

Charles Deacon – Corona Convict #9140 – Sue White

Charles Deacon was the oldest child of William Deacon (1824-1875) and Elizabeth Fuller (1828-1888) who were married in the parish church in Pangbourne, Berkshire on 8th November 1846. Charles was born in Pangbourne, Berkshire in 1849, and his baptism took place 12 Aug 1849. His father (William) was a labourer.

The 1851 Census shows William, Elizabeth and Charles living in Pangbourne and before the next census in 1861, 4 more children were born and the family were living at Pangbourne Marsh. It is possible at this time that Charles started to misbehave and become a bit wayward. There is an account in the *Bath Chronicle* on the 31st July 1862, of three boys in the town of Bath (one of them is a Charles Deacon) stealing apples. The town of Bath is a little way from Pangbourne but it is possible that, as our Charles would have been about 13 years old by this time, he had been sent there to work.

*“Monday, (Before the Mayor, D. Barrett, and J.W. Bush, Esq)
Three lads, named respectively Edward Collins, Anthony Lucas, and Charles Deacon, were charged by P.S. Chamberlayne with robbing a garden at the South Parade. – the officer was on duty in Manvers Street at Half-past one on Sunday morning, when he heard someone in Mr Barnes’s garden. He got over and found the three prisoners, who ran away, but Collins was found in an adjoining garden with a quantity of apples in his pockets, of the same description as those on a tree in the garden. The other two prisoners were caught near the garden. – Mr Barnes, Southgate Street, said the apples produced were his property. They were not ripe, and had been picked. – Sentenced to twenty-one days’ imprisonment with hard labour.”*

It is unclear to which prison the boys would have been sent, but it was common practise at this time for young prisoners to be sent to adult prisons. By December of the same year he is in trouble with the law again. This time for stealing a coat worth 1 shilling.

COUNTY BENCH, SATURDAY, DECEMBER 27.
(Before M. G. Thoyts, Esq., Chairman; Right Hon. J. R. Mowbray, M.P., R. Benyon, Esq., M.P., J. Hopkins, H. L. Hunter, W. Merry, and J. B. Monck, Esqrs.)
STEALING A COAT.—Charles Deacon, aged 13, was charged on remand, with stealing a coat, value 1s., the property of James Batten, on the 19th ult., at Pangbourne.
The complainant stated that on the day in question, he put his coat down in the stable connected with the "Cross Keys" Inn, and left it there. He missed it on the following morning, and in consequence of what he heard he went to the prisoner's home, and his mother gave up the coat to him.
Police-constable Curl stated that when the prisoner was given into his custody, he voluntarily said that he went into the stable and saw Webb, the carrier, there, and he also saw a coat lying there, but he did not take it then; he afterwards went and undid the fastening of the door, and took the coat, and went home with it.
The prisoner having been previously convicted of a larceny, he was sentenced to twenty-one days' imprisonment, and ordered to be detained three years in a reformatory school.



Reading Mercury 3 Jan 1863

16c Cross Keys Inn (picture taken May 2014)

After another 3-week stint in an adult prison Charles was sent to the Warminster Reformatory School in Wiltshire. This school was established in 1856 and was essentially a farm school where the inmates were expected to work as well as attend lessons.

"The Reformatory Regime

For at least the first fifty years of its existence the Reformatory was run on very clear, strict principles. The key feature was simply hard work mainly through farming although a few were occupied in tailoring, shoemaking and, later carpentry. Others were engaged in jobs around the Reformatory especially cleaning and cooking. The boys acquired their industrial training very much through practical working rather than any theoretical study. Basic education played a part but it seems to have been subsidiary to work and only later was it given a higher priority." (Wiltshire Reformatory for Boys by Ivor Slocombe, Hobnob Press, 2005.)

At the time when Charles was admitted, a Mr Hendley, with his wife as matron, was in charge of the school. Charles was probably only at the school for about a year and by March 1864, was in trouble with the law again. This time was serious, and though to us the crime will seem quite petty Charles was sentenced to 7

years transportation in the Wiltshire Assizes on 15 July 1864 for arson.

Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette, (England) Thursday 21 July 1864

“Charles Deacon was indicted for attempting to set fire to the Warminster reformatory school on 30th March last. Mr. RAVENHILL conducted the prosecution.

