

TRANSPORTED! FOR STEALING AT CHIPPING

"one Printed Cotton Gown of the value of sixpence".

Elizabeth Thomas was not a Chipping girl, but she was sentenced to be "transported to some place beyond the seas for seven years next". A dreadful fate for a girl of 20, and she was making history with the first settlers in Australia, in 1788, amongst the naked Aborigines.

"Some place beyond the seas" is significant. Banishment from the kingdom was expressly forbidden by Magna Carta and Common Law, but was legalised by Parliament in 1597. Transportation to America was soon organised and continued until Independence in 1776. Then the convicts were stored up in derelict ships (hulks) while Government tried desperately to find some other far-away place to send them. West Africa was considered, but was notorious as "the white man's grave". Captain Cook and his naturalists had landed briefly at "Botany Bay" on the first-ever sail up the east coast of Australia in 1770. The decision to send convicts to this totally unexplored land on the other side of the planet shows the urgency of the problem. There was also a hint of Empire building and a naval base in the Pacific, a hope of finding tall trees for ships' masts and a definite plan to grow and weave flax for sails.

We know little about Elizabeth Thomas until 1786/7, when she was 19 and was twice in the Lancashire Quarter-year Sessions courts. From grimy and fragile documents in the Lancashire Record Office the story seems to be that Elizabeth was charged at the Wigan session on 26th September 1786. She was found guilty by the jury of stealing a white apron and a white shawl, value four pence, the property of Ann Freeman of Aughton (near Ormskirk) and of absenting herself without consent from the service of the Honourable Richard Jones, Esquire. She was sentenced to three months hard labour and a private whipping at the Rogue's Post on the day of her release, which suggests that this was not her first offence. A certificate shows the cost of prosecution as three guineas. It seems that she served this sentence at the Preston "House of Correction" and from the record of prisoners there it seems that she was soon back in custody, detained by Robinson Shuttleworth Esq on 25th December 1786 "on Suspicion of stealing a printed Cotton Gown, at Chipping, the property of Jennett Sturzaker". The following day John Sturzaker of Chaigley appeared personally before JP Shuttleworth and promised to appear at the next session at Preston to give evidence, or forfeit £20. At the January 1787 session Elizabeth pleaded guilty and was sentenced to transportation. The costs of prosecution were £3-8-2d, which included bringing the Sturzakers to the court at Preston.

Sturzaker is not a local surname. John must have been worth £20, but we have found no trace of him in the Land Tax or other records. Perhaps he was not a permanent resident. This was a busy time in this area because since 1785 the ancient corn mill (now Kirk Mill chair works) was being redeveloped as a cotton spinning factory and there were strangers about, some of them from South Lancashire and North Wales. Perhaps it was the hope of prosperity which had attracted Elizabeth Thomas.

The Preston "House of Correction" was also due for redevelopment. When Elizabeth was there it was a small and wretched place in a remnant of the Franciscan Friary built about 1221 in the fields below what we now call Friargate. It was well known to John Howard, the prison reformer, and was already condemned as a gaol, and was superseded two years later by a new model prison on the site we know today.

It is one of the quirks of history that often more information has survived about those people who were involved with the law than about the far greater number who lived and served their community without being recorded on paper. This is certainly true for the convicts transported to Australia, and Elizabeth's story was passed on to us by Joe Harvey, one of her many descendants, when he visited Chipping in September 1994. His full story is in our Society's library and we continue here with a summary from it and from other sources, especially the book "The Fatal Shore" by Robert Hughes which is also in our library.