

The Absolution of Solomon SHADBOLT

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When Kate GRENVILLE was researching her convict ancestor for the novel *Secret River*, she admitted to feeling slightly anxious about the nature of his crime. Theft was one thing, but what if he had been transported for something really serious; even, God forbid, murder? Her fears awakened memories of a dark rumour concerning my own convict ancestor, Solomon SHADBOLT, suspected of killing a man in 1826.

However, it was burglary that led to Solomon's arrest almost twenty years later. On a snowy winter's night in 1845, Solomon (my three times great-grandfather), his son George, and two nephews, Ben and Jonathan SHADBOLT, broke into a general store in a Hertfordshire village and made off with food, drapery and the contents

of the till. All four were tried and pronounced guilty at the Hertford Assizes. Owing to a previous conviction for theft, Solomon was transported for twenty years. As first offenders George and his two young cousins each received a lesser sentence of 15 years in exile. At the time of their arrest George was 25, Jonathan 27, and Ben 20. Solomon was 46.

In 1993 the respected New Zealand writer Maurice SHADBOLT wrote an account of the burglary in a memoir called *One of Ben's*. He also noted that '*Uncle Solomon may literally have got away with murder two decades earlier*'. Maurice gave only sketchy details about the affair, but it certainly gave me a jolt!

The SHADBOLTS were shipped off to that harshest of all penal colonies, Norfolk Island, arriving in January 1846. Conditions were almost beyond belief and several weeks later a gang of 'old hands' went on a murderous rampage. The brutal killings and the infamous hangings which followed must have shaken my ancestors to the core.

Maurice suggested that Solomon became mentally unstable, describing him as '*... a weary fifty year old, unhinged and homesick for Hertfordshire*' who *curled up and died*' on Norfolk, leaving his son and nephews vulnerable to sexual abuse and physical violence. He wrote, '*Young Benjamin, Jonathan, and George would now have been easy prizes. There is no reason to suppose they went unravished*'. These colourful comments struck me as rather harsh. After all, the three younger SHADBOLTS were from a tough background and were more than handy with their fists. Three years prior to the burglary they had all been charged over a village brawl. It is unlikely the trio would have turned to the diminutive (5' 4") middle-aged Solomon for protection anyway, as he was in very bad shape. For the final six weeks of the voyage to Norfolk aboard the *Mayda* Solomon had been suffering from dysentery and was discharged only as the ship was about to dock.

Surprisingly, when I accessed the Tasmanian convict records I discovered that, sick as he was, Solomon did *not* die on Norfolk. He was transferred from Norfolk Island to Van Diemen's Land in May 1847 along with his son and nephews. From Hobart they were taken to Cascades Probation Station on Tasman Peninsula. Anything would have been an improvement over the conditions they had left behind, but life was still hard. Prisoners were sent out at first light to fell trees and mill wood. Fatal accidents in the bush were commonplace but there were far more deaths from pneumonia, especially among the new arrivals from Norfolk Island. It was bitterly cold and they were housed in damp huts without adequate food or clothing. Solomon made it through that first winter only to die on 19 January 1848, tragically close to gaining at least partial freedom.

Jonathan SHADBOLT disappeared to the Western Australian goldfields after his release and was never heard of again. Ben Shadbolt married and settled in New Zealand with his wife and family. He owned hotels and timber mills and died a wealthy man. My great-great grandfather George became a successful farmer,



George SHADBOLT and his younger daughter, c1876

blacksmith and carpenter in northern Tasmania. He helped build his local church and was appointed first superintendent of the Sunday School.

George was just six years old at the time his father was suspected of killing ploughman Thomas CHALKLEY in the Hertfordshire village of Datchworth. On Sunday 1 January 1826, Solomon and his brother Joseph were seen leaving The Horns pub in company with CHALKLEY who failed to arrive home. His body was found several days later in a nearby pond. Since he had been perfectly sober when he left the pub, foul play was suspected. The SHADBOLT brothers were hauled in and questioned, but released without charge.

Last year I visited Hertford and in the County Archives I checked the *Hertford Mercury* for the first week of January 1826. On 7 January, under the headline 'Rumoured Murder' was a lengthy article beginning, 'Considerable consternation was spread in this town and neighbourhood on Wednesday last from the report of another barbarous murder having been committed in this county. Like the murdered Weare, the victim was reported to have been concealed in a pond where his mutilated remains had been dragged by merciless assassins. Robbery was also attached to the crime of murder.'

But all was not as it appeared, 'We are happy to have it in our power to lay before our readers the whole facts of the case, the authenticity of which may be relied on. It is so far true that the body of a man was found in a moat of water within a few hundred yards of the Horns Public House at Bull's Green.'

The body was removed from the pond and taken back to the pub to await the Coroner's inquest. Solomon and Joseph were detained but as the *Mercury's* report continued, 'we are happy to state that nothing transpired to attach the least criminality to either, and they were ordered to be discharged.'

The Coroner returned a verdict of accidental death, concluding that the poor fellow had missed his footing in the dark and fallen into the freezing pond. Far from being mutilated, Chalkley had only minor scratches on his face

from brambles. And there was more, *A further proof of his not having met his death by unfair means is that the money he was known to have had about him, seven shillings, was found in his pockets.*

Why, one might ask, did the *Hertford Mercury* rush into print to exonerate the pair? The clue lies in the mention of the WEARE murder, which occurred in October 1823 and was reported in the *Hertfordshire County Chronicle*, 'On Friday night last, Mr Wm Weare, attorney, of Lyons Inn, was murdered at a place about 6 miles from the town of Watford, Herts., in a manner which, for cold-blooded villainy as to the mode of affecting it, and the diabolical ferocity which accompanied its perpetration, have seldom been equalled.'

WEARE had been murdered over a gambling debt and thrown into a pond. His killer was a well born, colourful character named John THURTEL. The public devoured every lurid detail of the case, 'John Thurtel ... when describing the manner in which he had tackled with Mr Weare [said] that at one time he had nearly mastered him, and got above him, upon which he took his knife out and cut his throat. The blood of Mr Weare in consequence came on his face and into his mouth, in such quantities that he was nearly choked.'

Thousands flocked to Hertford in January 1824 to see THURTEL hanged.

When Thomas CHALKLEY's body was also found in a pond, rumours spread until local people were in a state of near hysteria. Clearly it was feared that unless the facts were laid before the public quick smart, Solomon and Joseph were in danger of being lynched. Unfortunately, most of the villagers were illiterate and it is likely the men received both verbal and physical abuse in the weeks that followed. Stories of their involvement probably circulated for years, affecting their capacity to earn a living. It may even have been a factor in Solomon's slide towards a life of crime, culminating in the 1845 burglary.

It was quite a relief to discover that my ancestor, although definitely no angel, was not a murderer and that he did not die 'unhinged' on Norfolk Island. The convict cemetery where Solomon was buried on Tasman Peninsula is now an orchard and, since he paid so dearly for his sins, I sincerely hope the old chap rests under the apple trees in peace.

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Yorkshire Family History Research

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