

HANDKERCHIEFS WERE NOT TO BE SNEEZED AT!

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John Sheen (88), one of the convicts I am researching, was a soldier stationed at Gibraltar when he was convicted of stealing several small items, including 2 silk handkerchiefs from a Captain Hague. For his sins he was transported to the Swan River Colony for 14 years. The records show that John Pidgeon (132), a fellow soldier, received the same sentence for being in possession of silk handkerchiefs known to belong to the same officer, presumably received from John. This seemed like a huge amount of fuss over a couple of handkerchiefs - and why on earth did John bother stealing them in the first place?

Light was thrown on the subject recently from my reading of a very interesting book *The Convict Settlers of Australia*. One chapter discusses the various offences committed by convicts and in particular London pickpockets. Evidently silk handkerchiefs were a common target.

Thieves did not steal handkerchiefs in order to wipe their noses, and though some of them were worn as neckerchiefs, the one piece of working-class finery, the articles were sold as a rule to 'fences', i.e. receivers of stolen property. These receivers operated all over London, but especially near the City, and Dickens was describing a true scene (Field Lane?) in "Oliver Twist" when he spoke of a thoroughfare leading to Saffron Hill. In its shops were great bundles of second-hand handkerchiefs for sale; the street was 'the emporium of petty larceny'.

Convicts transported did not, as a rule, assess the value of the handkerchiefs they stole, but one of the criminal classes, interviewed in mid-nineteenth century, talked about his career and noted that 'the best handkerchiefs then brought 4s in Field-lane, and another said that when he first came to London, he had no 'fence' or 'pals' for a time, and sold the handkerchiefs he stole to Jews in the streets, mainly in Field Lane, for 1s 6d. Sometimes he received 3s 6d for the best handkerchiefs, 'those that have the pretty looking flowers on them'.

Being mathematically challenged, I can't work out the equivalent cost of a handkerchief today - allowing for 150 years inflation, cost of living indexation, the GST and the sliding dollar, but thank heavens for tissues!

References and Notes:

The Convict Settlers of Australia. L.L. Robson. MUP 1994.

The deeds of more than 300 Eastern States convicts are described in this book. Though not included in the index, a list of their names can be found in Appendix 11, pp 193-205.

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Black Silk Handkerchiefs

Marcia Watson

Many convicts were convicted, and transported, for stealing silk handkerchiefs, although not always black silk. Pauline Millar highlighted this subject in her article "Handkerchiefs were not to be sneezed at!" in *Convict Links*, October 2001, p6. Even in Australia, stealing silk handkerchiefs was considered a crime as John Jones found out. He was charged with burglary of a house in Hobart, stealing 6 black silk handkerchiefs, valued at 30 shillings and 8 coloured ones, valued at 24 shillings. He was sentenced to Transportation for Life. (1)

If they were so "valuable", it seems odd that the Department of the Comptroller for Victualling and Transport Services issued the following notice:

The Commissioners for executing the office of Lord High Admiral of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland do hereby give notice that on Thursday the 21st April next, at one o'clock, they will be ready to treat with such persons as may be willing to contract for supplying and delivering into Her Majesty's Victualling Stores at Deptford and Gosport, the under mentioned quantities of

Black Silk Handkerchiefs, Deptford 9,000 number; Gosport 19,000 number; one third of each quantity to be delivered by the 30th June, another third by the 31st August, and the remainder by the 30th September next, or earlier if preferred by the party tendering. (2)

I assume such large quantities were for seamen.

An attempt was made in 1824 to standardise dress among seamen by the 'Instructions to Pursers' which listed the clothing to be carried in every ship. The instructions included blue cloth jackets and trousers, knitted worsted waistcoats, white duck trousers and frocks, shirts, stockings, hats, mitts and *black silk handkerchiefs*. This 'standard' seaman's clothing would be liberally mixed with that brought aboard by the man when he joined the ship and may have included more exotic and flamboyant additions acquired whilst on foreign stations. (3)

I wonder what the consequences were if a seaman sold or lost his Black Silk Handkerchief?

References and Notes:

1. [www.law.mq.edu.au/sctas/html/1841cases/RvJones\(No1\),1841.htm](http://www.law.mq.edu.au/sctas/html/1841cases/RvJones(No1),1841.htm)
2. London Gazette, 19 April 1853, p18 at <http://www.gazettes-online.co.uk/>
3. website.lineone.net/~d.bolton/Crew/uniforms.htm

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