

Downham Riots 1816

A History by Elizabeth Howard.

At the end , on that hot August Saturday , on Norwich Castle hill , there was a delay. A rumour of a reprieve " and the execution not taking place until half past one , gave strength to that rumour . " But no urgent galloping horse, no urgent running man brought a reprieve . The due process of the law continued inexorably . A cynic might believe that a public hanging as late as half past one on a summer Saturday afternoon would guarantee to attract a bigger public audience , the better to educate them in the ways of the law versus the law breaker . Castle Hill was crowded with the curious and the ghoulish and the thrill seekers .

Daniel Harwood faced the hangman and " suffered with firmness the dreadful sentence of the law ". The Cambridge Chronicle went on to say that Harwood aged 22, " had been lead away by bad example and in a moment of intoxication . " Harwood " was to have been shortly married , and that the unhappy object of his choice is now pregnant by him . " Thomas Thody the second of the Downham rioters held in Norwich Castle " when brought out , evinced great fear , which he expressed by convulsive shrieks and was obliged to be supported by several men . ". He left a wife and two children .

There had been at least two attempts to halt the executions. Thos. Wm. Coke of Holkham had written to Chief Justice Vicary Gibbs suggesting that the men , Thody and Harwood had been of previous good character and would certainly regret their actions and return to a quiet life . Pathetically Daniel Harwood`s father Thomas had written to suggest that this was a tragic case of mistaken identity , his boy had been christened Dan , as the parish register of Gooderstone would show , not Daniel . He would get the parish register to the Chief Justice to prove it . And there was a long 70+ signature petition from the townspeople of Downham asking for clemency . Privately , Chief Justice Vicary Gibbs reported to Coke of Holkham that these two had to hang , but the other rioters would be reprieved . It was reasonable . It was exemplary. No blood had been shed, but the townspeople had been terrified and their property had been stolen and severely damaged . The two would act as a deterrent to others who might consider rioting and smashing up and stealing the property of law abiding citizens. The acquitted would go home and feel lucky to be alive.

The magistrates had faced the rioters and attempted to calm them with offers of an increase in wages and a decrease in the price of bread .In fact the magistrates , Pratt, Hare and Dering had just escaped with their lives . They had been at their usual Monday meeting in the Crown Inn when the mob fell on the town . They got out and hid in Dr Wales house in the High Street and in other neighbours houses and gardens But crucially, they had managed to alert Captain William Lee`s Upwell Yeomanry Cavalry who arrived at around 5 in the afternoon of the first day of the riot . The Upwell Yeomanry Cavalry though heavily armed had also behaved in a disciplined way and no lives had been lost . Finally the rioters had dispersed loaded with free beer and free bread, and other food . There were no winners and no losers .

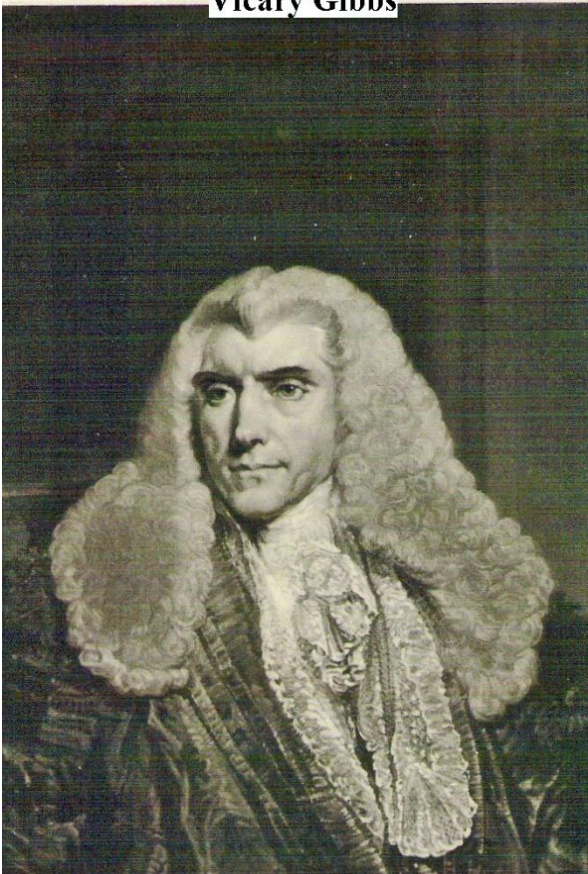
The Downham riot was not unique . Various seemingly unrelated events culminated in two years of terrible weather , freezing winters , cold wet summers , and Europe recovering from the Napoleonic wars faced extreme food shortages. Add to that the extraordinary eruption of

