

William Dixon, Pyrenees II Convict # 1852

by Joanne Hyland

My interest in the convict William Dixon stemmed from a family belief that he was our ancestor. His court trial transcript was purchased from Inverness, Scotland after his name was listed in the Dictionary of Western Australians with a question mark as to his marriage to Catherine Dow in 1861. Dow was a Scottish female emigrant who arrived in Perth with a young daughter also named Catherine, aboard the Tartar, 7 October 1861. Dow married William Dickson just two weeks after arriving in the Swan River Colony with her young daughter. It always struck me as unusual that Dow would choose to marry a convict when so many free men inhabited the colony, however later investigation would find her daughter on Scottish census records with the surname Dickson. William Dickson arrived in Western Australia possibly in the late 1850s with an employer and has yet not been found in shipping records (not unusual if he was indentured labour). It seems that Dow left her native village of Fowlis Wester in Scotland to join her daughter's father, Dickson. William worked for Dr John Ferguson and his son Charles who ran the Houghton's vineyard in the Swan Valley. He was by family accounts, a manservant to either John or Charles. What is definitively known however is that William and Catherine's daughter Jane Dickson was born at Houghton in October 1862. Jane was my two times great-grandmother. (She also married a convict, William Richard Bettles, however, my great grandfather, David Gordon, Jane's second child as an unwed mother, was born in October 1889 before she married Bettles in August 1891.) That direct convict connection remained elusive! Below is convict William Dixon's story as researched in the 1990s before finding that he was of no relation to my family. It is not known what became of him.

William Dixon arrived in Perth on 30 April 1853 aboard the convict transport *Pyrenees* on its second trip to the Swan River colony.

Western Australia took convicts between 1850 and 1868 and by so doing increased building of public works with its new found labour force. Convicts brought increased population, crime and new issues for the small colony, however their presence also secured a continuing investment of British funds, much needed in the faltering local economy. William was transported to Perth after being convicted at Inverness, Scotland on 13 September 1849. He departed from Torbay, England, (various accounts list Portsmouth and Southampton) on 2 February 1853 aboard the ship *Pyrenees* to, Western Australia to begin a new chapter in his life.

Thanks to the detailed records kept on convicts we have a physical description of William Dixon. In 1853 he was 5 feet 3 1/2 inches tall, with light brown hair, blue eyes and a florid complexion. He appeared healthy, was an ex-sailor and had the tattoo of GP and an anchor on his left arm, and a scar on the bridge of his nose. According to Professor Kent of the 'convictcentral' website who has researched the meanings of convict tattoos "*One of the most popular images was an anchor and interestingly, most of the wearers had nothing to do with the sea. It was used as a symbol of hope and constancy and was often attached to a loved one's initials.*" William Dixon was listed on the convict list for the *Pyrenees II* as being a seaman, sentenced to 10 years but with no "type" of crime listed. His crime was theft. Being born in 1826 he was 27 years of age when he arrived.

Here follows an account of the known background details on William Dixon and his arrival in Western Australia.

The Pyrenees anchored in Cockburn Sound on Saturday 30 April 1853 and on the following day the prisoners were brought on deck in batches to be issued with their tickets-of-leave.

(Ian Elliot, *Moondyne Joe: The Man and the Myth*, 1978, p 6).

Later convicts would be confined in the newly constructed Fremantle Prison on arrival but at the time of William Dixon's arrival the convict establishment was still under construction. As there was no way to accommodate and control all the convicts who arrived, and as their

labour was urgently required for public works, those convicts who had displayed good behaviour over a probational period were granted an immediate ticket-of-leave. William Dixon was granted his like other convicts who arrived with him on the *Pyrenees* in 1853, among them Joseph Bolitho Johns who would later become the infamous "Moondyne Joe".

Details of William's crime were found in the complete record of his trial gained from the Scottish Record Office. William was a seaman and according to his own testimony in his trial records dated 5th February 1849 he was a:

...native of a village in the neighbourhood of Southampton and was lately employed on board the Schooner "Fowles" of Inverness but was paid off at Inverness about a week ago having been merely engaged for one voyage from Inverness to Newcastle and back. Took lodgings in the house of Alexander Ross in Pumpgate Street, Inverness.

According to the 1841 census records the home of Alexander Ross in Pumpgate Street in Inverness also housed two sons. Alexander, whose occupation is listed as a ship carpenter, and Donald, who at 15 years of age was the same age as William (born 1826). In 1841 Alexander Ross was 25 years of age and as a ship carpenter he or Donald are the most likely connection to our William Dixon, working as a sailor on the Inverness schooner *Fowles*. (Census information obtained and verified through Anne Fraser genealogist for the Inverness Highland Council Genealogy Centre, Inverness Library, September 2005).

The village where Dixon was born was traced through the 1851 England census records, while he was incarcerated at Portland Prison, his home town noted as being Fawley, near Southampton. Further research using Family Search showed a William Dixon baptised 22 August 1824 at Fawley, to parents John and Mary Dixon.



