

Matthew Porteous – Scindian Convict #20

Matthew Porteous was a literate, married, saddle and harness-maker, aged 51 years when he was convicted of theft in Edinburgh in February 1848. Theft was rather an oversimplification of his crime as this article describing his trial depicts:

Hampshire Advertiser, 11 March 1848

“High Court of Justiciary. – The court met at Edinburgh on Monday, the judges present being the Lord Justice Clerk, Lord Cockburn, and Lord Wood. Matthew Porteous, formerly a horse-dealer, was placed at the bar, charged with “reset of theft,” in so far as he had in February 1843, “resetted” 53 silver watches, 525 silver tea spoons, 520 gold rings, and a great quantity of articles of other kinds of silver plate and jewellery, which were on the 17th of the said month stolen from the premises of Thomas McLurkin, pawnbroker, Paisley. Three men were tried and convicted of the theft in July 1843, and the prisoner was previously apprehended on two occasions, but having got out on bail he fled, and was twice outlawed. The prisoner having pleaded not guilty, a great number of witnesses were examined, and from their testimony it appeared that a few days after the housebreaking he was seen by a criminal officer on the outside of the “Engineer” stage-coach, near Galashiels; when, observing he was recognised, he jumped off and fled across the fields and escaped. He afterwards went to Birmingham, where he resided five months under the name of Watson, and sported two race-horses. About the end of that period he proceeded to Tamworth fair, and there was known to offer some gold rings at a low price. He carried a bundle with him, rolled in coarse cloth which on his apprehension, was found to contain seventeen or eighteen watches, four of which were identified by parties as having been pawned by them to McLurkin. A dealer in old clothes in Glasgow, named Gibbons, confessed that he knew the theft was to be committed the day before, and that he took the prisoner at the bar to thieves to bargain for the sale of the jewellery, which had the same morning been stolen. It was contained in two bundles, and after hastily inspecting them, the prisoner paid £25 for them. The goods were at least worth £300. Mr Graham appeared as counsel for the accused, but he made no defence. The jury having returned a verdict unanimously finding the prisoner guilty of “reset” so far as the watches were concerned, the court after remarking that his case was worse than the thieves, sentenced him to be transported for fourteen years, being double the punishment being awarded in their case.”

In Scottish law “Reset of Theft” is defined as “The receiving and keeping of stolen goods knowing them to be stolen, with a design of feloniously retaining them from the real owner.” To compound this crime the news report adds that he absconded while out on bail, was outlawed, continued housebreaking and even seems to have resorted to attempted highway robbery! Certainly a shifty-sounding character and by all accounts, rather good at evading the police. This ended with his being sentenced to transportation for fourteen years.

Arriving aboard the *Scindian* on 1 June 1850, Matthew Porteous was described in the Convict records as being of stout appearance, 5 foot 7 and ¼ inches tall, with dark brown hair, grey eyes, a long sharp visage and having a dark complexion. Nothing is known about his wife and children and they did not join him in the colony. Porteous is however mentioned in the convict-

related correspondence of Governor Charles Fitzgerald, in particular relating to his business as a saddler.

Porteous was issued with his ticket-of-leave ten months after his arrival on 29 April 1851. Various newspaper advertisements indicate that he was working for himself as a saddler during 1852/3:

Inquirer, Monday 17 May 1852, p 4

“REMOVAL. MATTHEW PORTEOUS, Saddler, begs most respectfully to announce to the inhabitants of Perth and its vicinity, that he has Removed to Mr. Haysom's premises, Hay Street, Perth. N.B. — M. P. has effected a great reduction in the price of Saddlery of every description.”

Inquirer, Wednesday 4 Aug 1852, p 2

“MATTHEW PORTEOUS, SADDLER AND HARNESS MAKER, BEGS to return his grateful thanks to his friends and the public generally, for the liberal support and encouragement he has received during the time he has been in business, and now begs to inform them he has engaged with G. Phipps, late foreman to Mr. C V. Bibra, and to say that all future favours conferred upon him will be executed with punctuality, neatness and dispatch. Perth, August 3, 1852.”

These articles seem to indicate that Porteous had been working as a saddler for some time however may have been facing some upheaval or possibly financial difficulties. This idea is borne out in the correspondence of the Governor, convict-related letters – M. Porteous corresp., page 147, letter 587:

“The

Reverting to your letter of the 5th ultimo relative to the affairs of Reg. No 20 Mathew Porteous I have the honor to acquaint you that the Police Magistrate was requested to ascertain as far as lay in his power the amounts and nature of this man's property – the results of his enquiries I now transmit: -

You will perceive that Porteous' affairs are of such a complicated nature and so unsatisfactory a state that I do not see how the Police could take charge of them – I would suggest that some persons might be appointed to manage his affairs until he be restored to health, which does not appear likely to be the case for some time, he being now reported as totally unfit to carry on his business.

Supt. W. – 9 Aug 1853?”

The letter gives some insight into both Porteous' business affairs and his health. It seems that the Establishment saw fit to get involved in his affairs as the below advertisement was placed five times up to 2 November 1852:

Perth Gazette, Fri 14 October 1853, p 2

“NOTICE!!! BY order of the Comptroller General, signed by Matthew Porteous in the presence of T. N. Yule, Esq., J.P., the undersigned requests all persons indebted to the said Matthew Porteous, Saddler, to settle their accounts immediately; and parties having claims against the above are desired to forward the same for liquidation without delay. WILLIAM HENRY WHITFIELD. Wellington street, Perth, October 13.”

The thing that could not be read between the lines was Matthew Porteous' state of mind. Unfortunately, he seems to have been suffering from mental health issues and he took his own life on 17 July 1854. He was about 57 years old at the time of his death. In what is possibly a sad postscript to Matthew Porteous' life, a further advertisement in the *Perth Gazette* on Friday 24 August 1855 listed an unclaimed letter for a Mr Porteous at the Perth G.P.O.

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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 444;

National Library of Australia, Trove Digitised Newspapers:

The Inquirer and Commercial News, Monday 17 May 1852, p 4;

The Inquirer and Commercial News, Wednesday 4 August 1852, p 2;

Perth Gazette, Friday 14 October 1853, p 2;

State Library of Western Australia, British Library Newspapers Online:

Hampshire Advertiser, 11 March 1848;

State Records Office of Western Australia, Convict Registers: Cons 1156R 17, 21A, 21B; Cons 128_38; Cons 488-30 – convict-related letters of Capt Charles Fitzgerald – M. Porteous corresp. On page 58, letter 395; Entry in Cons 488-31 – convict-related letters – M. Porteous corresp. On page 147, letter 587;

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