

PARKHURST BOYS FROM DEVONSHIRE

Many Australians can trace their ancestry back to early immigrants, and for some a convict-connection is a badge of pride. Some families in Australia and also in New Zealand are descended from "Parkhurst Boys", a fairly short-lived scheme for the rehabilitation of young offenders, and just a few of these descend from boys sentenced in Devonshire.

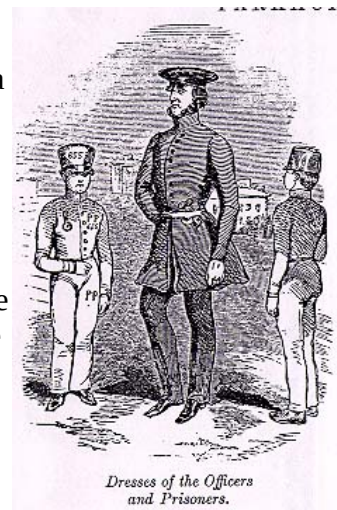
In Western Australia, the "Towton Cup" is an important fixture on the Perth Racing Calendar; in New Zealand, the "Minhinnicks" are a well-known Maori family; and in Queensland there is a Parliamentary Constituency of "Groom". The names "Towton", "Minhinnick" and "Groom" are those of young offenders who were exiled as "Parkhurst Boys" following their transportation sentences in Devonshire Courts. For them and many others the scheme was a success. But at the other end of the scale were a number of incorrigible boys who continued causing trouble.

In May 2002, the Devon Family Historian published "The Minden Convicts from Devonshire", my account of the transportation of seven Devon men to Western Australia in 1851. They included my great-great-uncle, James Cawsey. I later discovered that two of the seven, James Cawsey and Edwin Butt, were not officially classified as "convicts" but were "Parkhurst Boys" who were compulsorily exiled.

Until the 1830s there were many instances of young boys being sentenced to transportation. (In one of his articles in the North Devon Journal, Peter Christie described the case of one nine-year-old from North Devon.) But attitudes were changing, and the government decided that young delinquents should be treated less harshly.

The first step was taken in 1834, when the prison authorities in Van Dieman's Land (Tasmania) decided to set up a prison reformatory at Point Puer for the youngest convicts. One Devonshire boy was William Bickle of Devonport, sentenced at the age of 11 at Devon Assizes, to 7 years transportation for stealing a watch. He entered Point Puer in 1836. He was troublesome from the start, and never learned from the harsh punishments he received - lashes, long periods in solitary confinement, and a two-year extension of his sentence. In 1841 he was put into an adult work-gang, and his further offences were punished by a month on the tread-mill, and 12 months hard labour in chains. Eventually in 1843 he gained his freedom. He is now remembered as the "3 of Spades" in the "Pack of Thieves" published by the Port Arthur Visitor Centre in Tasmania.

In 1839, the government introduced the "Parkhurst Boy" scheme under which juveniles sentenced to transportation would be sent to a reformatory in Parkhurst jail on the Isle of Wight for training in a useful trade. Then they would be exiled, and instead of being imprisoned in the convict jails, they would be usefully employed. There was a system of classification based on the conduct record at Parkhurst. The best boys were free emigrants, or exiles who were given their freedom immediately upon arrival. These, and some less reliable boys known as "Colonial Apprentices", were sent to the very new settlements of "Swan River Colony" (Western Australia), "Port Philip" (Melbourne) and to New Zealand, while the worst tended to be sent to Van Dieman's Land and a harsher regime as de facto convicts.



In the years between 1843 and 1851 about 45 boys who had been sentenced in Devonshire courts , most when under 15 years old, were exiled as "Parkhurst Boys". They had all been sentenced to terms of transportation between 7 and 15 years, in the main for larceny. Of these 45, 19 were sent to Van Diemens Land (Tasmania), 12 to the Melbourne area (then part of New South Wales), 9 to the Swan River Colony (Western Australia), 2 to Sydney, and 3 to New Zealand. A great many managed to put their past behind them, and started a new life - a few with notable success. Some others remained incorrigible and their misbehaviour led to punishment and re-conviction. The following provides a few of their stories, grouped by their destination.

Western Australia (Swan River Colony)

Because the Swan River Colony was very young, and there was a shortage of labour, the Parkhurst Boys seem to have been more welcome there than elsewhere. Boys were sent there through the entire period of the Parkhurst Boys scheme and it tended to be those with better records. The Devonshire boys were Henry Towton, Edmund Brewer, Charles Pengelly, John Roan, Joseph Dyke, James Screech, Edwin Butt, James Cawsey, and Edward Callaghan.