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Mt Tambora a "super-colossal event" the ash of which reduced the earth's temperature by 1 degree. 1810-1819 were reckoned to be the coldest since the 1690s. May and June 1815 suffered heavy rainfall which in turn had the effect of ruining the harvest. Because of or despite the ruined harvests, it was also in 1815 that the Government of the day passed the Corn Laws. These were designed to protect the cereal growing landowners from the effects of imports of cheap foreign cereals. The riots started in London in the same year.

vicary GIBBS



But it was not just the Food riots, in Suffolk in 1815 farm machinery was broken, in October there were disturbances in Hull when the seamen went on strike, and in November the Bilston Collieries also went on strike. More machine breaking went on in Huddersfield in 1816, there were food riots in Suffolk, Essex, Cambridgeshire and Norfolk in the first half of 1816 and more riots from Frome in Somerset to Birmingham in the north; in October it was the turn of South Wales, December saw the Spa Fields riots and finally in 1819, the horrific Peterloo massacre took place.

The Times of 30th May 1816 collects reports from Cambridge, Bury, and Norwich. The article writer seems to imply that the same rioters moved up the country from Bury toward Ely and Littleport and on to Southery and finally to Downham. He speaks of "a most desperate body of insurgent fen-men." as if they were a different species.

The fenmen assembled at Littleport and made a bee line for the home of the Rev Mr Vachel a magistrate, "who stood at his door armed with a pistol, threatening to shoot anyone who should attempt to enter, when three men rushed upon him and disarmed him. He immediately ran upstairs to relieve his wife and two daughters who with very slight covering, made their escape with him, running nearly all the way to Ely, where they arrived safe after midnight." A group of rioters then marched a miller and his wife to the bank and demanded £50. Further damage was done before the group was split into the Ely and the Littleport "banditti" The Royston volunteer cavalry broke up this disturbance but not before shots were fired on both sides, the rioter who shot a soldier wounding him, was himself shot dead, and a second rioter was shot in the face, from which wound he subsequently died. This fatal gunfight resulted in the rioters splitting up and disappearing.

The Upwell troop of yeomanry cavalry was sent to Southery "the magistrates and inhabitants expecting another visit from the insurgents of Southery and its neighbourhood, in

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consequence of their demands not being complied with . They insisted on 2/- per day for their labour, and to be paid for Monday and Tuesday (the days they were rioting at Downham) ; also fixing their price for bread , flour etc . When the troop arrived, (about seven in the evening) the special constables were on the alert and several were immediately taken into custody .”

” On Saturday morning seven persons were fully committed for trial ; and on Sunday and Monday last many more prisoners were brought in , what have not been examined . The Upwell troop were ordered to Wisbech on Saturday morning to meet the March and Whittlesey troops , the magistrates and inhabitants being fearful of outrages ; but all is at present quiet there . ”

The local papers were having a field day . On 24th August 1816 , you could buy ” This day is published A REPORT on The Trials of the Rioters at Downham and Feltwell . At the late Norfolk Assizes . To be had of the Printers of this Newspaper and all their Agents. ”