The prisoner, a boy of 15, was an inmate of the Reformatory. Adjoining the building is a hut in which 10 boys sleep, keeping their clothes in boxes there. On the evening of the 30th of March another boy of the name of Eden went to his box for his jacket, but it not being in his box he opened the box of the prisoner, when a flame burst out. Eden instantly shut down the lid of the box, which had the effect of putting out the fire, otherwise, in all probability, the whole school premises would have been consumed. The next morning the master of the establishment searched the prisoner’s box and found in it candles, grease, tow, and straw. It appeared that on that day the prisoner having done something wrong his Sunday pudding was stopped as a punishment and he then made use of some threats. After the fire, he was put in a cell and he then said he had lighted a candle and put in the box, but he had nothing to do with a fire which occurred there in February. The master of the school was called as witness, and when the prisoner was asked if he had any questions to put to him he said “All the good he is there is to encourage the boys to run all over the people’s ground, on Sundays, instead of going to school, to catch rabbits for his dog to kill.” – Guilty. – Seven years penal servitude.”

It appears that Charles spent about 2 years in prison in Britain before being transported to the colony in Western Australia. He possibly spent at least some of the time in Portland prison and this is where he may have acquired the skills to call himself a stonemason when he arrived in Western Australia, as I believe that at the time Charles was there, inmates in Portland were engaged in building a breakwater around the Island of Portland using limestone from a nearby quarry.

On 13th October 1866, Charles, along with just over 300 other male convicts, boarded the vessel *Corona* in Portland, bound for Fremantle, Western Australia. Charles was convict number 9140.

'The 1199-ton ship was built at Dundee in 1866. It was employed as a convict transport for Western Australia and left Portland England on October 16th 1866 bound for the Swan River colony. She carried the thirty fifth of 37 shipments of male convicts destined for Western Australia. The voyage took 67 days and the Corona arrived in Fremantle on December 22, 1866 with 79 passengers and 304 convicts.' (Erickson).

It is hard to imagine the conditions that the prisoners must have endured during the voyage but after just the first night at sea the surgeon recorded;

'Oct 17 Very rough during night, most prisoners sick, wine issued to all at 1.20pm. Much rain today.'

Even on board with probably no hope of escape it appears some of the prisoners decided to 'try their luck'. It may not have been an escape attempt but possibly just a means to enjoying more time on deck or it is also speculated that they could have been trying to get to the arms store. The surgeon reported;

'Nov 26. The ships carpenter on his rounds found two inches of between deck sawn through and several holes bored through the adjacent planks forming the shape of a square hatch, large enough for the passage of a man. On examining the upper deck no trace could be seen of a cut or abrasion of the plank so ingeniously had the same been filled with waste paper and soap and only by pushing a wire from below could the place be found. Corporal punishment was administered to the alleged culprits:- Hugh McGriskin 18 lashes; George Eagan 24 lashes; John Parker 24 lashes. The latter two then to be placed in hand and leg irons'

Fortunately, Charles does not appear to have been involved in this but it indicates something of the severity of punishment for misdemeanours etc. whilst on board.

On 22 December 1866, the crew and probably the prisoners would have had their first sight of Rottnest and the mainland of Australia.

'Dec 22. AM strong breeze, cloudy. Noon Rottness (sic) Island in sight, 12.30 pilot came aboard, 3pm anchor at Fremantle, 3.30 police boat arrived from shore.

Dec 23 Commandant arrived to inspect ship and arranged to disembark prisoners.'

As the Fremantle Prison, built by previous convicts, had opened in 1855, it is almost certain that the inmates on the *Corona* would have spent their first nights in Western Australia there.

Upon arrival at Fremantle a detailed description of each prisoner was recorded. (Convict Department Reel Number FCN42 Ref ACC 128/40-43.)

"Prisoner 9140 Charles Deacon. Date of conviction 15th July, 1864. Sentence 7 years P.S. Age 17. Height 5 foot and one-half inch. Hair brown. Eyes grey. Visage small. Complexion fair. Appearance slight. Marks WD, ED left arm; GT, CD and anchor on right arm; bracelets on both wrists. Trade stonemason. Single. No children. Can read and write. Religion C of E?"

It is almost certain that the WD and ED tattoos on his left arm are the initials of his parents William and Elizabeth Deacon. I think the CD on his right arm would refer to his own initials so I wonder who GT is? I assume the 'bracelets' are also tattoos.

The prisoners would have been put to work almost immediately. In fact, it seems that he was discharged on probation, along with another prisoner (#9167, J. Gregory) on the 5th January 1867 under the supervision of Assistant Warden Blagburn at Fremantle Prison. However, it was not long before Charles was in trouble again. By February of 1867 he refused to work and had money in his possession. On March 26 1867 at Fremantle he was convicted and given 3 months gang labour and money forfeited for this offence.

In June of the same year he attempted 'to make away with a sheet, the property of the Government.' This charge was heard in Perth on July 8 and he was sentenced to 5 days on bread and water.

