

From Baker to Builder – Ronda Hitchens

Obituary Notice: "The West Australian Sat. April 20, 1912

Mr David Gray, a colonist of some 45 years standing in this state – was one of the leading contractors in the earlier days of the state. He was greatly respected by all who knew him and was always ready to help his fellows when in need. The latter part of his life was spent in farming near Pinjarra. The funeral took place on Tuesday and was largely attended."

A few days earlier the same paper had reported his accidental death which tallied roughly with family legend about the event. It appears that David worked like a demon all the week but invariably drove his horse and cart into Pinjarra every Saturday afternoon to meet his mates and relax with a few drinks at the hotel. If he drank too much the horse knew the way home and always safely delivered him back to his wife. On this particular day however there was a violent storm during their journey, and his horse must have bolted into the bush, tipping up the cart and killing David.

As children we were often told "David built that" when something came up about various Perth buildings or we were driving through the suburbs or country areas. He won fame by building a two-roomed cottage in Melbourne Street, just down from Roe St. in one twelve hour spell. Everything was on site and a large team of workers assembled under his supervision the whole house and it was completed in just under the deadline, I imagine a few jugs were sunk that night by the weary workers.

No one ever told us though that this great grandfather had come to W.A. as convict number 8856, who was convicted at Derby on March 8, 1865 for arson and forgery. He had set up an eating house there a few months before and insured it well. When it burnt down one night the police were a little suspicious and checked up on him. It then emerged that he had made two previous claims on insurance over houses in London which had also caught fire mysteriously.¹ He was found guilty and given a ten year sentence with transportation. He was 25 and had a young wife and three children aged 5, 3 and 1 year.² If life was hard for him it certainly couldn't have been any better for her either. Her address is given as Poplar, London which suggests that she was hardly left well provided for. Will I ever be able to prove what happened to her and the children? David wrote home regularly until December 1869 after which no mail out is recorded.

In England David was working as a cook and baker at the time of his arrest, but is recorded as a boilermaker on the "Belgravia" shipping list in 1866. After he arrived here he worked as a general servant and then went seriously into the building trade, starting as a labourer and obviously working his way through the building skills. By 1873 he was earning a pound a day as a bricklayer and later as a builder on his own account although he was not granted his freedom until 1876. He employed 96 ticket-of-leave men between 1870-1884.³ He signed a petition regarding discrimination against ex-convicts in the colony. David bought land at North Beach, Perth where he built one of the old landmarks in Hamersley St, the Shell House, so called because shells were embedded in the limestone of the walls when it was plastered over. At his death he owned land also at North Perth, Pinjarra and Gutha.⁴ The latter being a bakehouse which may have recalled happier times for him.

¹ "The Times", London, State Reference Library microfilm copy

² Aust. Joint Copying Project, P. Com 2, Reel 5984 Piece 3

³ Ticket-of-Leave Registers on Acc. 1386 and Acc. 1156 "R"

⁴ Supreme Court Wills, held at State Archives viewed in Battye Library Reading Room

In 1877 he remarried as a widower to Alice, daughter of Thomas Alexander Greay (a Parkhurst lad) and Ellen (nee Quinn). My grandfather, William Thomas was their eldest son. They had three more sons and one daughter who survived childhood. All the sons followed David into the building trade and even today a lot of their work still stands.

This convict left his mark on Western Australia in a very positive way, with many descendants as well as the visible signs of his labour.

Now my efforts on this branch of the family are going to be extended into trying to find out what happened to the family left behind in England. After all they were relatives too.

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