”Gibbs’s unpleasant voice, disagreeable temper, and jejeune pedigree presented formidable handicaps at the start of his career. He initially employed himself as a special pleader, in which capacity he developed a good professional reputation, and was called to the bar in 1783. He proved successful, if acidulous, as an advocate, and powerful in marshaling evidence”. Born in Exeter son of an apothecary 1751, educated Eton , Cambridge . Retired 1818 , died 1820 .
Wikipedia ; DNB

Many column inches were devoted to the trial before Lord Chief Justice Gibbs . ” William Bell, Amelia Lightharness and Hannah Jarvis were indicted for having on the 20th inst. together with various other persons riotously and tumultuously assembled at the parish of Southery from whence they proceeded to acts of theft and violence in the town of Downham
.....Frances Wiseman stated that she kept a pork and sausage shop : that in the afternoon of the 20th a mob assembled in front of her house : that she observed the prisoner Amelia Lightharness , looking in at the shop window , and that immediately afterward the same prisoner opened the latch of the door and brought in several of the mob , telling them `this was the shop for good pork ` . The witness further stated that her shop formed part of her dwelling house : that Amelia Lightharness was the first that entered and at her instigation the mob ransacked the shop of the witness taking away forcibly a quantity of pork and sausages . The shop window was broken by the violence of the people.”

”Maria Palmer, Wm.Buxton and Zachariah Stebbing severally corroborated the first witness and the latter proved that all the above named prisoners entered the shop of Mrs Wiseman and concurred with the acts of violence there committed . Bell and Jarvis severally produced evidence of good character . Verdict – All Guilty .”

” Thomas Thody , Charles Nelson , Daniel Harwood, the same Hannah Jarvis, Elizabeth King, Margaret Jerry and Elizabeth Watson . These prisoners were indicted as forming part of the

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same unlawful riotous assembly at Southery as before mentioned and for proceeding to assault William Spinks , at Downham aforesaid , and stealing from his person a certain quantity of meal and flour . William Spinks stated that he was an apprentice to Mr Baldwin , a miller at Downham and at the time of the riot had charge of his mill. That on 20th May at about two in the afternoon , he saw a large number of persons approach the mill whilst he was on the road alone about a furlong off ; that upon his coming up to them , they demanded of him the key of the mill , which he delivered to them through the impulse of fear ; that the persons so assembled had sticks and cudgels ; that upon him delivering the key , they proceeded to lay violent hands on the meal , flour and sacks found therein , some part of which they threw about and destroyed and the other part they carried away with them . This witness together with George Gillingham , Susan Stebbing, Pleasance Laws, and William Baldwin or some of them identified the persons of all the prisoners , and proved that Charles Nelson was the first who entered the mill . Verdict – All Guilty .”

“The same Thomas Thody , the same Daniel Harwood, the said Amelia Lightharness , William Youngs, Edward Mellon, and William Galley were indicted as part of the same unlawful and riotous assembly at Southery and having proceeded to Downham , for breaking open the dwelling house and shop of Samuel Bolton , a butcher there, and stealing therein and carrying away a certain quantity of pork the property of the said Samuel Bolton, the said Samuel Bolton and another being in the house and being put in fear . Samuel Bolton stated that on the said 20th May he had given the mob some meat , in the hope of pacifying them ; that about five o`clock in the afternoon of the same day , they came in a large body to his house and demanded more which he said he was unable to give them . Upon this occasion Thody , Harwood and a man named Fendyke who is still at large, appeared to be the ringleaders . Harwood said if witness did not give them more they would have all there was in the shop . To this menace uttered by Harwood the witness replied , ` he would be damned if they should ` , and immediately closed and bolted the door , and went toward the kitchen for the purpose of finding two guns , with which he meant to defend his property . Before he had reached his guns however , the mob forced open the door and stripped the shop of all meat to the value of £5 or £6.”

“These prisoners were all identified as taking an active part on this occasion by the concurrent testimony of the last named witness and Thomas Bolton , Zachariah Stebbing, and Ann Springfield . Verdict – All Guilty .”

