PAST FORWARD ESSAY WRITING COMPETITION 2025: **RUNNER UP**

JOHN MELLING

AN ILL-FATED BOTTLE OF BRANDY

By Richard de Grijs (Sydney, Australia)

Running down Bay Horse Yard, John Melling knew he was in trouble. What should have been a quick snatch-and-grab had gone horribly wrong. Who would have expected William Cox, landlord of the Golden Lion Inn, to be working in his cellar at 11 o'clock at night? Cox had seen John grab a bottle of brandy, but the publican wouldn't let the eighteen-year-old get away that easily, so he gave chase. And now, two or three coppers had joined the pursuit… Dropping his precious catch, John desperately looked for a way out of the tangle of buildings, but there was none. The officers quickly cornered the petty criminal and made their arrest.

That dramatic chase of 3 April 1839 triggered a series of events that would span the globe. Having been caught red-handed, the wheels of justice turned quickly. On 29 April, the Lancaster Quarter Sessions Court at Wigan convicted Melling of larceny, sentencing him to seven years of transportation.[1]

Entries in the British convict transportation registers, 1787–1867, often come alive on closer inspection. Take John Melling, an otherwise nondescript farm labourer, who would have escaped public notoriety if not for his youthful transgression.

Records describing the petty crimes typical of Quarter Sessions cases are frequently incomplete, however. For instance, Wigan's court records do not identify 'our' culprit beyond any reasonable doubt; 'John Melling' was a common name in Lancashire. We only have three firm records indicating his age. These include the journal of George Todd Moxey (1801–1881),[2] ship's surgeon of the convict transport Woodbridge, on which Melling sailed to Port Jackson (Sydney):



The Golden Lion Inn, Wallgate, ca. 1935. (Photo courtesy of Eric Johnson; https://www.wiganworld.co.uk/album/5/qodzmaus.jpg)

John Melling, aged 18; convict; disease or hurt, ulcer on leg. Put on sick list, 3 December 1839. Discharged 12 December 1839 cured. [3]

Second, his Certificate of Freedom, issued on 1 August 1846 at Port Macquarie (New South Wales, Australia), states that he was born in 1821. Melling's family history has been researched by his descendants, but dates provided for his birth, or his age at the time of his death (1 June 1869), are inconsistent with the actual records. The transcript of his marriage to Mary Wynne at St Thomas Church of England (Port Macquarie)[4] on 22 September 1845 does not include the couple's ages; the original marriage certificate[5] lists him as twenty-four years old.

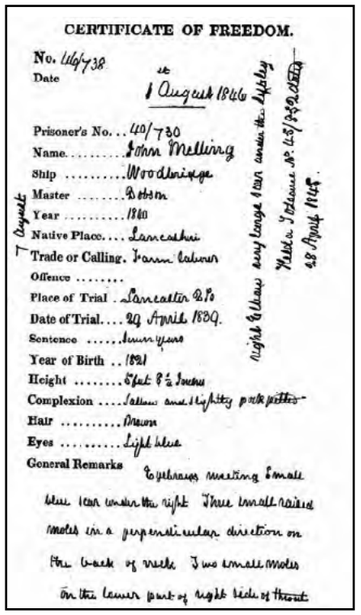
This narrows down his likely identity to that of the son of William and Ann Melling, baptised on 5 May 1822 at St Thomas the Martyr in Upholland.[6] Of their ten children, 'our' John and Mary's first (twin) sons were John William (1847-1885) and William (1847-1929), and their first daughter was Mary Ann (ca. 1854-1893) – all names honouring the children's parents and grandparents.

Melling's crime scene was a well-known Wigan watering hole; it was forced to close in the 1960s for town centre redevelopment. The Golden Lion Inn was distinct from the Golden Lion Pub, although both were Wallgate establishments. The former was known as the 'bottom lion', given its location next to the Bridgewater Pub at the bottom end of Wallgate, just before Pottery Road on the corner of Alker Street.[7] The 'top lion' was one of three adjoining public houses, with the Raven Hotel and the Big Lamp, which were also cleared for 1960s redevelopment.

Following his sentencing, Melling was detained on the prison hulk Fortitude at Chatham, Kent.[8] On 12 October 1839, at Sheerness, one hundred convicts from Chatham joined 130 men from the hulks at Woolwich on the Woodbridge under Captain William Dobson (1792–1842), bound for Sydney; four had been convicted at the Wigan Quarter Sessions.