Left: All Saints Church, Fawley, built between 1170 and 1340.

Image Courtesy: https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Fawley%2C_Hampshire#Media/File:Church_of_All_Saints_fawley_2013.JPG; Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0

The trial document states that the interrogation was conducted in the Gaelic language and an interpreter was used. According to records William robbed one Murdoch Fraser, a gentleman with whom he had been drinking in various establishments throughout the evening, of his gold watch and watch-chain. The crime was described as “wicked and felonious” and he dragged Fraser into a timber yard, delivered a blow to his mouth and then a kick to his right side before attempting to wrest the gold watch and chain from his person. The chain was about Fraser’s neck and according to Fraser’s own testimony he fought to hold onto it, however the chain eventually broke and William Dixon ran off with his booty. Fraser found a policeman nearby and reported the assault and theft. It was at first thought to have been committed by a man named Thomas Paul who had been with Fraser earlier in the evening however the next day Dixon was positively identified by Fraser as being the culprit. Dixon denied the charge.

A rough childish signature of William Dixon is found on the bottom of the statement - this may be the only remaining physical evidence of William’s existence. William was held from then on until convicted at his trial seven months later, on 13 September 1849. From this time until his departure to Swan River Colony he was imprisoned (3 ½ years) - the latter part of his term being spent in Portland Prison from where he

was collected as transportee number 1852 on 24 January 1853.

According to Alexandra Hasluck in her book *Unwilling Emigrants*:

The few days before the convict embarked were enjoyed by them as a brief period of leisure. There were medical examinations to undergo, for no one was permitted to embark unless quite fit. They were issued with a new set of clothes.

They were given sermons and told of the benefits of transportation to a colony where employment and wages were high and where they could enjoy a new start in life at the end of their sentence. In a letter by a convict to his brother in England we learn that the men have high spirits and sing and dance especially in the first weeks of the voyage (after an initial bout of the usual seasickness). Later the interest is in card games.

The greater part of the day is divided between cleaning the berths and decks, washing and cooking, smoking and reading. The rations are sound and good - good pork, good pease-soup, good plum-dough...

The feature that distinguished the convict ships from ordinary emigrant ships was an iron grating which reached from the upper to the lower deck around the open hatches fore and aft. (Hasluck, p21).

According to Elliot, the voyage out on the *Pyrenees* was probably not as bad as we may imagine.

The ship... was large, clean and a fast sailer. The prisoners were allowed on deck, and, with the prospect of comparative freedom at their eventual destinations, most would have been relatively happy and well-behaved." (Elliot, p5)

*On a previous voyage of the *Pyrenees* carrying convicts between England and Western Australia, it was recorded that the convicts "were an orderly, well behaved body of men and during fine weather made the evenings pleasant by their songs and good humoured revelry." No doubt things were much the same during Joe's (and William's) voyage. (Elliot, p 6)*

The Western Australian State Library has microfiche records of the journals kept by ship doctors on board convict transports. The following interesting information about the *Pyrenees* and its passengers on its second journey to Perth in 1853. (This is an incomplete transcript as only points of interest relevant to this history are recorded.)

MEDICAL JOURNAL NO. 217 - PYRENEES 22 DEC 1852 - 16 MAY 1853 - General Remarks by John Bower MD - Surgeon

Prisoners were collected from the following prisons:

<i>22 Dec 1852</i>	<i>WARRIOR HULK</i>	<i>55</i>
<i>"</i>	<i>WOOLWICH DEFENCE HULK</i>	<i>35</i>
<i>19 Jan 1853</i>	<i>PORTSMOUTH PRISON</i>	<i>50</i>
<i>"</i>	<i>STIRLING CASTLE HULK</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>24 Jan 1853</i>	<i>PORTLAND PRISON</i>	<i>88</i>
<i>28 Jan 1853</i>	<i>DARTMOOR PRISON</i>	<i>66</i>
	<i>Total</i>	<i>296</i>

The average age was 25.55 yrs. Number of convicts between the age of 15-20 yrs - 64; 20-25 yrs - 114; 25-30 yrs - 50; remaining 68 - over 30 yrs age. There was a marked difference in the appearance of the men received from the Hulks and those from the Portland and Dartmoor Prisons: the former had a pale and waxy look which contrasted strongly with the ruddy and florid complexions of the men who had been exposed freely to the bracing air of those elevated locations.

Knowing that William Dixon was listed as having a florid complexion when he boarded the *Pyrenees* and calculating from his transportee number 1852, he was the third prisoner of 88 collected from Portland Prison.