“ The same Thomas Thody, the same Daniel Harwood, Frances Porter , John Bell and John Blogg were indicted as parties to the same unlawful and riotous assembly , and for breaking open the dwelling house of John Parkinson in Downham aforesaid, no person being therein , and feloniously stealing and carrying away a quantity of flour and various articles of wearing apparel found therein . Hannah wife of the said John Parkinson who is a tailor and baker and keeps a general shop at Downham , stated that being terrified at the appearance of the mob , they had, on the said 20th May last , shut their shop , and retreated to the house of a neighbour . The mob did proceed to Mr Parkinson`s house and shop as was expected and

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after they were gone away , the witness with her family returned , upon which they found the house had been broken open and they missed from the shop there, waistcoats , shawls , shoes, flour and other articles .”

” The evidence of the last witness corroborated by her daughter Charlotte Parkinson , Richard Gamble , Thomas Mallett Bailey , Wm . Gamble , Charles Smith , and James Weston, was sufficiently clear to establish the charge against all the prisoners except John Bell who had not been seen in the house but had been afterwards met with a ham under his arm . The latter prisoner was therefore acquitted and the others found – all Guilty .”

” John Stearne was indicted for larceny only , he having on the said 20th May , demanded cheese of William Oakes of Downham . Wm Oakes stated that the prisoner came with a mob and demanded cheese , which he delivered to him through fear , observing at the same time that he himself wanted it as much as they did . Samuel Johnson , landlord at the Crown Inn, at Downham stated, that on the same day the prisoner Stearne brought a cheese to his house and divided it amongst the mob . Verdict – Guilty.

”The same John Stearne , the same Thomas Thody , and John Pearson , were indicted for breaking open the Crown Inn, in Downham , with other persons, for assaulting the said Samuel Johnson , the landlord , and for stealing from his person , meat, flour and other provisions . Mr Johnson identified the persons of the prisoners Thody and Pearson as having been the foremost of the party who first broke in by force , but the prisoner Stearne was not observed by him until he (Stearne) produced the cheese , which was sometime after the forcible entry . Stearne was therefore acquitted. The other prisoners were both found Guilty .”

”In addressing the Jury upon the several indictments for riot , the Chief Justice very clearly explained the law to them , that in tumultuous assemblies of this nature , not only the parties which commit any acts of violence are answerable to the law, but likewise all persons who by joining a mob give sanction to their unlawful proceedings were in the eye of the law equally guilty of any outrage which was committed by any of such mobIn allusion to the good characters which most of the prisoners adduced in their favour, with respect to the honesty and peaceable habits of their lives, the Judge emphatically observed, that nothing could more clearly show the necessity of suppressing such disorderly and mischievous proceedings as were subject of these trials . Persons who had heretofore acted honestly and had been good members of society , had now by deluding one another in the vain hope of redressing those grievances which their proceedings only tended to aggravate , evinced their peaceable dispositions by unlawfully assembling to the terror of well disposed persons , and their honesty by forcibly seizing the property of others .

” Having convicted the ringleaders at Downham , sufficient had been done to answer the purposes of the prosecution on the part of the Crown., which could only be to show persons who were disposed to join in such tumultuous proceedings , that these transactions cannot take place with impunity , for a day of reckoning must come sooner or later . ”

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The Chief Justice now proceeded to pass sentence of transportation for seven years on John Stearne who had been indicted and convicted of larceny onlythe charge against him not having been laid capitally .

