

MY FIRST AUSSIE ANCESTOR

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William TAPERELL, who was transported for life in 1833, was the first of my ancestors to arrive in Australia. He was born in Devon in 1800, possibly in the cathedral city of Exeter, parents unknown. Nothing is known of his life before he committed his first crime in London in April 1827. While visiting a friend who worked as a servant at Steven's Hotel, Hanover Square, he stole a red writing case containing £100 in notes, and a silver snuffbox from the apartment of a hotel guest. William lent £70 of the stolen money to a businessman at 5% interest, and gave his wife Mary Ann a £10 note to buy a pair of stays costing 12 shillings from a shop in St Clement's churchyard.

Two weeks later the police called at their home at 15 Grafton St, Westminster, with a search warrant. They soon found Mary Ann's stays, and the promissory notes for the money that William had lent to the businessman. A further search revealed the writing case in the top drawer of a chest and the snuffbox under the mattress. William said his mother had given him £20 and the snuffbox when he visited her in Exeter a month before, but the evidence against him was overwhelming. He and Mary Ann were taken by coach to Newgate Prison, to await trial, which took place on 4th June 1827 at the Old Bailey Sessions of Oyer and Terminer (hear and determine). Mary Ann was acquitted but William was convicted of stealing and sentenced to transportation for 7 years. A mistake in the indictment, naming the wrong parish where the crime took place, caused his sentence to be reduced to one year in the House of Correction, Clerkenwell. The trial was reported in the *Times* newspaper on 5th June 1827.

After his release, William would have found it impossible to find work in his usual occupation of gentleman's servant. Without references from his previous employer, no one would have engaged him. He moved across the Thames to the less affluent area of Southwark in Surrey, and it was here that he committed his second stealing offence. On the night of 20th Oct 1832, William broke into the home of Thomas and Mary Williams and stole women's clothing, jewellery and trinkets to the value of £8.9.6. Four days later, the robbery was reported in *The Police Gazette; or Hue and Cry*, asking for any information to be given to the police.

William Taperell was duly arrested and tried at the Lent Assizes, Kingston-on-Thames, on 25th March 1833. The jury found him guilty and the judge sentenced him to death. On appeal, the sentence was reduced to transportation for life. After one month in Horsemonger Lane Gaol, he was moved south to the *York* hulk at Portsmouth. The healthy prisoners would have been taken ashore each day to work on the wharves, shovel soil or break stones to build breakwaters.

On 15th May, washed thoroughly and dressed in new clothes, William boarded the convict transport *Stakesby* with 215 other male convicts for the voyage to Van Diemen's Land. When the ship arrived at Portsmouth from London to pick up her human cargo she was already provisioned with stores and fresh water. On board were the convict guard – two officers and 32 soldiers of the 21st Regiment – and the Surgeon Superintendent, whose duty it was to oversee the welfare of the prisoners, and the health of everyone on the ship. When the *Stakesby* sailed from Portsmouth on 22nd May 1833, William left England and never returned. Nothing more is known about his wife Mary Ann, and as William was illiterate, it is unlikely that she ever heard from him again.

At the start of the voyage, all the prisoners suffered from seasickness. Weather permitting, they were allowed on deck each day for fresh air and exercise. Regular days were set aside for bathing and washing clothes, always in seawater as drinking water was strictly rationed. On Sundays they were mustered on deck for a church service and required to be clean and tidy. They sweltered below deck in the heat of the tropics, and shivered in the cold and damp of the high southern latitudes as the ship was driven eastwards by the gale-force winds of the roaring forties on the final leg of the voyage.

After 105 days at sea, the *Stakesby* dropped anchor in the Derwent River at Hobart on 4th Sept 1833. Before the prisoners were landed, their descriptions and details of their crimes, sentences etc were recorded. Each man was given a number, William's being T 759. They were taken ashore and marched to the Penitentiary in Campbell St, known to the prisoners as The Tench, to await assignment. William was first assigned to a Mr Dawson at Richmond. Two months later he was caught attempting to break into his master's store. He was returned to Hobart to be employed on Public Works, which meant either working on the roads or breaking stone at the nearby rock quarry.

William's second assignment was to the Van Diemen's Land Company, which had a large land holding in the far north-west of the island at Woolnorth and Circular Head. Surviving records of some monthly work sheets show that William worked at Highfield Farm, Circular Head, as a labourer and as a servant to the Company's officers. The stone ruins of the prisoners' barracks, built at Highfield in 1836, are today a landmark in the area. William's assignment was terminated in 1836 for misconduct in having property in his possession for which he could give no proper account. He was sentenced to one year's hard labour on the roads.

His last assignment was to John Sinclair at Morven (Evandale). Sinclair had several hundred acres on the South Esk River so was probably a farmer. William received his Ticket-of-Leave in April 1842 for the district of Launceston, and was thus free to find his own employment within that district. He could not leave the district without permission and had to attend a muster in Launceston every 3 months. Records of the musters show that he worked for 6 months in 1842 for Dr Gaunt who had a farming property called Windermere on the east bank of the River Tamar. In that year Dr Gaunt honoured a promise to his wife and had a church built on the property, on a knoll overlooking the river. The St Matthias' Church is now a popular place for Launceston couples to be married.

The next few musters show William as a resident of Launceston. In 1844 he was listed as working on board the paddle-steamer *Gipsy*, which carried cargo and parcels up and down the River Tamar between the inland of Launceston and Port Dalrymple at the mouth. It is likely that he worked as a labourer, loading and unloading cargo, and stacking the 4 foot long billets of firewood on board to fuel the boiler. The following year he applied for a Conditional Pardon which he was entitled to do after serving 12 years of his life sentence in Australia. His application did not mention his Colonial offences, was sent to London for approval and was granted on 12th June 1846. The pardon was only for the Australian Colonies and New Zealand and he faced arrest if he returned to England.

Three months later, William left Launceston on the brig *Henry* bound for South Australia. Perhaps, while working on board the *Gipsy*, he had heard about the "free" colony, which was founded without convict labour and thought it would be a good place to start a new life. He landed in Adelaide on 4th Sept 1846, exactly 13 years after his arrival as a convict in Hobart. He found work as a labourer and soon met Isabella McPherson, a farmer's daughter, who has recently arrived from Inverness, Scotland. They married at North Adelaide in April the following year when William was 47 years of age. A son Eneas was born in Jan 1848 and a daughter Catharine (my great grandmother) in July 1849. Although their births were not registered, their baptisms are listed in a Presbyterian register held at Mortlock Library.

William was one of the many thousands of people who succumbed to the lure of finding a fortune on the Victorian goldfields. No doubt his convict experience with a pick and shovel fitted him for work as a digger. He left Adelaide for Melbourne on the brig *Rattler* in March 1852. When he returned to Adelaide at the end of the year, he persuaded his wife to pack up the family and go back with him.

The family settled in Bendigo and was living at Back Creek in Sept 1853 when a second daughter was born. Little Isabella died in Melbourne 17 months later, apparently when the family were on their way back to South Australia, because a few days after her death they sailed for Adelaide on the steamer *White Swan*. William was in Victoria again in Nov 1855 when Isabella had their fourth child in Adelaide, but was in attendance to see his son William baptised in Feb 1856. Once more the family packed up and boarded a ship for Melbourne, this time for good. They settled in a mining area a few miles south of Bendigo at Opossum Gully. William died there of pneumonia on 25th April 1858. The information on his death certificate said that he had spent 10 years in Tasmania. This was the first inkling that there was convict in the family.

My initial feeling of shame changed to gratitude to all my ancestors who migrated here, willing or not, so that I was born an Australian.

References and Notes:

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