

# On the Trail of Benjamin Stubbs-Mills [revised]

by Fran Schifferli

During a visit to the UK in 2015, I determined to find the birthplace and scene of conviction of my 2x great-grandfather Benjamin Stubbs (2769), who was transported from Portland in 1854 to the Swan River Colony aboard the *Seapark*.

Benjamin was born Benjamin Mills in 1829 in the village of Potternewton, now a suburb of Leeds. He came from a family of carpenters, blacksmiths and masons all of whom found ready employment in the small village, which was fast becoming the resort of wealthier Leeds identities. The wealthy were seeking an escape from the smog-filled skies of the developing industrial city; the stench, disease and the poverty of the poor of Leeds.

Both Benjamin's parents died by the time he was seven years old. In the 1841 Census he was living with his Aunt Sarah Wilkinson in Armley. He was employed in the Armley Woollen Mill as a Woollen Piecer, a highly exploitive occupation that required small, nimble children to crawl under working machines, and join together the spun threads.

However, by the 1851 Census, Benjamin was found in the Portland Gaol under the name of *Stubbs*. A newspaper account gives a vivid description of the events surrounding his apprehension, trial and conviction, together with that of his four accomplices. "Benjamin Stubbs, Richard Race [Reece], George Walker, John Foley and Thomas Jones charged with having feloniously stolen one hog sheep of the value of twenty shillings, the property of Moses Lillington, at Winfrith Newburgh – ten years transportation."<sup>1</sup> Benjamin assumed his mother's maiden name *Stubbs*, perhaps to protect his family name. He was a long way from Leeds, which prompts questions like, how did he get to Dorset and was he running away?

The specific site of the felons' arrest was given in a newspaper account, as Grange Warren in Winfrith Newburgh, Dorset.<sup>2</sup> Armed with the newspaper cutting, we determined to find the place of his crime and follow the trail to Portland.

Having driven from Exeter to Winfrith Newburgh, we stayed overnight at the Red Lion Pub and explored the village nearby the next morning. It was a small, picturesque place full of historic thatched cottages; the narrow lanes leading to old farmhouses and barnyards. We were in the right area but frustrated at not being able to pinpoint the exact location. Seeing some men emerge from a hall, I approached them with my task of finding my convict forebear's crime scene.

'What, did he steal a sheep?' was the cheerful response. I showed them the newspaper article and they read it with interest, laughing heartily in good humour as they did so. 'Yes, he did steal a sheep! Poor beggars. They must have been hungry.'

The Grange Farm, we were told, was up the road, 100 metres or so, and to the left. There was a sign. Needless to say we found it in an instant. The particular locality of this farm is Chaldon and is a kilometre from Winfrith Newburgh.

A young man in the farm house read the newspaper account, and willingly gave us permission to look around and take photos. The house, of more recent construction, replaced the 1849 one, though some of the sheds may have been from earlier times. I asked about the 'Warren' part of the description of the field in which the offenders were discovered. 'That's easy,' he replied, pointing. 'Look at that hill top in

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<sup>1</sup> *Dorset County Chronicle*, 29th November 1849, p.2.

<sup>2</sup> *North Devon Journal*, 6 December, 1849, p.2.

the distance. Can you make out at least five small bumps? They are the warrens—megalithic burial tombs—called ‘The Five Marys’. You can drive up and walk along a bridal path and visit them.’

We did that. A view of Grange Farm opened before us; green fields, hedges, tree lined depressions and farm buildings. We could imagine Benjamin and his scruffy companions having their barbeque in the creek bed below, the glow of the camp coals, clearly visible to anyone walking past that evening. Were the men so desperate that they wished to be seen?

We travelled on from ‘The Grange’ towards Dorchester where the five culprits had been tried and convicted. Usually, the old Courthouse (where the Dorchester Assizes were held) is open to tourists, but that day it was closed. It is the same Court where the famous Tolpuddle Martyrs, who instigated a forerunner of agricultural trade unions, were tried and sentenced to transportation to Australia in 1834. Only after thousands signed petitions and political marches were organised in London, were those six men later cleared of their convictions and returned to Plymouth by 1839. It is a fair consideration that the Establishment were concerned about uprisings amongst the farm workers in Dorset and were keen to control any form of discontent among the itinerant workers, hence the severity of the sentences handed out to Benjamin and his companions in 1849.