This being done the following prisoners , who had been capitally convicted of rioting , 16 in number (viz, William Bell, Amelia Lightharness, Hannah Jarvis, Thomas Thody , Charles Nelson , Daniel Harwood , Elizabeth King, Margaret Jerry , Elizabeth Watson , Lucy Rumbelow, William Youngs, Edward Mellon, William Galley , Frances Porter , John Blogg and John Pearson), were called before his Lordship to show cause why sentence of Death should not pass against them to die according to Law . The Chief Justice, then , in a very impressive manner passed that solemn sentence against them . His Lordship stated that on account of the good characters which some of them had borne , it would afford him high satisfaction if circumstances should appear to justify him in recommending their cases for a relaxation in the severity of their punishment . Nevertheless he wished them not to be deluded into any ill founded security . There were among them some who had excelled their fellows , and had stood foremost in the execution of their misguided and wicked actions . To these he could hold out no hope . His Lordship concluded by exhorting them all to use well the short time which might remain to them in this world , and to make their peace with Him before whom they must soon appear in the next ."

"Of the above 16 prisoners who received sentence of death , only two were left for execution, viz. Thody and Harwood ". All the others were reprieved . Reprieved is not the same as acquitted or discharged . " After the ringleaders had been tried and convicted the following minor offenders were discharged on giving security for their good behaviour , viz. .John Jerry, Harrison Bone, and John Bowers .. "

Apart from these minor offenders, the remaining 14 sentenced to death and reprieved , were dealt with quickly and harshly. Of the Hilgay rioters William Young got one year`s hard labour . The Southery two Stearne and Bell got 7 and 14 years transportation . Of the Downham rioters Lucy Rumbelow got 6 months hard labour, Elizabeth Watson , at the age of 49 , got a year`s hard labour as did Margaret Jerry and Elizabeth King . The harshest sentences were given to Amelia Lightharness aged 23 , Hannah Jarvis, aged 36 , widow , and Charles Nelson , all of whom got Transportation for life .

The transportation of convicts to Australia was big business and many shipowners contracted their vessels to the Government . Ships of the Royal Navy used as transports tended to be in the final seaworthy years of their lives . Charles Nelson sailed out on the Shipley with John Pearson He was fortunate and sailed from Woolwich on 20th November 1816 just a matter of months after the August sentencing in Norwich . They may well have been held in a prison hulk on the river Thames during that 3 month waiting period . For the women Amelia and Hannah , they had to wait almost a further year before they were embarked on the ludicrously named ship Friendship . They are reported removed from Norwich Castle in June 1817 and put on board the Friendship" now at Deptford awaiting orders to sail to the Bay." .

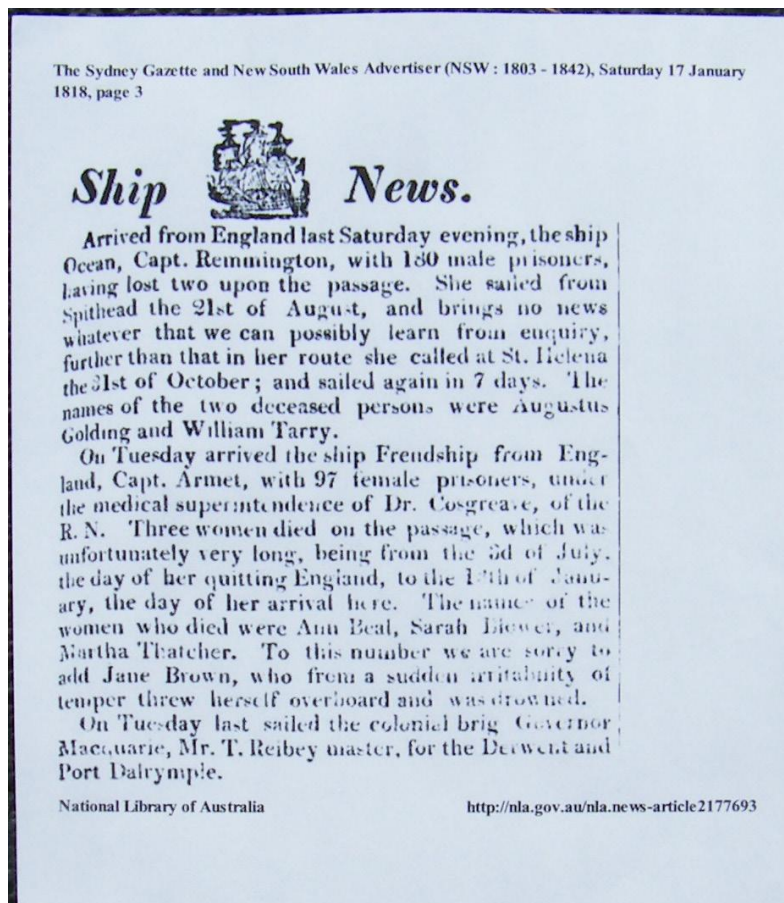
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The convict ship Friendship was not the First Fleet ship of 1788 of the same name , that had been beached for want of healthy crew to operate her , on Batavia . This second Friendship was built in the Thames in 1793 of 430 tons burthen.

