

Transportation for life

The story of John Woolliscroft 1799-1869

John Woolliscroft was the son of Joseph Woolliscroft and Elizabeth Mills and christened at Cheadle, Staffordshire on the 23 Feb 1799. His father died in 1817. At the time he was farming at Peakstones, Alton, Staffordshire, a tenant of James Beech of Kingsley. Peakstones was located on the road (present day B5032) from Alton to Cheadle. Joseph left his estate to his wife including the tenancy of Peakstones. In 1819 John's mother Elizabeth remarried to publican and widower **Thomas Swetnam** at Alton in Staffordshire.^{1,2}

John married **Sarah Wright** in 1818 at Swynnerton, Staffordshire. The marriage was witnessed by George and Rosehannah Mills. The marriage appears to have been troubled and in 1827 John was in a relationship with someone else.

On the 2 August 1827 John Woolliscroft appeared with John Malbon (Malabone) at Stafford Assizes on two counts. Firstly for assaulting Solomon Smith on the Highway, robbing him of 7s 6d on the 15 June 1827 in Denstone Lane on his way back from Ashbourne. The newspaper report of the trial states that “*the prisoners were men of truly ferocious character and appearance and formed part of a desperate gang with which the neighbourhood had been infested*”. John Malbon had given a false statement after his arrest placing the blame on John Woolliscroft and his brother Thomas. In his defence John Woolliscroft brought forward a woman with whom he was living in a “*habitual state of criminal intercourse*”. The newspaper report of the trial states that the lady in question was aware John was a married man. However, her evidence was disregarded by the court as she was not of “*good character*”. Both Johns were sentenced to death for their crime.

The two prisoners together with Joseph Malbon the father of John Malbon were afterwards tried for breaking and entering a mill at Alton and stealing 4 bushels of Indian corn. Joseph Malbon was reprimanded. The Judge addressing himself to John Woolliscroft and John Malbon told them that they must “*expect to leave this country never to return to it*”. The reporter stated that “*on leaving the bar Wooliscroft made some most impudent observation*” to the court.³ The Derby papers reported that the two Johns had been sentenced to death.^{4,5}



[Drawing of two convict hulks? at quayside steps, one HMS Retribution, with colour notes](#)
by John Grieve © National Maritime Museum Collections

After the trial John and his partner in crime John Malabon were transferred to the prison hulk Retribution moored at Woolwich in Kent. The conditions in which the prisoners lived on the Retribution were abysmal. [More about prison hulks](#). The Hulk report stated that John was “*good and single*”.

John remained here until the 10 March 1828 when he was transferred to the William Miles. The ship set out seven days later from Woolwich with its cargo of 199 convicts. It anchored at Downs near Sandwich in Kent and eventually set sail for Tasmania on the 28 March.⁶



The William Miles 1827 by Miles Walters
courtesy of Bristol Museums, Galleries & Archives

The William Miles arrived at Hobart, Tasmania on the 29 July. During the voyage John became unwell with rheumatism and took a month to recover according to the daily sick book of convicts kept for the William Miles by Johnson the surgeon. He was discharge fit on the 2 August. Seven of his fellow prisoners had died during the voyage.⁷

John's behaviour was not exemplary after his arrival in Tasmania and appeared in court for several misdemeanours. On the 12 July 1831 he was appointed to the Field Police. In 1832 was fined for being drunk causing him to be unable to carry out his duties. As a consequence he had to wait an extra three months before receiving his conditional pardon. On two other occasions it was recommended that he was relieved from his post in the Field Police. One of these occasions absent for 7 days on a trip to Hobart. On the other occasion he did not stop a prisoner from escaping because of drunkenness. His conditional pardon was granted on the 6 January 1841.^{8, 9, 10, 11}

In 1845 John was an 'emancipist' he sought permission to marry and married **Mary Downes**, a widow, on the 1 December 1845. Mary was also an exile and had arrived in Tasmania in 1843. Mary died in 1847 and at the time she was described as a wife of a 'peasant'. John died in Hobart General Hospital in 1869.¹²

John's conduct record states he was from "*Cheadle Common - twice in prison Stafford Goal for stealing game once for 6 months. 3 and all ? at Croxted (Croxden), Staffordshire. Keeps a Public house and farm the Green Man. I lived with my mother. I had left home about 3 months*". The description book states he was from Dillon(Dilhorne), Staffordshire.