We drove on to Portland, looking to find the Portland Gaol where Benjamin spent two years before being transported to the Swan River Colony in 1854. This proved a difficult task as the gaol was not clearly marked on the map. We confused the place with The Verne, an old castle stronghold, which is also called Verne Prison. We eventually found the café which I knew to be run by prisoners nearing their release and I thought to be inside the prison courtyard. No, it was attached to The Verne and by the time we got there at 3.15pm the café had closed.

Half a dozen young prisoners were joking together and lounging on the steps waiting to be transported back to the Portland Gaol. They proved a friendly lot and really warmed to my story, especially as I told them my ancestor had served time there in 1850. They gave us clear directions on how to find the gaol. (After all, they were sure to know!)

Disappointingly, the Portland Gaol Museum was closed when we arrived, so we stood, staring up at the massive walls and gates with 1849 inscribed above them, wondering if this was all there was. At least it was a state-of-the-art prison for its time and the ‘amenities’ were newly constructed before Benjamin arrived. I’m glad he wasn’t left to rot in stinking, foul dungeons like the other unfortunates in those days, on the hulks or at Newgate. However, life wasn’t a picnic in the gaol as the prisoners laboured in the nearby Portland Quarry, suppling stone that built half of London and providing the breakwaters for the new navy installations, constructed below the prison.



*Portland Gaol 2015*

A friendly female prison officer spoke to us and directed us to the back of the prison where it sat hard against the cliffs that led down to the sea about 400 metres below. There, she said, we would find a track which wound down to the beach. Here prisoners were off-loaded from sailing ships, to climb up to the prison for incarceration and where also they walked down to board the ships that transported them overseas. The prisoners trudged, daily, down the track, when they were engaged in constructing the breakwater of the fine Portland Harbour, visible from the cliffs far below and still used today.

It was marvellous to climb some way along that track and imagine Benjamin, there. It had been a very satisfying and emotional day and we were quite exhausted.

After returning to our daughter's flat in London, we continued on to York for several days sightseeing. We trained from York to Leeds, a journey of only 25 minutes, determined to find Benjamin's birth place. A taxi conveyed us to Chapel Allerton, the site of the Mills' parish church, St Matthews, where all the Birth, Death and Marriage records were originally recorded. The Church was long gone and rebuilt a few kilometres away. We explored the old church cemetery hoping to find James Milnes' grave. (The different spelling was a source of confusion in my early research). James was Benjamin's grandfather, who died in 1827. We knew there was a burial slab but the search was hopeless. The cemetery is terribly overgrown and we pushed our way through the wilderness, enjoying the experience but failed in our objective.

From there we walked to Potternewton, a kilometre or so away, where the extended Mills family lived in the 1800s and where Benjamin was born. Some of the houses dated from those times but of course it has all changed. It was good to get a feel for the place however. Satisfied we could achieve no more we bused back to the city and had lunch in the old Corn Exchange which has been restored to house modern businesses.



*Dwellings, where the Mills may have lived in Potternewton in the 1820s.*

Refreshed, I allowed my husband to persuade me to walk to the Armley Mill Museum, where Benjamin worked as a child. 'It's only two kilometres,' he said, estimating from a map. It was a nice day for a lovely canal walk. You certainly get a better appreciation of a place when you do it by foot but it was a good deal more than two kilometres and the day, quite hot.

It was amazing to look over the mill museum where my forebear was working as a woollen piecer in 1841 and probably from when he was as young as 8 or 9 years old. It was dangerous work. Getting caught up in the machine workings meant certain injury, the loss of a limb or even death. We were able to view the spinning looms on which he worked. A small school room was attached to the mill so it is likely Benjamin received a very rudimentary education. It was a satisfying tour and we were fortunate to experience it as Armley Mill is the only old wool mill still in existence in the UK.



*Armley Mills Museum spinning machines in 2015.*

Our journey investigating the places frequented by my ancestor proved very satisfying. It was remarkable to experience some of the life of my forebear, Benjamin Mills. It was a difficult life in trying times. His direct descendants today are known as 'Mills' or 'Stubbs-Mills' and are proud of their ancestor, who made a successful life for himself and his family in Western Australia.

I like to think that it was Benjamin, who called out at the end of the trial of the five miscreants, on hearing they were to be transportation for 10 years, 'Thank ye (sic) my Lord. It's better to go there than to starve'.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps that comment earned him the extra two years in Portland Gaol, whereas his four companions arrived together, aboard the *Mermaid*, in 1851.

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<sup>3</sup> *North Devon Journal*, 6 December, 1849, p.2.