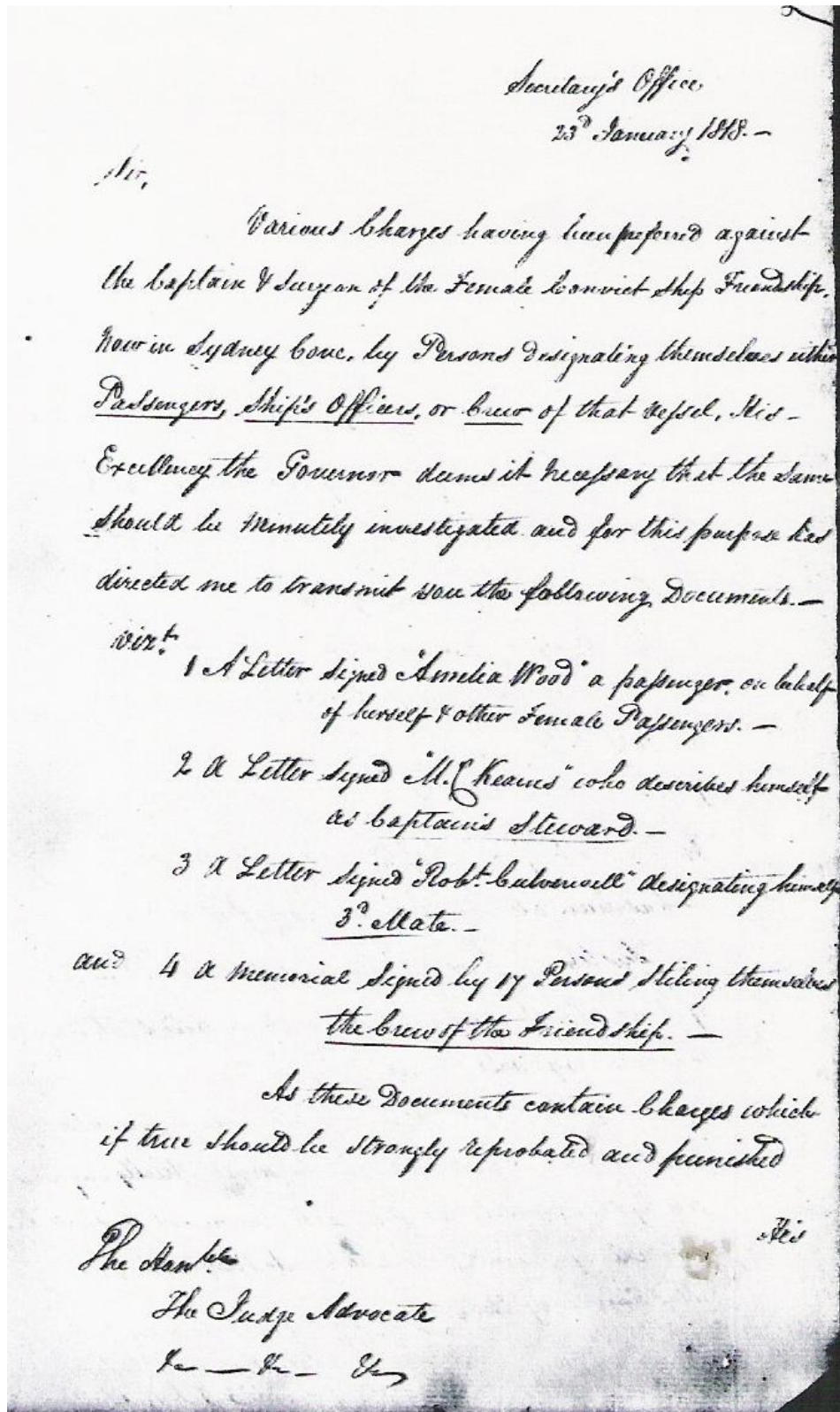
The Shipley had a very smart crew and master and for Charles Nelson and John Pearson , a good ship`s surgeon in George Clayton . Clayton managed to get all convicts to Australia in reasonable health and without too many punishments . In fact he writes in his journal that he was able to release most of the convicts during the journey of one and then both leg irons . Nevertheless 176 days with or without leg irons was a daunting prospect for convicts and guards alike . Charles Nelson and the Shipley arrived at Sydney on 20th August 1817 and the last sight of him is in 1844 when he finally got his pardon . Twenty eight years after his conviction and sentencing in Norwich , he was finally a free man again .

