

## **THE "MINDEN" CONVICTS FROM DEVONSHIRE**

Some time in the 1830s, my great-great-grandfather John Cawsey, an agricultural labourer from Tawstock, was drawn to Barnstaple by the start-up of the lace industry. Many of his children and grandchildren worked in the "Derby" lace factory during the following 70 years or so.

James Cawsey was in trouble from a very early age! In November 1843 (10 years old) he came before the courts for petty theft. Then in July 1846 he was imprisoned for a month for stealing apples. And in 1847, referred to as a "notoriously bad boy", he was before the court for assault on two old women but got off with a caution.

Finally, still only 15 years old, James Cawsey was subjected to a jury trial for a further offence of stealing apples. The "North Devon Journal" of 6th July 1848 described the trial at some length. The jury was in some doubt because of the flimsy evidence presented. There had been seven boys in the orchard. James was the only one caught by the sole witness who gave chase, but no apples were found upon him. The jury, under pressure from the Recorder, eventually found him guilty. The Recorder (probably William Praed) then passed the sentence that he be "transported beyond the seas for a period of seven years". The Recorder referred to his repeated convictions by the Borough Magistrates (more, perhaps, than the incidents I have discovered!).

It was reported that after the hearing, "The Recorder and many of the Council spent a very pleasant evening amid a profusion of the good things of the table". Did he give a passing thought to the men he had sentenced? Probably not.

Further information recently came to light from pages on the Internet relating to Western Australian convicts. There are full details of the voyages and the convicts on some 43 ships which conveyed convicts to Western Australia in the 1850s and 1860s. James Cawsey travelled on the "Minden"

In 1851 the Frigate "Minden" left Plymouth carrying 301 convicts bound for the Swan River Colony.

Seven of the 301 convicts were from Devon, as follows:

<b>Name</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Crime</b>
Edwin Bott	Tailor	15	Larceny
James Cawsey	Bricklayer	18	Larceny
John Drew	Labourer	19	Larceny
Robert Marshall	Servant	19	Larceny
John Parr	Thatcher	31	Sheep stealing
William Searle	Labourer	2	Bestiality
Henry Turner	Brushmaker	52	Fraud

All had received 7-year sentences.

The ships doctor, John Gibson, wrote an account of life on the "Minden" which gives fascinating detail about the 85 day voyage to Fremantle. The weather was fine, good health generally pervaded the ship, and after their working day and their supper the "Prisoners were encouraged in the Diversions such as Dancing, Music, Leap Frog and the Boxing Gloves" !(See the internet pages for full transcript)

On reaching Fremantle, the convicts were transferred to the newly built prison there. This prison still stands, and is a tourist attraction in Fremantle.

Various convict records have survived and are the original source of the table above. There are also physical descriptions of all the convicts. James Cawsey was described as 5' 0" tall, 'stout', with sandy hair, an oval freckled face with blue eyes.

Most of the 301 convicts on the Minden were in their 20s and 30s. The Devon men are statistically odd in that 5 of the 7 are aged 20 or under, and one is aged 52. Edwin Butt of Exeter was the youngest on the ship ( a mere 13 years old when he was convicted), and Henry Turner was, with one exception, the oldest. All the men are, by today's standards, very short. Edwin Butt, (still only 15 years old), was under 5' tall.

Many prisoners obtained their release early and entered the Western Australian community as much-needed workers. The Exeter men John Drew and Henry Turner were among these. Sadly this was not what happened to James Cawsey. Australia's first lunatic asylum was built in Fremantle and opened in 1865 specifically to accommodate convicts who had become deranged. James Cawsey was one of these, and he died in the asylum.

The old asylum is now the Fremantle Arts Centre, reputed to be one of the most haunted buildings in Western Australia. There are reports of at least three ghosts who walk the corridors both day and night! Perhaps one of these is "5' 0" tall, with sandy hair ....." !

#### **REFERENCES (North Devon Journal)**

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- 2. N.D.J. 27.6.1844 ( James Cawsey - theft of fruit )**
- 3. N.D.J. 16.7.1846 ( James Cawsey - stealing apples = court conviction and imprisonment)**
- 4. N.D.J. 22.7.1847 (James Cawsey - assault)**
- 5. N.D.J. 6.7.1848 (James Cawsey - stealing apples - sentenced to transportation )**
- 6. N.D.J. 6.1.1859 ( Ellen Cawsey; wife of John - abusive and violent language)**
- 7. N.D.J. 6.12.1860 (William Cawsey - assault)**
- 8. N.D.J. 7.3.1872 (John & Ellen Cawsey - assault case -husband and wife - in the "Union Inn")**
- 9. N.D.J. 20.7.1876 (William Cawsey - insulting a young woman)**
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- 11. <http://fremantleprison.com>**
- 12. [http://www.q-net.au/~ghosts/fremantle\\_arts\\_.htm](http://www.q-net.au/~ghosts/fremantle_arts_.htm)**
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- 15. "North Devon History, p157 - Deportation for boy thief" . Peter Christie**