

## Thomas Fletcher - Scindian convict #18

Twenty-one-year-old unemployed collier, Thomas Fletcher, was brought to trial on 19 February 1848 at the Lancaster Spring Assizes for a string of violent crimes, reported on by the *Lancaster Gazette and General Advertiser* on 26 February 1848:

### ***Robbery on the Highway***

*“Thomas Fletcher, 21, Henry Fletcher, 19, and Henry Abraham, 22, charged with having at Shevington, stolen a bag, 100 half crowns and 100 shillings; the property of the Leeds and Liverpool Canal Company, and with having at Shevington, attempted to drown Richard Molyneaux, also charged with having at Wigan, assaulted Richard Latham, and with having robbed him of a pencil case, a sovereign and 15 shillings. Mr Segar appeared for the prosecution. Mr McOubrey defended the two Fletchers; Mr James for Abraham.*

*Richard Latham, sworn – I am a farmer, near Wigan; I was coming from Wigan about 12 at night. About 1 mile from Wigan I saw three men; they were walking close together, the tallest one was leading off; it was rather an overcast night; the taller one had a dark coat or jacket; and the other two light clothes on; they were walking fast; in a short time I saw them c(r)ouch down in the roadside; one called “holloa”; they came up and knocked me down; they knocked my hat over my eyes; they cut my pocket off; I had a sovereign, and fifteen shillings, and a pencil case; one came up with an axe; he offered to strike; I called out “Kill me and send me to Jesus Christ”; they then went towards Dean Lock; I had never seen the prisoners at the bar before then; I saw them in custody seven days after; I did not see their faces.*

*Richard Molyneaux, sworn – I am a workman on the Leeds and Liverpool Canal; about a quarter past 1 in the morning, 3 men came to the office and threw me down; they had their faces coloured with red; Thomas Fletcher came first and the two others followed; they knocked me down; one called out “hit him on the head with the axe”; I can’t swear to any but Thomas Fletcher...*

*His Lordship said there was no case against any one excepting Thomas Fletcher. His Lordship summed up rather humorously; and the jury returned a verdict of Guilty against Thomas Fletcher. Transported for fifteen years; Captain Hansbrow stated to the court that a police officer was in waiting to take the prisoners on another charge.”*

Thomas was clearly the ring-leader in this one-night rampage of assault and robbery. It is possible that the Henry Fletcher involved in the crime was his younger brother. The Portland Prison register states that Fletcher had no known previous convictions however the violence and multiple offences in this one instance were enough to get him transported for 15 years. He spent time in Wakefield Prison in West Yorkshire before being transferred to Portland Prison on 1 June 1849 in readiness for transportation aboard the *Scindian* on 28 February 1850.

The Convict Establishment records describe Fletcher’s physical appearance as being 5 foot 8 ½ inches tall with fair hair, grey eyes, an oval face with a fair complexion and stout appearance.

It was noted by the chaplain in 1851 that Thomas' brothers were William and Henry Fletcher who lived in Bridge Street, Wigan, Lancashire. In 1851 he was 24 years old, having previously been employed as a coal miner, unmarried, and semi-literate, having spent only a short time in school. The chaplain's comments stated that he was attentive and regular in his work habits but "but spent a good deal of his earnings on drink" and that the reason for his crime was "want of employment". His record lists several books he borrowed while a prisoner and his interests leaned towards exploration, travel and history. Fletcher received his ticket-of-leave a few months later on 23 November 1851.

On 16 February 1853 the *Inquirer* reported that in Fremantle, ticket-of-leave holder Thomas Fletcher was charged with carrying firearms without permission and was admonished and fined 10s. He was issued with his conditional pardon on 13 August 1859. Thomas stayed around the Fremantle area reportedly employing six ticket-of-leave men between 1864 and 1869, including four sawyers, a woodcutter and a cook. A few newspaper articles after this period state that a Thomas Fletcher was charged in Fremantle for drunken or offensive behaviour on most occasions getting off with a caution or having the charge dismissed.

No record has been found for Thomas ever marrying or having children in Western Australia. The date of his death is also unknown.

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Sources:

Births, Deaths, Marriages, Western Australia;

Erickson, R., O'Mara, G., *Convicts in Western Australia 1850-1887 : dictionary of Western Australians*. Volume IX, p 191;

Fremantle Prison Convict Database;

National Library of Australia, Trove Digitised Newspapers:

*The Inquirer and Commercial News*, 16 February 1853;

State Library of Western Australia, British Library Newspapers Online:

*The Lancaster Gazette and General Advertiser, for Lancashire, Westmorland, &c.* (Lancaster, England), Saturday, February 26, 1848; pg. [1]; Issue 6266. *British Library Newspapers, Part II: 1800-1900.*;

State Records Office of Western Australia, Convict Registers: Cons 1156 R17, R21A, R21B.