Bad luck followed Amelia and Hannah all the way to Australia . They arrived in Sydney on 14th Jan 1818. Governor Macquarie wrote in his journal that Friendship " arrived 7th Jan re-quarantine on suspicion of contagious diseases . " and more " re-arrival with female convicts with reports of prostitution on board . " and further " 26th Feb charges were brought against Capt Armet and Peter Cosgreave the surgeon . " By 20th Feb Amelia and Hannah were embarked on the Duke of Wellington for yet another voyage into the unknown , this time and finally to Tasmania .



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Colony, which on that day had attained its thirtieth anniversary. We understand that His Excellency the Governor, in celebrating an event in which all present necessarily felt much interest, was pleased to pay a handsome tribute to the memory of the late Admiral Phillip.

In the evening a Ball was given by Mrs. Macquarie to a numerous party, which was continued with spirit to a late hour. We were particularly gratified with a likeness of Governor Phillip (executed by Mr. Greenway, who felt much pleasure in this opportunity of celebrating the memory of the Vice Admiral, who had ever been his steady friend and patron), suspended at one extremity of the room, in a wreath, supported by two banners; one being that of Vice Admiral, and the other containing the following inscription: "In Commemoration of the 30th Anniversary of the Colony of New South Wales, established by ARTHUR PHILLIP, whose virtues and talents entitle him to the grateful remembrance of his Country, and to whose arduous exertions the present prosperous state of the Colony may chiefly be ascribed."

Yesterday morning, 28 of the female prisoners arrived in the Friendship were landed; 16 of whom having husbands in the colony were allowed to join them, and the remaining 12 went as servants into various families. Thirteen others, who were afflicted with scorbutic diseases, were sent to the General Hospital; and 56 were transhipped from the Friendship to the Duke of Wellington, to be conveyed to Hobart Town, together with 28 artificers and mechanics, sent from this settlement to be employed on the Government works there.

In the Gazette of Jan. 10, we mentioned Captain Anson's report of his having taken in, off Madeira, a boat containing six Spaniards and an American sailor, whom he received on board in an almost perished state, and afterwards transhipped on board an American vessel to be landed at Bonaville. They arrived, as mentioned in the former account, to be sent from South America, as well as four from the enemy's island of St. Vincent, transmitted to Captain Anson by the American vessel, and stated the 15th of August—a week commencing by a declaration that he would have made the particulars of their case known to the world, had he not been prevented by a vessel of his companions. Being taken on board the Friendship, the writer declares they arrived in a state of slavery at Buenos Ayres, with the exception of one, who remained to serve with the patriots; but being at length forced to comply, they were a sent on board the Esmeralda private schooner to Buenos Ayres (more probably Tuckerman) Messrs. Furness (a Frenchman) commander, each receiving an amount of 25 dollars. The commander, the better