The first of these was Henry Alexander Towton. Convicted in Plymouth of stealing money, he was one of the very first group of Parkhurst Boys. They were sent to Australia on an ordinary immigrant ship, on which they seem to have been treated similarly to the assisted migrants - though they were under the direction of a "guardian", Samuel Caporn. On arrival in Fremantle in 1843 Henry Towton was apprenticed as a farm boy. He had excellent reports and became a respectable citizen. He bought a tavern in Perth which he renamed "The No-Place Inn" (shown here). Soon afterwards his son George Andrew Towton was born.



George Towton, became well known in racing circles, both as a Jockey and, later as a Trainer of 6 winners between 1888 and 1897. Hence the Towton name is still well known in Western Australia, with the Towton Cup as part of the racing calendar, a thoroughfare Towton Way and a business called Towton Investments.

Edmund Brewer from Exeter and Charles Pengelly from Plymouth were also selected as "apprentices". It was said that they "had manifested, for a considerable period, stedfast dispositions to conduct themselves creditably, and to earn their subsistence, in future by honest industry. Each had a good practical knowledge of one, and most of them two, useful trades". They were in a group of Parkhurst Boys who embarked in the ship "Halifax Packet" at Cowes on the 20th August 1844.

Boys continued to be sent to the Swan River Colony on immigrant ships until about 1850, including Roan from Plymouth and Dyke from Exeter. However in that year, the convict prison was opened at Fremantle, and subsequent groups of Parkhurst Boys travelled on the convict ships and were administered by the prison. Screech, Butt, Cawsey and Callaghan were the four boys from Devonshire exiled during this period. One of these, James Screech, successfully settled into the Western Australian community. Screech had been sentenced at Exeter for ~Stealing a Pistol and Telescope with previous convictions. He settled in York, Western Australia, where he married and had seven children.

The story of the unfortunate James Cawsey, sentenced for stealing apples, and transported on the "Minden" in 1851, is largely covered in my earlier account; he died in the lunatic asylum in Fremantle. Another boy on the "Minden" was Edwin Butt. Edwin John Butt was born in Exeter in 1835. At his trial in Exeter in February 1848, still under 13 years old, it was said that he had been

six times in prison! This time he was charged with the theft of cheese from the Higher Market. He was sentenced to seven years transportation; a woman, Susan Sydenham, who was charged with receiving the cheese, was sentenced to "breaking stones". It seems likely that Edwin Butt left the Swan River Colony once he was free to do so, and probably settled in the Melbourne area, marrying in 1863.

New Zealand

Things were very different in New Zealand where there was a similar well-intended scheme. Two ships, the "St George" and the "Mandarin" took Parkhurst Boys to Auckland in 1842/3, some to be freed on arrival, others to be probationary apprentices. But the New Zealanders were outraged. New Zealand had never received "convicts" before and the inhabitants of Auckland were "in dread of thefts and robberies perpetrated by the delinquent boys".

The apprentices who had arrived in New Zealand were clearly not treated well. One boy wrote home to the Chaplain at Parkhurst, The Chaplain replied telling the boy "to be patient amid all the ill usage of an unthinking and temperate people". He referred to the fact that "the people in Western Australia think very differently from those with you, for they have received the boys most kindly". The newspaper "Daily Southern Cross" implored people to "act kindly and charitably by them" and had heard that "several of them were employed on the roads without shoes and stockings" and that there was concern about the manner in which they were lodged.

Protests from New Zealand were listened to in London, and no more boys were sent to New Zealand.

The 3 Devonshire boys who arrived in Auckland were John Dillon, Robert Hill, and John Minhinnick. John Minhinnick's story is most interesting. As a 13 year-old, probably from Tavistock, who was said to be a poor, neglected and deserted boy, he was brought before Exeter Assizes in 1839 for housebreaking, and was sentenced in Exeter to 15 years transportation. He had at least one previous conviction in 1837 - for stealing apples. He was transferred to Parkhurst, trained as a shoemaker, and sent to Auckland in 1842. He was put to work but absconded unsuccessfully several times before he finally "went bush" and joined the Maoris. There were (understandably) two sides of the story. The official report said that "he was indentured to a farmer, who soon reported that he was excessively indolent, dishonest, stole property, and was generally a bad influence". However the contemporary reports quoted above give some credence to the Minhinnick family's version - that "cruel Governor Fitzroy did not give the boys their promised freedom as the boys were too valuable for road-building; that John escaped from the primitive conditions of a blockhouse."

In 1846 he was leasing a half-acre of land in a Maori area south of Auckland and was 'trading in goods'. At some stage he met a Maori woman, Nihera. They married in 1853 and a large family resulted. A few years later they moved south into the Taranaki District - just as the Taranaki Wars began in 1860, provoked by Land Disputes between the Maori and the European Settlers. These wars continued intermittently until 1881, and John Minhinnick was certainly in the heart of the troubles. In 1863 a large Maori group attacked a house where Minhinnick was working as a carpenter and stole a printing press. Because Minhinnick understood the Maori language, he was a witness in a hearing at the Supreme Court at which one Maori was arraigned. In 1866 he attended a Compensation Court regarding his earlier claim for losses suffered in the Wars. He deposed that he was obliged to flee for his life and lost two mares and some pigs. He was awarded £41.



