

# WIGAN'S QUEEN OF SPADES

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Recently, I came across a deck of playing cards that had been designed for Sydney's Malt Shovel Brewery in 2013. They were meant to promote its signature 'James Squire' range of beers — named after the English convict who first successfully cultivated hops in New South Wales, Australia.

Back in England, James Squire (1754-1822) had been caught stealing '... four cocks, five hens and divers other goods and chattels the property of [his neighbour] John Stacey ...'. Consequently, on 11 April 1785 he was sentenced to seven years of transportation 'beyond the seas'.

Squire appears to have been a womaniser of sorts. Indeed, among the Malt Shovel Brewery's staple beers, 'Four Wives Pilsner' is a perennial favourite. The deck's illustrator, Christopher Nielsen, used the card game's four queens to represent the women in Squire's life. I was particularly intrigued by his second woman, Mary, the Queen of Spades,

a fierce-looking woman unapologetically labelled 'Thief' (pictured left).

Like Squire, Mary Spence(r) (1768-1822?) had been sent to New South Wales on the 'First Fleet' (1787-1788) to atone for her crimes. On 9 October 1786, the Lancashire Assizes, through the Wigan Quarter Sessions, had sentenced her for theft, from one Charles Felton of Crosby (Liverpool), of two handkerchiefs, one cotton and one black silk; a green quilted tammy (glazed, partly wool) petticoat; and a black silk cloak, total value unknown.

Little is known about Mary's early life; her convict record does not include an occupation. A daughter of James Spencer and Elizabeth Hughes, she was baptised on 19 June 1768 at St Peter's Church — 'The Ancient Chapelry' — in Formby (north of Liverpool). She had likely had multiple encounters with the law before being sentenced to transportation; such sentences were usually reserved for repeat offenders.

Mary's sentence, five years of transportation, was unusual; typical sentences were for seven or fourteen years of transportation, or for life. Although her shorter punishment could have been a clerical error, it features among a long list of other convicts' punishments, all listing sentences of seven or fourteen years, so a clerical error seems unlikely. It is possible that her shorter sentence was driven by considerations for her youth, her relatively minor, non-violent offence or possibly even by mitigating personal circumstances.

The First Fleet departed from Portsmouth on 13 May 1787. According to the passenger manifest, Mary, heavily pregnant, had been assigned to the Prince of Wales with at least fifty-six other convicts. James had embarked on the Friendship; he was later transferred to the Charlotte.

On 1 July 1787, while en route from Tenerife (Canary Islands) to St. Sebastian (Rio de Janeiro), Mary gave birth to a daughter, whom she named after herself. Baby Mary was baptised on board the Prince of Wales on 19 August 1787 while in port at St. Sebastian. Mary had probably become pregnant while awaiting her departure to the Antipodes; the baby's father may have been a prison guard, possibly at Lancaster Gaol.

The infant's survival chances were slim in the harsh conditions of the strange land they would soon call home. By 22 January 1788, all eleven ships of the First Fleet had arrived at their destination of Botany Bay, south of present-day Sydney, after up to 252 days at sea. Sadly, baby Mary died shortly after their arrival; she was buried on 5 April 1788.

There is some evidence that Mary and James started a relationship shortly after their arrival in the colony. Infamously, when caught red-handed while stealing a quantity of 'horehound', James claimed to need the medicinal herbs for his partner Mary, who was ill, or so he said. Instead, he allegedly used the hops-like plants to brew some of the first batches of Australian beer. A judge ordered that he receive 150 lashes with the cat-o'-nine tails for his transgression. Today, the James Squire range of craft beers features an excellent pale ale, aptly called 'One Fifty Lashes'.

It appears that Mary soon resorted to her old life of theft and petty crime. As punishment, now heavily pregnant with James' son, on 5 March 1790 she embarked on H.M.S. Sirius for transportation to the secondary penal settlement of Norfolk Island, where she arrived on 15 March. Their son, Francis (1790-1851), was baptised there on 1 August 1790. Unable to care for her infant son, when she returned to Port Jackson (Sydney) on 21 September 1792 on H.M.S. Atlantic, Mary left Francis behind.

