

Thomas Welsby – Scindian Convict #5

At the time of the 1841 England Census, Thomas Welsby of Bolton was aged 17 years and working as a smith's striker for the local foundry. Unfortunately, within two years he had his first run-in with the law. The *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, of Saturday 30 April 1842, reported in District News from Bolton, that a young man Thomas Welsby was charged with theft from a public house, caught stealing a quart copper warmer, from the house of Samuel Horrocks, the Mill-Stone, Crown Street, on Monday evening last (25 April 1842).

This prior conviction was to be the undoing of Welsby when six years later he was involved in another robbery. This time a hat was stolen and his accomplice received a sentence of 1 year's imprisonment for the act. Welsby, due to his previous felony, was sentenced to 15 years' transportation. The *Liverpool Mercury* of Friday 31 March 1848 reported on the case heard at the Liverpool Lent Assizes, Southern Division:

"Highway Robbery

Thomas Welsby, 23, and James Morris, 32, were indicted with having at Bolton feloniously assaulted John Nuttall, and robbed him of his hat, about midnight on 19th of January last. The prosecutor was going towards his father's house on the night in question, when he was accosted by two men, who knocked him down, unbuttoned his coat, and otherwise assaulted him. They were alarmed and ran off, Morris taking along with him prosecutor's hat. A witness named Wilmer proved that Welsby, had stated that he and Morris had knocked a man down, and that they would have had his money, but were prevented in consequence of an alarm being given. The hat was found by the police in the house of one of the prisoners. Both prisoners were found guilty. Welsby, who had previously been convicted of felony, was sentenced to fifteen years' transportation, and Morris to one year's imprisonment."

From this time on, Welsby spent the rest of his life in and out of prison. He was sent to Wakefield Prison before being transferred to Portland Prison on 9 August 1849 in readiness to be transported to Western Australia aboard the Scindian early the following year. Prison records provide his physical description: height 5' 5 1/8", dark brown hair, dark hazel eyes, prominent visage, dark complexion, stout appearance. His time in the Swan River Colony started successfully when he was issued with his ticket-of-leave on 5 October 1851. Just three years later in November 1854 he was reconvicted by the Perth Police Magistrate and became colonial prisoner #9439. During 1855 the daily medical journals indicate that he was under sentence of hard labour and was treated for ophthalmia, constipation and vermin. Not a pretty picture of what Thomas' life had become.

A news story from a further misdemeanour refers to this earlier reconviction but no mention can be found of the crime committed:

Perth Gazette, Fri 13 Dec 1861, p 3

“AN ABSCONDER.—Thomas Welsby, t.l., was charged by Sergt. Dunmail with having absconded from the district of Guildford. As the prisoner's defence was most unsatisfactory, and as he had some time since been convicted of a grave offence which he committed while absent from his duly appointed district, his Worship returned him to the Establishment during his Excellency's pleasure.”

The early 1860s for Thomas were typified by movements between the Convict Establishment at Fremantle and various work districts such as Mt Eliza, Point Resolution (site of a limestone quarry), Busselton where he served 12 months, Newcastle, the Harvey Road Party and Albany. He was continually labouring on the roads and likely building bridges and other works along the way.

He resurfaces again in the Perth Police reports in April 1871 – twice fined for drunkenness within three days reported by the *Perth Gazette* on 5 May 1871:

Perth Police Report – April 1, Thos. Welsby drunk fined 5s; April 3, Thos. Welsby drunk fined 10s.

One more Convict Establishment record dated 12 March 1877 indicates that Thomas Welsby, No. 5, was admitted, received from Guildford. By this time Thomas was aged in his fifties or possibly even 60 years, as various records have shown discrepancies in his recorded age at different times.

The final record found believed to be Thomas Welsby is that of his death in 1880, reportedly aged 64 years.

Thomas Welsby is one of the many convicts who sadly found his way into the convict system and never really managed to get himself out of it. He absconded from his allocated district, was returned to prison, was subjected to hard labour for most of his prison time and eventually it appears, turned to drink to forget his woes. The official record of his existence in the Swan River Colony paints a dismal picture and we can never really know what happened in between his multiple times in prison.

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Sources:

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Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser (Manchester, England), Wednesday, March 29, 1848; pg. 7; Issue 1335. *British Library Newspapers, Part III: 1741-1950*;

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