John and Nihera Minhinnick had about eight children and there are many descendants.

Melbourne (Port Philip, Geelong and Williamstown)

Williamstown, the start of Melbourne, was established in 1837 on Port Philip Bay. It was regarded as just the place for Parkhurst Boys. Many of these boys travelled out on ships carrying "Pentonville Exiles", a larger group of convicted felons who served part of their sentence in Pentonville and were then exiled (They became known as "Penton-villains"). Though these groups provided useful labour, they were not wholly welcome, and after a while the destination for Parkhurst Boys became Geelong, where a convict prison was being established. Many of the boys sent to the Melbourne area were given their freedom on arrival. Most were probably successfully assimilated into the community in the same way as other immigrants.

Five Devonshire boys went to Port Philip/Williamstown (John Hill, Charles Knight, John Pike, Charles Vennel and Edward Drewe) and seven to Geelong (Thomas Tossell, Thomas Bowden, Joseph Pine, Matthew Hunter, Joseph Rhymes, Thomas Bickford, and Charles Sansom)

We know something about two of the Port Philip boys, John Pike and Charles Vennel, who are known to have made good. John Pike's story has been well researched by a descendant. John Pike came from Axminster and his transportation sentence was for stealing a silver watch from William Pearce of Axminster in 1843. He was exiled to Port Phillip in 1846, continuing to Geelong, and obtained a position as a groom for a horse-breaker. He had one 'lapse' in 1847 when he was charged with 'neglect of duty'. In 1849 he married at Geelong; his family of seven children and their numerous descendants, remained in Geelong and many were successful in business and in sport.

Charles Vennell's misdemeanours can be blamed on his mother Mary. In late 1844, Mary Vennell remarried, to a farmer, William Axworthy. She already had a criminal record. Her son, Charles Vennell, had expected to go to sea, and had spent three years at the Greenwich Seaman's school. But Mary would not allow him to go to sea; instead he returned to Plymouth and became an errand boy for a jeweller. At his mother's behest he stole five gold rings. Mother and son were both tried and convicted. Mary was immediately transported to Van Dieman's Land, but Charles became a Parkhurst Boy and was exiled in 1847. Charles seems to have been one of the more reliable boys sent to Williamstown, receiving his Certificate of Freedom on arrival. He settled in the area, married in 1858 and had five children. Meanwhile, over in Van Dieman's Land his mother Mary had begun her life as a female convict. Still a convict, she married Thomas Talbot in 1847 (at that time, her previous husband William Axworthy was still living in Devon). Mary, now Mary Talbot, did not settle down. Her Ticket of Leave was revoked. She was convicted of larceny in 1853, and sentenced to 12 months hard labour. She eventually received a much delayed Conditional Pardon in 1856 and settled in New Norfolk, Tasmania.

East Coast (probably Sydney)

Just two Devonshire Parkhurst Boys were disembarked on the East Coast of Australia. William Henry Groom and Joseph Bendle, arrived in Australia in 1849. They had travelled on the "Hashemy", a convict transport intended for Port Philip . However at least one Parkhurst boy died from cholera on the voyage, and as a result of this, together with public protests at Port Philip in the dying years of convict transportation, the "Hashemy" was turned away. Sydney did not want the "Hashemy" exiles either, and it continued to the Moreton Bay convict settlement in Queensland. However (according to some sources) the Parkhurst Boys were allowed to disembark at Sydney. Groom and Bendle were both sent to an inland area of New South Wales beyond the Blue Mountains.

William Henry Groom had an extraordinary life. He was born in Plymouth and in 1846, as a 13 year-old baker's apprentice, he was convicted of embezzlement and sentenced to 7 years transportation. After his period in Parkhurst, he was exiled in 1849. He was soon working near Bathurst, near the Turon gold-diggings and he became politically active. An accusation of stealing gold led to his sentencing to road-labour for 3 years. Then in 1856 he migrated to Toowoomba, Queensland and rapidly prospered, becoming first mayor of Toowoomba in 1861, then proprietor of the Toowoomba Chronicle, and Member of the Queensland Parliament from 1863 being Parliamentary Speaker from 1883 to 1888. He played a major role in the growth of the Toowoomba area. In 1900 he was elected to the newly formed Federal Parliament. However he died while attending the first session of that Parliament in Melbourne, in 1901.