Charles Cozens (b. 1815), a soldier court-martialled in Canada and sentenced to fourteen years of transportation, kept a personal diary describing the events:

The auspicious day at length arrived, …; and we were called by name to attend that muster on British soil which was fated to the greater portion to be the last. … we were examined and inspected by the surgeon-superintendent of the vessel, Dr. Moxey of the Royal Navy, a tall and determined looking Scotchman, whose countenance denoted characteristic shrewdness and sagacity, accompanied with great energy and decision of character. We were then trans-shipped to our future floating prison, a fine ship named the Woodbridge.[9]


CERTIFICATE OF FREEDOM.

No. 46/738
Date 1 August 1846

Prisoner's No. 40/730
Name. John Melling
Ship Woodbridge
Master Dobson
Year 1840
Native Place. Lancashire
Trade or Calling. Farm Labourer
Offence
Place of Trial. Lancaster Q.S.
Date of Trial. 29 April 1840.
Sentence Seven years
Year of Birth 1821
Height 5 feet 8 ¼ Inches
Complexion Yellow and slightly pock pitted
Hair Brown
Eyes light blue
General Remarks

Eyebrows meeting small blue scar under the right. Three small raised moles in a perpendicular direction on the back of neck. Two small moles on the lower part of right side of throat and collarbone. Small mole below right elbow. Very large scar under the left leg.

7 Augusts
Right to return any time within the Kingdom
Victoria Colonies Act 13 & 14 Vict. c. 55 / 29 & 30 Vict. c. 118
28 April 1845.

John Melling's Certificate of Freedom, 1 August 1846. (State Records of New South Wales, Australia)

After 133 days at sea, the transport arrived safely at Port Jackson, via the Cape of Good Hope. Only a single casualty had occurred in transit — John Pooley, one of the men who had been convicted at the Wigan Quarter Sessions (on 22 July 1829). Cozens expressed his gratitude to the ship's surgeon and her captain:

… the sagacious, politic, and salutary measure adopted by the surgeon-superintendent, powerfully aided by the kind, conciliating and truly paternal conduct of the captain, would almost alone have ensured submission and even cheerful compliance. Too much praise cannot be awarded to those gentlemen for the generous, manly and philanthropic conduct to the friendless unfortunates under their authority and control for every indulgence, comfort and accommodation which could reasonably be expected, or safely allowed was freely and willingly bestowed.[10]

We do not hear again from Melling until 28 April 1845, when his Ticket of Leave was 'Granted on Authority of the Governors' at Port Macquarie. Shortly afterwards, he married Mary Wynne, still a minor, 'with consent of the Government and of the Guardian appointed by the Court'. The only record describing Melling's appearance around that time implies that he was 5 feet 8¼ inches (1.73m) tall, with a sallow, slightly pock-pitted complexion, brown hair and light-blue eyes. 'General remarks' on his Certificate of Freedom expand this further:

Eyebrows meeting small blue scar under the right. Three small raised moles in a perpendicular direction on the back of neck. Two small moles on the lower part of right side of throat and collarbone. Small mole below right elbow. Very large scar under the left leg.

Melling lived the rest of his life as a law-abiding citizen, publicly rejecting his criminal past.[11] Following his death, Mary remarried, to Richard Marshall of London Bridge, near Tenterfield.

Sources

1 *Australian Joint Copying Project. Microfilm Roll 91, Home Office records, HO11/12, p. 105 (54); https://convictrecords.com.au/convicts/melling/john/60521.*

2 *Willetts, J., n.d. "George Todd Moxey R.N." Free Settler or Felon. Convict and Colonial History. https://www.freesettlerorfelon.com/george_moxey_surgeon.html.*

3 *Medical and surgical journal of the convict ship Woodbridge for 21 September 1839 to 11 March 1840 by George S [sic] Moxey, during which time the said ship was employed in a passage from England to New South Wales. Admiralty records, ADM 101/75/2/2, f. 3. https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C10560636.*

4 *https://www.wikitree.com/photo/jpg/Melling-227.*

5 *New South Wales Marriages Registration No. 690/1845 Vol. 30B.*

6 *https://www.genesreunited.co.uk/boards/board/ancestors/thread/1260009.*

7 *https://www.wiganworld.co.uk/album/photo.*

8 *https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Melling-227.*

9 *Cozens, C., 1848. Adventures of a Guardsman. London: Richard Bentley; https://www.freesettlerorfelon.com/convict_ship_woodbridge_1840.htm.*

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Armidale Express and New England General Advertiser, 9 October 1866. "Robbery under Arms." P. 2; http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article187930385.*