Despite James' developing entrepreneurial talents, at this time he was not yet in a sufficiently financially secure position to provide for his infant son. Therefore, in 1792, he enlisted the boy into the New South Wales Corps as a drummer, at the young age of just fifteen months. Francis eventually left Norfolk Island on 6 November 1795, on H.M.S. Supply. He was added to the Corps' payroll on 13 June 1797. Eventually, in 1822, Squire acknowledged Francis in his will:

I give and bequeath unto James Spencer the son of Francis Spencer of Sydney aforesaid who is a natural born child of mine by Mary Spencer, deceased, the sum of thirty pounds.

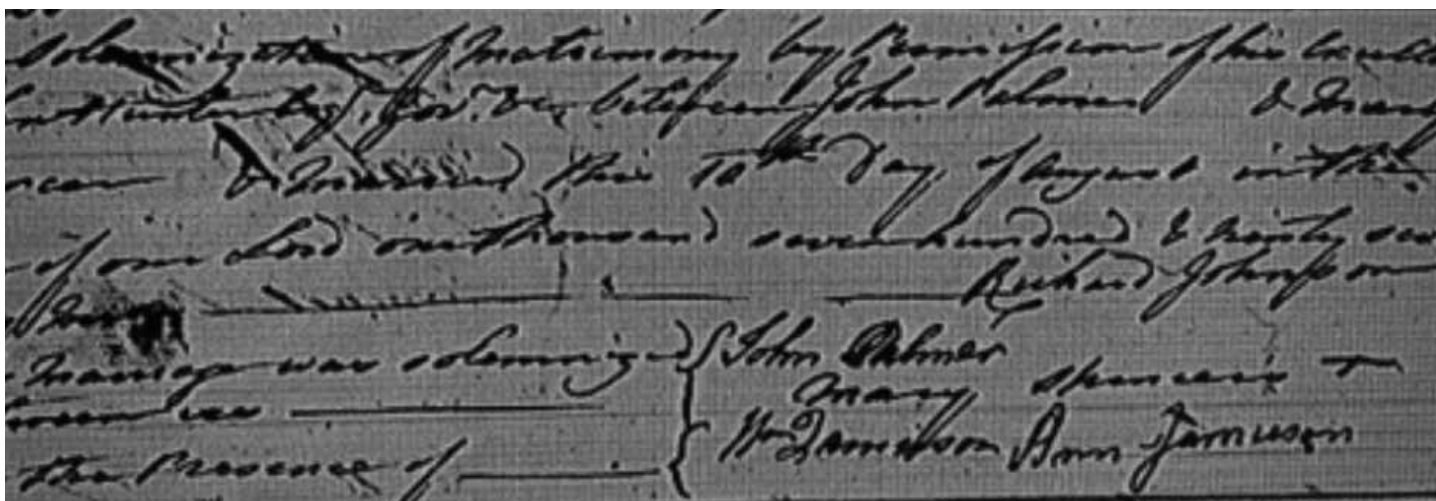
Meanwhile, on 10 August 1797, the Reverend Richard Johnson (1753?-1827) married Mary and John Palmer (1754-1832) in St Philip's Church of England in Sydney, with Governor John Hunter's consent. Palmer, a corporal in the New South Wales Corps, had arrived in Sydney in 1790 on the Second Fleet's Neptune. The couple had two daughters, Ann (1796) and Elizabeth (1799); Elizabeth died in infancy. By the turn of the century, Mary disappears from the official records. The final record, from December 1799,

shows Palmer suing one Robert Courter for £250, alleging criminal conduct involving Mary. John Palmer and Mary may have separated at this time, but the official records do not contain any additional information.

A strong, independent woman able to navigate difficult situations and maintain her dignity and self-respect in the face of adversity, Mary Spence's nickname as Wigan's Queen of Spades is clearly highly appropriate.

## REFERENCES

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Mary Spence and John Palmer's marriage vows, 10 August 1797 (State Archives and Records of New South Wales: Registers of Baptisms, Marriages and Burials, 1787-1856; vol. 4, No. 250, p. 54).