Tasmania (Van Dieman's Land)

It is generally recorded that this was the destination for the more troublesome Parkhurst Boys (though it did include a few with a good record at Parkhurst). The boys arriving in the convict settlement were treated as convicts and put into the work-gangs for a probationary period of a year or so after which they were promised their freedom - if they behaved. Images of Conduct Records for all convicts, including most of the Parkhurst Boys, are available on-line and indicate that some of the exiled boys were incorrigible. Their repeated offences were harshly dealt with and freedom was delayed.

Of the 19 Devonshire boys who were sent to Van Dieman's Land, the first five, in 1843, were on the "Mandarin" which continued to Auckland. Three of these boys were freed on arrival (Nicholas Hollock Brown, William Baker and John Dixon). The other two (David Williams and William George) were to be apprenticed. David Williams was very troublesome. He had been sentenced in Tiverton for stealing a purse containing 18 shillings. On arrival the 'apprentices' were accommodated in the Immigration Quarters in Hobart. Williams was described as 'disobedient, idle, and repeatedly absent without leave' and his misconduct (including kicking the Superintendent) was recorded. He then began a one-year period of probation, but after release from probation in 1844, further misconduct led to first 3-month, and then 6-month terms of imprisonment and hard labour. However he was 'discharged to freedom' in October 1846.

The other 12 boys travelled to Van Dieman's Land on convict ships between 1845 and 1850. None were 'free', and all were immediately dealt with as 'convicts' and put to work in gangs.

Not many of these boys made a success of life in Tasmania. One of those few was George Gregory.

George Gregory came from Crediton and in 1848 he was sentenced for "Stealing a sovereign on board a vessel at sea". He was exiled to Hobart in 1850 and was sent to a Gang at Launceston. There were several charges of misconduct and one led to his sentencing to 3 months hard labour in chains. However he did receive his Conditional Pardon, and in 1855 he married Emma Pearce. George and Emma Pearce settled in Westbury in Northern Tasmania, had four children, and descendants have remained in the Westbury area.

Three other boys had particularly bad records. These were Thomas Mullins, John Robertjohns, and James Adolphus Worth. The last of these did eventually settle down; his story is as follows.

James Adolphus Worth, then only 13 years old, was sentenced for 'embezzlement' in Plymouth in 1848 and arrived in Van Dieman's Land in 1850. His bad behaviour caused his 'Ticket of Leave' to be delayed until 1853. Then in 1854 he was tried in Hobart for 'receiving a pencil case' and was

sentenced to 3 years imprisonment in Hobart Gaol, and his Ticket of Leave was revoked. During his imprisonment he served 6 months hard labour in irons for disobedience of orders. He gained his freedom on completion of this sentence, in 1857 - 9 years after his original sentencing. This was the start of a new life. It appears that there was a short-lived marriage in Tasmania, with a baby, James Worth, who did not survive.. He then left Tasmania for Melbourne, where he met Christina Margaret Begbie. In 1863 they had a child, Arthur Adolphus Begbie Worth, but James and Christina did not marry until 1867, perhaps prevented by the earlier marriage in Tasmania.

John Robertjohns was in the very last group of Parkhurst Boys exiled to Van Dieman's Land on the "Oriental Queen" in 1853. He was also referred to as "Robert Johns" and was probably the son of Robert Johns, an agricultural labourer of Farringdon, near Exeter. In 1848, then 13 years old, he was sentenced at Exeter to 10 years transportation for stealing lead and this led to his transfer to Parkhurst. His prison report was adverse ("very indifferent, formerly bad"). His conduct record in Tasmania was poor from the very start and he experienced solitary confinement and hard labour. In 1857 he was belatedly given "Ticket of Leave" status, but his continued bad behaviour led to the revoking of his Ticket of Leave. However he was given his freedom in 1859 - perhaps because he had then served the 10 years of his original sentence.

Thomas Mullins, sentenced for stealing spoons from the "Cattle Market Inn" in Exeter was even worse, said to be "very bad, disobedient, constantly complaining of bad treatment, and inciting others to discontent". His many offences in the convict settlement led to solitary confinement, hard labour, and extended probation.

Conclusion

Inevitably this account has focussed on the most interesting and best documented stories of the best and the worst of the boys. There were many others who seem to have welcomed the opportunity that the Parkhurst scheme gave them to start a new life. There was James Chard, whose prison report was 'exemplary'; he was free by 1847, and married in Tasmania. James Hooper, from Woodbury, near Exeter, was one of those who left Tasmania at the earliest opportunity and probably settled in Melbourne.

Many people have become interested in the story of the "Parkhurst Boys", and there is a great deal of openly available material on the web, and in on-line and other archives; there are two books which give much detail, (referring to the boys as "Fagin's Children", and the "Artful Dodgers"). And there are individuals in Australia who have a personal interest in a particular boy. I acknowledge all these many sources, but they are too many to list. However I do thank Tony Cocks of Southampton University, who has prepared biographies of some 650 Parkhurst Boys for a PhD , and provided me with his material on several Devonshire boys.