

John Wilson – Scindian Convict #60

John Wilson, a sawyer from the Newcastle area, was born in 1809 and was married with four children when he committed highway robbery on 23 September 1847. Found guilty of robbery with violence and already having a previous conviction he was sentenced to 15 years' transportation.

The details of John's crime and trial were reported in the *Newcastle Courant* on Friday 3 March 1848:

"NORTHUMBERLAND AND NEWCASTLE SPRING ASSIZES.

John Wilson was charged with committing a highway robbery, with violence, upon the person of William Wilkinson, a carrier between Newcastle and Humshaugh, on the 23rd September last. Mr Matthews appeared for the prosecution, Mr Overend for the prisoner. The evidence was this:- Wilkinson on the day mentioned had been to Newcastle, between four and five o'clock that afternoon, baited and then went on. On reaching a place called Chester-banks, which is about half-a-mile from Stagshaw-bank, and while walking by the side of his horse, he was suddenly knocked down by some person from behind; the blow taking away his senses. On recovering his senses he found the man had his hand in his pocket, and on struggling was knocked down a second time. When he had recovered his senses again, the man was still standing over him, and demanded a purse which he said he knew he had. He replied, "for God's sake spare my life, I never did any body any harm," and gave him the purse. The prisoner then made off, going through a plantation, and across a turnip field. This was committed about seven o'clock, and at half-past 8 the prisoner was observed getting into the train at the Corbridge station of the Newcastle and Carlisle Railway, going to Newcastle. When the prisoner was taken before the magistrates at Hexham, the prosecutor would not swear to him – but on hearing him speak, he said he was the man. The corroboratory evidence was the circumstance of the prisoner being seen during the afternoon and evening, going along the road in the same direction as the prosecutor, and dodgeing about in the neighbourhood of the robbery, armed with a large green stick. On the prisoner being charged by the police-officer with the robbery, he denied having been in that neighbourhood for the last three years, and that he was at work at Gateshead on the day in question. It appears the prisoner had been acquainted with the habits of the prosecutor, for, though living at Newcastle, he had married his wife from the neighbourhood of the prosecutor's residence. The prosecutor had been much cut about the head, and had a quantity of silver taken from him besides the purse. The prisoner was found guilty, and a previous conviction having been proved against him, he was sentenced to 15 years' transportation."

Wilson's imprisonment began with 8 ½ months in the notorious Millbank Prison in London before being transferred to Wakefield Prison in West Yorkshire. The Portland Prison register reports John Wilson as being 39 years of age when he is received from Wakefield Prison on 20 June 1849. He was transferred to Portland Prison in readiness for transportation aboard the first convict ship to Western Australia, the *Scindian*, which arrived on 1 June 1850.

In September 1850, John made a successful application to the Governor to have his wife Dorothy and four children, James (14), John (13), Thomas (11) and Isabella (3) join him from

Sowerby, Cumberland. In the same month on 20 September 1850, John Wilson is listed in the Superintendent's Orders on page 4 where it states that men fully employed at their respective trades or occupations should receive extra rations. For Wilson, working as a sawyer, the ration was 6 oz of bread, 8 oz of meat and one pint of beer. Other men employed as sawyers were #67 John Morris, #16 Samuel Jackson and #37 Samuel Smith.

By the time Wilson was issued with his ticket-of-leave, on 29 May 1851, there had been no reply from his family or the referee he had nominated. A later file note concerning John's wife states "Does not wish to emigrate."

There is one further mention of a John Wilson, likely to be him, in the *Inquirer*, 18 Aug 1852, p 2:

Fremantle: John Wilson, drunk, fined 5s. and 2s. costs

The disappointment of his family deciding not to join him certainly could have led John to drink to drown his sorrows. His manner of death indicated that he probably did. John Wilson died of congestion of the liver in the Convict Establishment hospital on 24 August 1853. He was around 44 years of age.

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Sources:

Births, Deaths, Marriages, Western Australia;

Erickson, R., and O'Mara, G., *Convicts in Western Australia, 1850-1887. Dictionary of Western Australians Vol. IX*, p 604;

Fremantle Prison Convict Database;

National Library of Australia, Trove Digitised Newspapers:

Inquirer, Weds 18 Aug 1852, p 2;

Portland Prison Register – Portland PCom2 383 513_520, courtesy Bevan Carter;

State Library of Western Australia: British Newspapers Online:

The Newcastle Courant etc (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England), Friday, March 3, 1848; Issue 9039. *British Library Newspapers, Part I: 1800-1900*;

State Records Office of Western Australia: Convict registers – Acc 1156 R17, R21A, R21B, CO18_62_299 AJCP 451 and Cons 1156C_19, p 167, SO1;

Wakefield Prison register, HO24_13, courtesy of Bevan Carter.