

Thomas Hirst – Scindian Convict #10

The Wakefield Prison register entry for Thomas Hirst lists his history of misdemeanours and crimes: "Once previously convicted, and five times summarily, also, twice acquitted of felony." Following his sentencing to fifteen years' transportation Hirst was incarcerated at London's notorious Millbank Prison. Six months' later he was transferred to Wakefield Prison in West Yorkshire on 17 September 1847 and was then moved on from Wakefield to Portland Prison on 20 December 1848. He was aged just nineteen years when first convicted as reported in *The York Herald and General Advertiser*, 16 March 1844:

CROWN COURT—YORK CASTLE.

"Previous conviction – information – Thomas Hirst (19) before the court in March 1844 charged with having feloniously entered the house of Frederick Turner on 10 January 1844 and stolen clothing, one hundred yards of woollen cloth, a silver spoon and other goods. Hirst was "admitted approver". He testified against the others, Richard Render, John McDonald, Joseph Kay and William Mayfield, who were all found guilty and sentenced to ten years' transportation.

Hirst in cross-examination admitted that he had got his living during the last twelve month, by thieving. He had been tried three times – the first being for sleeping in a brick kiln, when he was committed to Wakefield for two months; the second occasion was for having skeleton keys in his possession. He had some skeleton keys 'planted' on Woodhouse, for the purpose of house-breaking. The approver also acknowledged having been tried at the last assizes for a burglary in Meadow Lane."

Why was Thomas entrenched in a life of petty crime from such a young age? The evidence from his trials indicates poverty was the likely cause of his ongoing criminal activity. The burglary mentioned during the March 1844 trial had been dealt with at the Winter Special Assizes York on 16 December 1843, and of which crime he was acquitted. Following the March 1844 trial, he was again in front of the bench in December 1845 and on this occasion he received a sentence of 8 months' imprisonment for warehouse breaking. Finally, in March 1847 he was tried for Housebreaking at Leeds:

"Thomas Hirst, (22), was charged with having, on the 3rd January last, at Leeds, feloniously entered the dwelling-house of Freeman Hepworth, and stolen therefrom a quantity of eatables, a coat, and a pair of trousers, his property.

Mr Johnston for the prosecution; and the prisoner was undefended. The prosecutor is a labourer and residing at Leeds, and on Sunday the 3rd of January last, he and his wife left their house, having previously secured the door. At eight o'clock however, when they returned, they found that the house had been forcibly entered, and the articles mentioned in the indictment had been taken away. On the following day, the prisoner tried to pledge the coat and trousers at a pawnbroker's shop in Leeds, where he was detained, and subsequently taken into custody.

The prisoner said that he obtained the articles of some men who he met in the street, and they requested him to pawn them. – Guilty. A former conviction was proved against the prisoner. To be transported for fifteen years."

From the time of his arrival until he was issued with his ticket-of-leave Thomas Hirst likely laboured in a convict work party building much needed roads and bridges. He was listed as working as a blacksmith in the Superintendent's Orders (SO1) p4, 20 September 1850:

"Extra rations for men employed at sawyers, blacksmiths, mortar mixers and washers on such days as they are fully employed at their respective trades or occupations.

*Blacksmiths - 6oz, bread, 8oz meat, 1 Pt Beer
48 James Baker, 10 Thomas Hurst, 34 Wm Loveridge, 44 Alexander Mathison."*

Hirst received his ticket-of-leave on 23 December 1850, just six months after arriving in the colony. He was assigned to employer John Smith in the Swan district. John Smith of Guildford was advertising in the *Inquirer* of 14 February 1849 concerning the Guildford Steam-Mills. This was likely the steam powered saw and flour mills at Guildford. The steam saw-mill was the first in the colony and was mentioned in the *Inquirer* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1844 when Mr J. Monger gave a demonstration of sawing the local timber and spoke of aspirations of exporting the desirable hardwood as far as China. Monger also had a hand in erecting the first timber saw mill at the foot of Mt Eliza operating from 1833. Thomas Hirst may have been working at the mill or in another capacity for John Smith.

Hirst was listed as a brass moulder, a highly skilled occupation but one not without attendant risk. An article in the *Cambridge Tribune* in October 1911 by Emery R. Hayhurst, called "The Brass-Moulder's Secret" exposed the health risks involved in the occupation:

"It is in one branch of the brass industry that we find, however, a peculiar attending disease. This is in the melting, moulding, or founding of brass, with the consequent inhalation of metallic fumes. The disease is called "brass founder's ague." As far back as 1832 an Englishman named Thackrah declared that brass founders, or all who were exposed to the inhalation of brass fumes, were liable to a malaria-like sickness evinced as chills, fever, and sweats. Yet the very fact that the disease did not kill the subject on the spot, or, indeed, within a few days, months, or even years, has kept the knowledge of it from the public, and, in fact, from the average physician. It is simply a predisposing affliction, which of itself does not kill, does not even require the physician's attendance, but paves the way for the chronic diseases which later prove fatal."

Was this the cause of Thomas Hirst's early demise at age 35 from an abdominal tumour on 14 September 1856? Hirst was one of only half a dozen of the first shipload of convicts to die within 6 years of arriving in the colony.

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Wakefield Prison Register, HO24_13; courtesy Bevan Carter.