, Daniel born in 1805, and Louisa born 1806.

None of the children were baptized in infancy, possibly because Peter was an adherent of one of the Protestant congregations in the area that practiced adult baptism. Mary Louisa and Louisa were both baptized 20 December 1822 prior to their marriages, with the register recording their birth dates and (unusually) their place of birth – London St. We can be very grateful to the Rev. Farrington, long time Rector of St George in the East, for his diligence.

Sometime after the birth of their second daughter Louisa in 1806, the young couple moved west along Ratcliffe Highway (now simply The Highway) into the Cannon Street Road area north of The Highway. Here too, there was considerable new infill development in the early 19th century. Wherever their new residence was, it was near the parish church of St George in the East, where many family events were to take place over the next decade.

Through a set of tragic circumstances, we have a very good idea of what the area looked like at the time. In December 1811, the infamous Ratcliffe Highway Murders occurred. Within a period of 11 days, two young families, very possibly known to Louisa, were brutally murdered in their homes.

A young sailor was arrested but killed himself in prison before the trial, so the crimes were never solved. There was massive press coverage and this included a beautifully detailed engraving of the scene where the funeral procession of one family – Marr, arrived at the church. In one corner we see in the crowd a young woman holding a baby, and it is very tempting to wonder if we are seeing Louisa herself holding the infant John James Uhr.



We are surprisingly well provided with addresses for the family for the next 20 years, with evidence from church records, trade directories, rent books, insurance registers and even court records where first Louisa and then her third son Edmund Uhr appear as witnesses. But on closer study it has proved difficult to say with any degree of certainty where exactly on (or adjacent to) Cannon Street Road the family was living and/or conducting business. (See article [Cannon Street Conundrum](#))

Peter Peterson died in June 1809 (buried at St George in the East), leaving Louisa as a young widow with 3 small children. Like many women in her situation, she then went into business on her own account, though her financial situation cannot have been easy. An 1811 Trade Directory (likely to be based on information supplied in 1810) records her as a tailor, and it is reasonable to assume this may have included continuing her late husband's business.

She appears to have continued in business on her own account even after her second marriage, and successive insurance records (see below) would suggest that she was a successful small business woman able to provide for her growing family.

Louisa's Second Marriage

On New Year's Day 1811, Louisa married Johan (John) Uhr at St James Piccadilly. He signed as Johan in his own hand. This time both John and Anne Ker acted as witnesses and the venue for the wedding may suggest that immediately prior to it, Louisa and her children were living with her parents, who at this point (at least according to *The Breach of Promise*) were living in Soho. Though Johan stated that he was 'of this parish' it seems likely that he and Louisa met in the Cannon Street Road area, possibly Johan as a mariner, was a customer of Louisa's work clothing tailoring business.

OLD BAILEY, Nov. 2.

The trial of Cooper, Allen, Knox, Winter, Harris, and others, was this day resumed at nine o'clock.

LOUISA UHR, a feather-maker in Cannon-street, St. George's in the East; knows the prisoner Cooper; lives near her; she went to Cooper's about three months ago, in consequence of a message, and saw him. He shewed her some white ostrich feathers; he offered about 3lbs. at 40s. per lb. and said that if she liked them perhaps there might be some more. She requested him to wait half an hour, and returned with her partner, Miss Bloomfield, and in a back room looked over the feathers, and afterwards offered him 4l. for them; Cooper refused to take it, saying that the feathers were not his, but told them he would accept 5l.

FRIEND the Officer produced some feathers found in the stable hired by Norman. Mrs. Uhr swore that the feathers offered to her were like those now shewn, in an unmanufactured state.

Cross-examined by Mr. Knapp. She added that Cooper throughout declared that he was not selling them on his own account.

JAMES GEORGE in the employ of Mr. Gibbs, silk-manufac-

In early 1812 we're able, thanks to the records of the Central Criminal Court at the Old Bailey, to meet Louisa in person.

Louisa appears here as a young (mid 20's) woman conducting her own business with initiative and competence. The business presumably involved the processing of feathers bought in bulk for the fashion industry (possibly using business contacts from her father's fan-making business). Her partner Miss Bloomfield, is probably Ann Bloomfield, who also lived in the Cannon Street Road area.

The likelihood of links to the millinery business is enhanced by an 1819 insurance policy taken out in her husband's name mentioning straw hat making. Interestingly another Peter Peterson (possibly a relative?) living in Stepney and in business as a straw bonnet maker, appears in Old Bailey records in 1827 when some of his stock was stolen. The thieves, aged 15 and 16, were convicted, on the evidence of Peter's 11-year-old daughter Margaret, of stealing two bonnets at a total value of 20 shillings. Both were initially sentenced to death, but their sentences were changed to transportation for life and they came to NSW on *the Marquess of Hastings* in 1828.

A further insurance policy of 1825 (again in John Uhr's name) suggests a reasonably comfortable lifestyle for the now depleted family (Daniel Peterson, Mary Louisa Jones, Louisa Shephard and John James Uhr had already left home). It is also the last likely date for the presence of Johan Uhr in the family, though as noted in the *Mystery Mariner* article, we currently know very little indeed about him.

Louisa herself appears "incidentally" in Court records in early 1826, when her third son Edmund, soon to depart for Australia, appears as a very confident witness in an Old Bailey trial involving stolen poultry.

"I live with my mother in Cannon Street Road"

statement is suggestive that his father is no longer on the scene and might even raise the possibility that his younger brothers are living elsewhere, perhaps with half-sister Louisa Shephard, whose husband George was a schoolmaster?

If this was the case, it's very unlikely to have been because of drastically reduced financial circumstances. It's worth noting that all Louisa's children appear to have been educated, at least as regards basic literacy, and even the most modest of the many small schools in the area required some parental contribution.

Louisa's last appearances in official records (until her death in early 1837) are in insurance registers for 1832 and 1833, where she appears as a **widow** living at 10 Gloucester Terrace, Cannon Street Road (See article *Cannon St Rd Conundrum*).

The fact that she is described simply as a widow suggests she is no longer in business, but the list of her insured possessions in 1833 included

Household goods, wedding apparel, printed books, musical instruments, china and glass

valued at 100 pounds. This suggests a comfortable, though not affluent, lifestyle for a widow probably living with and educating two sons aged 10 and 14. Possibly the wedding apparel was for her business.

The mention of musical instruments is interesting because of William Uhr 's keen interest in music. The books suggest a high level of literacy, and were possibly inherited from Louisa's father John Ker who is believed to have died around 1830.

It's possible that she died at 15 Oxford Street (off Cannon Street Road at the northern end), the address given for her daughter Louisa Shephard in the Death Duties register, or at the London Hospital along whose southern boundary Oxford Street ran.

She would have been around 50-53 at the time of her death, and her place of burial is currently unknown. Or was unknown – see new article [Farewell Louisa](#).

Her youngest child George is believed to have sailed for Australia very shortly after his mother's death, though it would be another 8 years before her youngest daughter Louisa joined the rest of the family in Australia.



Written by Margaret Ker for Uhr Family Name website – July 2021