August the 8th 1867 saw him in trouble again. This time for absconding from Claisebrook. This was obviously considered a serious offence and he was committed to 12 months in irons at Fremantle Prison. Because of this attempt to escape he was fined £2 to pay for his recapture.

During the year of 1867 while at Fremantle prison there are several instances of him being placed on the 'casual sick' list;- 16th September, 19th September, 30th September, 8th October, 14th October, 19th October and again on 28th June 1868 while at an 'outstation'. Was he malingering or genuinely sick? It's hard to say, but it was common practise that inmates placed on the 'casual sick' list would be placed on a 'rice pudding diet in lieu of potatoes'.

November 27th 1867, he was charged with 'smoking in Public Works' at Fremantle and forfeited his next Sunday dinner.

On February 7th 1868 he was convicted of 'disobedience of orders' at Fremantle and suffered one day on bread and water. Remember that he is still, at this time, subject to being bound in irons in accordance with his 12 months' sentence.

He appears to have kept a fairly clean slate for the next 12 months but on 17th March 1869 he is charged with 'refusing to proceed to work' with the consequence of 3 days on bread and water.

On 9th September 1869 he is discharged to Ticket of Leave and moved from the Swan Depot to the Bunbury depot. From 27th September 1869 to 12th September 1871 he worked at various trades, such as teamster, cook, labourer and sawyer in the Wellington and York districts which included Bunbury, Minninup and Preston. He served various employees at this time and his

wages ranged from a mere 10 shillings a week to 50 shillings per week.

At last, he received his Certificate of Freedom at Bunbury on 27th September 1871 after serving his full seven years sentence. He was then still a young man of only 22 years.

I believe Charles continued to work in the Wellington and also the Blackwood districts for the next couple of years from September 1871 until 30th September 1873 when he is convicted in Fremantle of absconding from his job of looking after a flock of sheep in the Blackwood area. This was considered a serious crime and he was given a three-month sentence in Fremantle prison. I have questioned the validity of this being considered a crime and the only answer I have been given is that he may have already been paid for the work and thus his absconding would be considered as stealing. He was discharged from Fremantle on 12th December 1873.

There is a gap between the times of his discharge from prison in 1873 till about 1887. He may have been working at Wainwrights in Geraldton in about 1887 but where was he in those 13 or 14 missing years? It is believed that he spent many years travelling around the northwest of Western Australia and he was known to be able to speak some Aboriginal dialects.

Charles' future wife, Annie Barry, was a servant girl who arrived on the *Lady Louisa* in March 1883 which had sailed from Liverpool to Dublin on the 20th December 1882 and thence to Fremantle, Western Australia. Her age is given as 18 on the ship's passenger list, however it is possible that she was as young as 16 when she travelled to Western Australia.

It appears that Charles is back in Geraldton working at Wainwrights in about 1887 and Annie has somehow found herself in Geraldton at the same time. On 4th July 1888, the couple were married in the Roman Catholic Church in Geraldton, Western Australia. Charles was about 39 years old and Annie about 23.

Charles is cited as a contractor on the marriage certificate and he may have still been working as such at the Geraldton based firm Wainwrights at the time.

However, between 1st February 1889 and 4th June 1892 Charles worked as a labourer for the railways and they lived in a Government hut in Northampton. Their first child George was born in Northampton in 1889. Unfortunately, George died while an infant in 1891. His sister Amy Florence Deacon was born in 1891 in Northampton. It is safe to assume that George died and was buried in Northampton. At the beginning of this employment Charles was earning 4/- per day but had a wage increase in March 1891 to 6/6 per day. He resigned from this position on 4th June 1892.

By 1893 Charles, Annie and Amy were living in Geraldton and their second daughter May Elizabeth was born there on 3rd August 1894.

In November 1895 Charles, describing himself as a farmer applied for and obtained a 100-acre lease of land in the Northampton district with a deposit of £12/6/0. The annual rent for this property was £2/10/0 and the lease was to run from 1st July 1895 to 30th June 1915. The land was situated on the Geraldton Northampton railway opposite the 17-mile post. Two more daughters, Ruby and Lily were born there and by 1901 the family were living at NarraTarra between Northampton and Geraldton.

From 1910-1916 the family resided in Chapman Road, Geraldton with Charles, aged in his early 60's, working as a labourer. Charles and Annie appear to have separated around 1925. Four years later, on 10th April 1929, Charles, aged 80 years, died of carcinoma of the stomach and was buried in the Anglican section of Geraldton cemetery. Annie died on 6th April 1941 aged 76.

Editor: Many thanks Sue for this great story on Charles Deacon. Sue has many more details about the family story which has been offered to the convict group for inclusion in the WA Convict Publication Project!