I have not found any evidence in England to confirm John lived at The Green Man in Croxden. However, in 1834 John's stepfather Thomas Swetnam was the publican at The Green Man in Croxden, Staffordshire. (*Whites History, Gazetteer & Directory of Staffordshire, 1834*). In 1851 when Thomas Swetnam wrote his will he was the landlord of The Green Man in Croxton parish. The Green Man and the associated farm passed to his son **Lewis Swetnam**. Lewis had married his step-sister **Ann Woolliscroft** (John's sister) in 1826. Lewis and Ann were living at The Green Man in 1851 with their young family and Ann's brother **George Woolliscroft**.^{13, 14}

A search of Ordinance Survey maps for the area between 1881 and 1955 from old-maps.co.uk show a Green Man Inn at Threapwood Head, on the B5032 at the junction with Sandy Lane which lies in Croxton parish. In 1964 when it was redeveloped and the name changed to "The Highwayman". The Inn a listed building and is currently being redeveloped into cottages to be known as "Cuthbert's Cottages". It was originally part of the Earl of Macclesfield Estate.



The Green Man c1891

After John was exiled his wife Sarah went to work as housekeeper for **William Charles** of Abbots Bromley, Staffordshire.

THE
HOBART-TOWN COURIER.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 2, 1828.

TRADE AND SHIPPING.

On Tuesday arrived the ship *William Miles*, 581 tons- Captain J. T. Simpson, from London 24th March, with 192 prisoners, (7 having died on the passage); Surgeon, A. Johnson R. N. The guard consists of a detachment of the 39th, under Lieutenant Kirkley, and Ensign Farmer. Passenger, Mrs. Kirkley.

The Hobart Town Courier (Tas. - 1827 - 1839) Saturday 2 August 1828 p 2

GOVERNMENT NOTICE, Colonial Secretary's Office, July 27, 1831. (No 141).
Mr. John Steward Spotswood has been appointed a Special Constable, police district of Richmond.

John Johnson, 205, Morley.
Martin Cope, 774, Andromeda.
John Cox, 470, Phoenix I.
John Woolliscroft, 845, William Miles,
Have been appointed to the Field Police; appointments of the last named three taking effect from the 12th inst.

John Southall, 890, Layton, has been appointed a Javelin Man and Constable, taking effect from the 1st of August next.

By command of
The Lieutenant Governor,
J. BURNETT.

The Hobart Town Courier (Tas. : 1827 - 1839) 30 Jul 1831: 2

I have found only one possible child for the couple, **Mary Woolliscroft**, who was christened at Checkley, Staffordshire in 1824. In 1841 Mary was a servant living in Hamstall Ridware, Staffordshire. She had moved to Liverpool, Lancashire by 1851 where she married mariner, **William Alexander Mason**. At the marriage Mary said she was the daughter of John Woolliscroft a farmer.^{15, 16}

Sources:

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2. "Staffordshire Parish Records," *Staffordshire Record Office, Eastgate Street Stafford ST16 2LZ*.
3. *Staffordshire Advertiser*, (Stafford, Staffordshire, England) 4 Aug 1827, p4, *William Salt Library, Staffordshire Record Office, Eastgate Street Stafford ST16 2LZ*.
4. "England & Wales, Criminal Registers, 1791-1892," [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: *Ancestry.com Operations Inc*, 2009. Original Data: Series HO 26 and HO 27; *The National Archives of the UK (TNA)*, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, England. Class: HO 27; Piece: 34; Page: 178
5. *Derby Mercury* (Derby, Derbyshire, England), Wed 15 Aug 1827, p2
6. *Australian Convict Transportation Registers – Other Fleets & Ships, 1791-1868* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: *Ancestry.com Operations Inc*, 2007. HO 11; Piece: 6
7. *Johnston, E., Surgeon, Copy of the daily sick book of the male convict Ship William Miles, for 10 March to 10 August 1828, The National Archives, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, England, ADM 101/75/1/2, Folio 4.*
8. *Tasmanian Archives*, <http://portal.archives.tas.gov.au/menu.aspx?detail=1&type=C&id=78524>
9. *The Hobart Town Courier* (Tas. Aus., 1827-1839) Saturday 30 July 1831
10. *The Hobart Town Courier* (Tas. AUS: 1827 - 1839)- Friday 29 March 1833
11. *The National Archives, Settlers and Convicts, New South Wales and Tasmania; (The National Archives Microfilm Publication HO10, Pieces 31, 52-64), The National Archives of the UK (TNA), Kew, Surrey, England. Class: HO 10; Piece: 56*
12. "Australia Marriages, 1810-1980," database, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org>). Pontville, Tasmania, Australia, reference ; FHL microfilm 1,368,287
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14. "1851 England Census," [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: *Ancestry.com Operations Inc*, 2005., *The National Archives of the UK (TNA)*, Kew, Surrey, England.
15. *Lancashire Birth, Deaths, Marriages*," <http://www.lancashirebmd.org.uk/index.php>. Liverpool, Our Lady & St. Nicholas & St. Anne Liverpool 2053LP/23/490
16. "Liverpool, England, Marriages and Banns, 1813-1921," *Ancestry.com*. [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: *Ancestry.com Operations, Inc.*, 2011., *Liverpool Record Office*. 283.NIC/3/42