

ROUND UP THE USUAL SUSPECTS!

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Since 1764 the Prestidge family of farm labourers had been unwilling residents of the Northamptonshire village of Moreton Pinkney. It started with John Prestidge of Warwickshire who found work there for a time, but when he tried to return to his home village in Warwickshire with his pregnant wife Elizabeth, he faced an Examination and was issued with a Removal Order to go back to Moreton Pinkney and settle there, far from family and friends. The couple's first child, a son also called John, was born soon after their arrival.

John Prestidge found work in the village and his family increased. He relied on a shilling or two from the parish outdoor relief fund to supplement his low wages, and an extra payment in the hard times of unemployment and illness. The parish funds also paid for the funeral when a loved one died. Occasionally he earned a few shillings by doing repairs on parish buildings, with help from his growing family.

Most of John and Elizabeth's children and grandchildren stayed on in Moreton Pinkney, bound to the village by poverty and their reliance on parish relief which was not available to them elsewhere. One grandson, William, escaped for a time when he joined the militia and then the 95th Regiment of Foot, which fought against Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo.

The mechanisation of agriculture robbed them of their traditional employment, and had a tragic side effect when one of the Prestidge daughters was killed by a threshing machine. The outdoor relief payments for working men ceased when the Poor Laws were changed in 1834. Groups of parishes were formed into Unions and a workhouse was built in each union. To be eligible for relief, paupers now had to live in the workhouses, where men were separated from their wives, parents from their children and brothers from their sisters.

Determined to stay together, two large families of Prestidges chose to live in two huts on a patch of parish waste ground. They were called the Moreton Gang and became a thorn in the side of the authorities. The Prestidge youths were the first to get in trouble with the law. In 1841 George was arrested for larceny but the charges were dropped. Walter and five of his friends were tried and found guilty of assault on a peace officer; all were released on sureties. In 1842 Henry served 3 months in Northampton Gaol for stealing barley. Three of the men were charged with larceny in 1846 and acquitted. Another was gaoled for 3 months for larceny in 1848.

These were all minor offences compared to an event in 1849, which left the families shattered. The 3rd generation John Prestidge, his son Henry and nephew William were all convicted of burglary at the Lent Assizes held in Northampton on 3rd March 1849, and sentenced to Transportation for Life. John was aged 51 years, the husband of Mary and father of 12 children. Henry was aged 24 years, single, and the only one of the three with a previous conviction. William was aged 27 years, the husband of Sarah and father of 4 young children. John's wife Mary, whose youngest child was still a babe in arms, now had no means of support. In the 1851 Census she was listed as a pauper and had 10 children living at home, four of them with occupations. But there were desperate years ahead.

John, Henry and William were held in Separate Confinement in Northampton Gaol for 2 months, then the younger men were sent north to Wakefield Prison in Yorkshire. In October, John was sent south to Millbank Prison in London and moved to Pentonville in Jan 1850. It was noted in the prison register that he was unsuitable for Separate Confinement. He was moved to the public works prison at Portland in Dorset, arriving there on 1st May 1850. Two days later there was a reunion with son Henry and nephew William when they arrived from Wakefield Prison, after completing their Separate Confinement.

In Feb 1851, the three men were in a large group of prisoners who boarded the ship "Cornwall" and were transported to the British naval base at Gibraltar. They were put on one of the hulks, either the "Owen Glendower" or the "Euryalus", with some of the worst of England's criminals. It is believed the convict labour was needed for the dockyards, the

wharves and servicing the tunnels in the Rock, which housed the defensive gun emplacements. Five years later, William was accidentally injured and died in hospital on 21st June 1856.

John and Henry spent another year at Gibraltar after William's death, departing on the "Hamilla Mitchell" on 16th June 1857 and arriving back in England at Portsmouth on 4th July. They were confined on another hulk, the "Stirling Castle", moored in Portsmouth Harbour. On 8th Sept 1857, John saw his son for the last time when Henry boarded the convict transport "Nile" for the voyage to Western Australia. A week later, John was invalided to Dartmoor Prison in Devonshire.

Henry arrived at Fremantle on the "Nile" on New Year's Day 1858. At Fremantle Gaol he was given the number 4695 and it was noted in the Character Book that his conduct on the voyage had been Very Good. An entry in the Superintendent's Order Book shows that he left the Gaol on 3rd Feb with a group of probationary prisoners who were assigned to the various road parties. Henry was one of three prisoners sent to join the road party at York Green Mount, where there was a convict station half way up the hill beside Convict Creek. He arrived back at the Gaol on 5th April and two days later received his Ticket-of-Leave. His Conditional Pardon was granted on 15th Sept 1860.

By 1863 Henry was farming at Greenough near Geraldton and employed farm servant James Taylor (6454), the first of 8 Ticket-of-Leave holders he employed over the next 4 years. He was granted a Tillage Lease, No. 3109 in Arthur St on the north Back Flats. He lived in a hut while building a two-roomed house of wattle and daub, with a thatched roof, a fireplace in one of the rooms, a clay floor and calico windows. When Owen McGuiness a mason from Ireland occupied the block next door, Henry moved back to his hut and gave Owen, his wife Bridget and their three young children the use of his house. The two men worked together to plant Owen's first crop, using Henry's single plough, and later formed a partnership.

The disease red rust attacked the wheat in 1869, leaving the farmers without a crop to harvest. In order to obtain seed wheat for the following year, the farmers accepted an offer of work from the Government to stabilise the sand dunes at Geraldton which threatened to bury the town. The men planted seeds which they collected from local plants, and cut and laid down brush to protect the area from wind erosion. Owen McGuiness worked on this successful scheme and it is likely that Henry did too.

Henry farmed at Greenough until early in 1879 when he dissolved his partnership with Owen and sailed to Melbourne, intending to settle there, but returned on the "Rob Roy" in April to live out his life in Greenough. He died there on 2nd May 1882 aged 57 years, leaving his estate to Bernard and James McGuiness, the two eldest sons of his friend Owen.

Henry's father John Prestidge served 3 years 6 months in Dartmoor Prison before being released on license on 2nd March 1861, at the age of 63 yrs. He would have been issued with a new suit of prison-made clothes and given 2 pounds of his prison earnings, with a further payment to come in 6 months if he obeyed the terms of his license. John's wife Mary had died in Morton Pinkney the year before his release, so he had no reason to return there. Instead, he made his way to the town of Leamington in Warwickshire, where he was recorded as living with a nephew George when the Census was taken at the end of the month. Ten years later he was living with his youngest son Benjamin and family, still in Leamington and working as a gardener. John died in 1879 of decay of nature, aged 82 years.

Sarah, the widow of William who had died in hospital at Gibraltar, moved from Moreton Pinkney to the town of Daventry some time during the 1850's. She worked as a laundress to support her four children until they were old enough to find jobs, her son as a carpenter and the girls in the shoe industry. She later took in an orphaned grand-daughter who was still living with her when Sarah died in 1894, aged 74 years.

During the years that John Prestidge was in prison, the families in Moreton Pinkney found it increasingly hard to survive. There were more arrests and convictions for larceny, and one for

poaching, with the women becoming involved in crime as well. A few family members left to live in the towns, but the real impetus to move away came with the extension of the rail network to Moreton Pinkney in 1873. The railway not only provided employment, but the means of transport out of the village and across the border into Warwickshire. The Prestidges settled mainly in the cities and towns of Birmingham, Warwick, Leamington and Rugby, back in their traditional home County once more.

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