(The middle paragraph of the above cutting , reads " Yesterday morning, 28 of the female prisoners arrived in the Friendship were landed ; 16 of whom having husbands in the colony were allowed to join them , and the remaining 12 went as servants into various families . Thirteen others who were afflicted with scorbutic diseases were sent to the General Hospital ; and 56 were transhipped from the Friendship to the Duke of Wellington to be conveyed to Hobart Town together with 28 artificers and mechanics , sent from this settlement to be employed on the Government works there ".)

There are four further sightings of Amelia Lightharness . Firstly she married in 1820 a Samuel Cash in Hobart . Female convicts in the female Factories were offered to the men of the colony who could drop a handkerchief or similar at the feet of the female convict they had

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chosen . But then her ticket of leave was taken from her in 1823 because of " immoral conduct and living in a disorderly house ." Clearly her marriage to Samuel Best was not long lasting nor a success . Her ticket of leave was finally restored in 1832 and she died in 1834 . She would have been about 40 years old . Hannah Jarvis did a little better . Internet posted family histories in Australia indicate that her two children born circa 1801 and 1804 in Norfolk finally joined her in Tasmania . She died in the newly named New Norfolk , in 1853.

For the women who rioted , the punishment was vastly disproportionate to the crime . They never again achieved their freedom and had to endure one of the longest , hardest voyages of any having to call in at St Helena for desperately needed water and supplies before sailing on to Sydney . And as if that was not the worst, their captain and surgeon were capable of acts of abuse against a captive group of women . Is it any wonder that Jane Brown "threw herself overboard and was drowned . " Despair was the most likely reason not as given in the Ship News, " from a sudden irritability of temper ." If Chief Justice Gibbs and the law of the land believed that hanging was the worst punishment , they should have researched the lives of those transported , for women for the most part it was a far worse punishment than death .

And of the rest ? John Pearson who travelled with Charles Nelson on the Shipley to Australia , does not appear again in any record . The two , John Stearne and William Bell both from Southery, who were sentenced to 7 and 14 years transportation seem not to have made it onto a ship . Australia`s wonderful convict database has no sighting of either of them . Perhaps their sentences were commuted to imprisonment here . Of the other names, Lucy Rumbelow seems to have survived to 1861 still living locally ; Elizabeth King, Elizabeth Watson and Margaret Jerry are glimpsed in the first census living locally quiet poor lives . Of the men , John Shinn appears in the 1841 census living in Downham. Harrison Bone is a shepherd living in Brancaster, Spencer Rayner, William Galley , and William Youngs live in the villages around Downham , heads down , unremarked and unremarkable. .

The riots had unsettled the Government and over the next twenty years , a gradual humanising of the law and ideas of welfare for the poor started to emerge . By 1834 the Poor Law Amendment Act had been passed. The destitute poor were to be housed in Union workhouses , but they were also to be fed, sheltered, clothed , to have a rudimentary education for children , some medical care, and protection and work . By the mid 1840s the dreadful Corn laws had been repealed , but not before nearly one third of the population of Ireland had died of starvation or been lost to emigration ; in fact parishes all over the country had forcibly emigrated their largest and poorest families.

Downham survived the mob of the "insurgent fenmen" and , in modern parlance, maybe lessons had been learned , maybe a distant memory of the sudden terror of an armed mob in the town inclined the magistrates and property and landowners to be a little more understanding in the future . And in a small way the tradesmen could hold their heads up in pride for having created a petition signed by 70+ of them asking the Chief Justice for clemency . . Perhaps the ordinary man in the street knew not only about being hungry , but about the terrors of transportation and the loss of freedom , the inescapable exile .

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Sources: National Archives , Kew

British newspaper archive : AJPeacock , Bread or Blood , 1965: National Portrait Gallery ,
London : National Archives of Australia : TROVE .