



**AFTERNOON TEA TO MARK THE
185TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE RAJAH QUILT
REMARKS BY
HER EXCELLENCY THE HONOURABLE CAROLINE WELLS
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
GOVERNMENT HOUSE, MONDAY 20 JULY 2026**

Good afternoon, everyone. It is my pleasure to welcome you to Government House as we mark the 185th anniversary of the convict ship *Rajah*'s arrival in Hobart in 1841, bringing with it what has become known as the Rajah Quilt.

I acknowledge the Palawa people as the First Peoples of Lutruwita/Tasmania and the Traditional Custodians of this land. For countless generations, they have cared for and nurtured this remarkable island, its landscapes, waterways and communities. I pay my respects to Elders past and present and recognise the enduring contribution of Aboriginal Tasmanians to the cultural, social and spiritual life of our State.

When I came into this Office, I said I wanted to lead with compassion, kindness and purpose. Those values are reflected in the story of the Rajah Quilt.

When we look at a quilt, we often admire its colours, stitching or craftsmanship. But sometimes a quilt becomes much more than fabric and thread. Sometimes it becomes a document of history.

The Rajah Quilt is one such quilt.

Made during the four-month voyage of the *Rajah* to Van Diemen's Land, it was stitched by women whose lives had been marked by poverty, hardship and

conviction. Together they created one of Australia's greatest textile treasures. The original is now housed in the National Gallery of Australia as a centrepiece of its textile collection.

Today, as we reflect on the Rajah Quilt and the facsimile displayed here in Tasmania, we are not simply celebrating remarkable needlework. We are honouring the lives of women whose resilience, skill and humanity have too often been overlooked.

In 1800s England, prison conditions for women were appalling. Into this bleak world stepped Elizabeth Fry, a Quaker who believed that every person deserved dignity and respect. Having been educated at The Friends' School for twelve years, this story resonates deeply with me, and I acknowledge the close connection between the school and the Rajah women through the Quaker tradition of compassion, philanthropy and reform.

Rather than seeing prisoners as beyond redemption, Elizabeth Fry saw women capable of rebuilding their lives. She and the British Ladies' Society for the Reformation of Female Prisoners provided practical support through clothing, sewing materials, education and encouragement. They believed useful work restored not only skills, but also hope.

That philosophy accompanied the women aboard the *Rajah*. Each received sewing supplies, and together they transformed 2,815 pieces of fabric into a magnificent quilt—a gift expressing gratitude to the women who had shown them kindness.

Around its border is a stitched inscription, ending with the words:

“...as a proof that they have not neglected the ladies' kind admonitions of being industrious.”

Those words remind us that the quilt was both a gift of thanks and a testament to transformation.

History often celebrates soldiers, explorers and political leaders. Less often does it record the quiet labour of women whose hands built homes, mended clothes, cared for families and created beauty despite hardship. The Rajah Quilt gives those women a voice.

Here in Tasmania, that story carries particular significance.

This island became the destination for the women aboard the *Rajah*. It was where they were required to begin again. Some struggled, some prospered, and many disappeared from history with little record of their later lives. Yet the quilt endured.

The facsimile displayed here allows new generations to appreciate both its intricate design and its extraordinary historical significance. It reminds us that preserving history takes many forms. Through conservation, faithful reproduction and careful interpretation, each generation shares responsibility for ensuring these stories continue to be seen, understood and remembered.

There is another thread running through this story: the thread of community.

No single woman made the Rajah Quilt. It required many hands, many skills and many hours of patient work.

Its story has also been preserved through the dedication of historians, conservators, researchers, museums, educators and volunteers. Their work has ensured that this extraordinary legacy continues to inspire us today. I would like to say a particular thank you to Anne and Rob Thompson for their passion and commitment to the Rajah Quilt.

The quilt itself teaches us something fundamental. It is built piece by piece until separate fragments become something stronger together. Perhaps that is its greatest lesson.

The Quakers believed every individual possessed value. The convict women demonstrated resilience in the face of adversity. And those who have preserved the quilt remind us that remembrance is an active responsibility, sustained through generosity, scholarship and care.

The Rajah Quilt therefore represents three remarkable forms of work: the work of reformers who chose compassion over judgement; the work of convict women who transformed scraps into beauty while facing an uncertain future; and the work of those who have preserved and shared this story so it will never be forgotten.

Across almost two centuries, those threads remain unbroken.

The Rajah Quilt is far more than a relic of the convict era. It is a symbol of hope overcoming despair. It demonstrates that compassion can restore dignity and that creativity can flourish even in the most difficult circumstances.

Above all, it reminds us that acts of kindness, like stitches, may seem small on their own, but together they create something that can endure for generations.

As we admire both the original quilt and this faithful facsimile, may we remember not only the craftsmanship, but also the courage behind every stitch, the compassion that made it possible, and the enduring power of people working together.

To conclude it is with great pleasure that I formally accept, on behalf of all Tasmanians, this facsimile of the Rajah Quilt.

Thank you.