The crew were all young men. They were lodged in an ill-ventilated and confined space much worse than within the Prison or the Barracks. More than the proper proportion suffered from fever and various other diseases, attributable in a great degree to the circumstances just

mentioned. The time occupied in passing from England where the thermometer stood at 50°F, to the variable winds near the equator where it never fell below 80°F, was only 17 days. A succession of light and buffeting winds prolonged the passage between the NE and the SE trade winds for upwards of ten days. As usual a great quantity of rain fell which rendered it necessary to keep the Prisoners below much more than usual; they suffered so much from the heat and closeness that many of them assured me it formed the worst part of their punishment. Shortly after a Continued Fever made its appearance amongst the Prisoners. A very peculiar and disagreeable smell arose from the airholes which at a later period was discovered to have been caused by liberty clothing having been packed while damp.

William Dixon was not mentioned in the daily sick list recorded by Dr Bower. As a seaman he would have been used to sailing and probably enjoyed the voyage greatly after being incarcerated for over four years.

Generally speaking the health of most of the persons embarked was improved by the voyage. The greater part of the Prisoners were disembarked by the 6th of May, the others waited on board for a passage in a vessel shortly expected, until the 16th of May and the 2nd of June on which date all that remained were sent on shore. The greater part of the Guard with their families left on the 9th of May, a few being retained until all the Prisoners were landed. JOHN BOWER MD - SURGEON.

The belief of the doctor that most persons on board disembarked with an improvement in health bears out the opinion of Ian Elliot that the prisoners for the most part had an enjoyable voyage. The “vessel shortly expected” may have been the ship *William Pope* taking prisoners to Bunbury and King George Sound, Albany (see below).

Ian Elliot has researched what happened to the convicts of the *Pyrenees* in his book *Moondyne Joe: The Man and the Myth*, so we are fortunate in having easy access to what most likely would have been William's fate on his arrival in Perth.

Groups of ticket-of-leave men from the Pyrenees II were dispatched to

various centres, the first party leaving for York only five days after the arrival of the ship. Others were included in a draft of men proceeding to Port Gregory (630km north of Fremantle). Forty PYRENEES convicts were stationed at the foot of Mount Eliza (later King's Park) and work recommenced on the construction of what is now Mounts Bay Road. Others were sent to the Toodyay depot. The remainder sailed for Bunbury and King George Sound aboard the William Pope or were put to work clearing the road to Albany. Those at the depots were employed on road clearing or other public works until engaged by private masters, usually farmers.

According to Alexandra Hasluck in her book *Unwilling Emigrants*, of the Pyrenees voyage in 1853, the prisoners carried were all ticket-of-leave men. In the later years of transportation in Perth when more hardened criminals were brought out it became a point of honour to have been among the early convict arrivals in the state.

A ticket-of-leave was granted to convicts who had served a period of probation and had proved by their good behaviour that they could be allowed a certain amount of liberty. A ticket-of-leave man was free to seek employment in an assigned district, but was not permitted to leave it without the consent of the comptroller-general of convicts or the resident magistrate of the district assigned. From the (convict hiring) depot the convicts were hired by settlers or employed on public works such as the construction of roads or bridges. From his wages the ticket-of-leave man was compelled to repay the comptroller-general the sum of 15 pounds, this being the cost of his passage to the colony. Well conducted ticket-of-leave men were permitted to marry.

A convict who observed the conditions of his ticket-of-leave until the completion of one half of his original sentence became entitled to a conditional pardon which removed all restrictions except the right to leave the state until the whole term of his sentence had expired. (Elliot, 1978, pp 4-5).

William Dixon most likely worked among the forty convicts stationed to work at the foot of Mount Eliza on the road today known as Mounts Bay Road. His only 'known' area (area inhabited) was Perth and the only

master he is recorded to have worked for was a Mr William Laurence of Perth dated from 9 March 1854. The ticket-of-leave registers show that William was never charged with any further misconduct or crime during his time as a ticket of leaver. Official records indicate that William Dixon received his Conditional Pardon on 9 December 1854, six months after starting employment with Lawrence. This would have been just over half-way through Dixon's term of sentence of 10 years from when convicted at Inverness on 13 September 1849.

The only likely employer named William Lawrence (none were listed in the *Bicentennial Dictionary of Western Australians* under the spelling of Laurence), arrived in Albany in 1841, an American from Boston and deserter from an American whaling ship (Erickson, R., *Bicentennial Dictionary of Western Australians*, Volume III, K-Q, p. 1814.) Lawrence walked from Albany to Perth, where in 1847 he married Elizabeth Caporn, (daughter of Samuel Caporn per *Simon Taylor* 1842). Samuel Caporn was a boatbuilder and conducted a carrying service on the Swan from the 1840s, living at Point Walter. Lawrence's first-born son, Frank, and later son Andrew are named in BDM WA records with the surname spelling of Laurence. Lawrence was known to have employed seven ticket-of-leave men between 1854 and 1882. He had a shipwright business in Bazaar Terrace, Perth, with his son, in 1867. As a former sailor, it is highly likely William worked in this type of ship-related industry.

No further information has been discovered relating to the rest of Dixon's life.

(All sources quoted in text.)

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First published in *Convict Links*, Vol. 37, No. 4, December 2023