

Highwayman Born in Kibworth

Researched and written by Lynette Robinson (4th x great granddaughter)

During the filming of Michael Wood's Story of England in 2010, a couple from Australia were visiting Kibworth in search of an ancestor. That ancestor was Charles William Baseley, a highwayman, sentenced to transportation to Australia for life in 1794. It may be of interest to know some of Charles' story.

Charles William Baseley (aka Beasley and Beazley) was baptised by his father at Kibworth on 6 December 1776, the eighth of eleven children born to the Reverend Henry Baseley (born 1740 Priors Marston, Warwickshire; died 1787 Kibworth) and Susanna, nee Trubshaw (born Colwich, Staffordshire 1744; died London 1840). Charles' father was educated at Merton College, Oxford. Records show that from 1769 the Rector of St. Wilfrid's was Christopher H. Walker, M.A. but the services were mostly conducted by the Curate, Henry Baseley.

When Charles was about 11, his father died leaving Charles' mother, Susanna, with (possibly) 11 children, ranging in age from 19 to four years. Charles' elder brother, Thomas was attending Oxford, later to become a member of the Clergy. A brother Henry Edward, in 1785, had become articled to Attorney Humphrey Worthington of the Parish or Town of Lutterworth, Leicestershire and another brother, Job, in 1797 had received his Freedom of the City Admission (London) as an apprentice carpenter. Records of the "Society of Stewards & Subscribers for maintaining and educating poor orphans of Clergyman til of age" show that in 1787 Charles' sister, Mary, aged 7 was attending the Lisson Green School at Marylebone.

It is assumed that at some time after the Reverend Baseley's death the family moved from Kibworth, perhaps initially to Derbyshire and then to London. Prior to the family moving, Charles may have worked, learning a trade in the knitting industry.

By the time Charles had reached 16 years of age he had commenced his criminal activities in the London area. On 18 July 1793 Charles and three others held up a coach around the Brentford to Small Borough Green Turnpike area. That same year he was involved, with two others, in the robbery of a shop. He was arrested and his Trial took place at The Old Bailey on 4 December 1793. He and his cohorts were found guilty and the three sentenced to be hanged.

In Court documents Charles was described as 16 years, 5'5", brown hair, fresh complexion, Derbyshire Stocking Weaver.

His two partners, John Rabbitts and William Brown were both hanged on 5 February 1794 at Newgate.

In July 1794, Charles' death sentence was commuted to penal transportation for life. Charles spent some time at Newgate and Tothill Fields Prisons before being sent to the prison hulk "Stanislaw" on 24 October 1794. He spent three long years on the "Stanislaw" awaiting transportation to Australia.

In November 1797, with Charles onboard, the convict ship "Barwell" left England and sailed for the new colony. The ship's records show that the passage out was horrendous. The

“Barwell” was becalmed for a long period, with the convicts sweltering below decks. In a letter from Judge Advocate Dore to Sir Michael Le Fleming dated February 1798, Judge Dore writes of a planned mutiny - “We have not yet experienced anything very refractory – twenty five in number had mediated a rise, when the sailors were aloft, to seize our cuddy arms and take the ship etc, by the murder of us all – but one impeached the preceding evening, and in the morn they were called up and every soul double ironed and coupled in pairs ...”

The “Barwell” reached Sydney Harbour on 14 May 1798.

It seems that Charles’ criminal ways may have continued for a short time. During 1799 he, with others, was suspected of plundering from a ship carrying Government stores. From hereon there is no record of any further criminal activity.

In about 1803 Charles commenced a relationship with Mary Thomas (alias Reay), a convict who had recently arrived on the convict ship “Glatton”. During this year Charles was granted a beer licence for premises in Bell Row Street, Sydney, known as “The Sydney Inn”. Charles was one of the first publicans in the new colony. His first daughter, Ann was born in January 1804, so it seems his life was improving.

In 1804 there was an uprising of rebel Irish convicts, resulting in the Battle of Vinegar Hill in the Toongabbie area of Sydney. Charles joined the Sydney Loyalists Society, a militia group raised to assist the soldiers with the suppression of the Irish convicts.

During 1806 Charles was granted a ticket of leave, granting him freedom to work and live, prior to the expiration of his sentence. Another daughter, Sarah, was born. His first son, Charles, was born in 1808, followed by another daughter, Jane, in 1809.

On 4 October 1809 Governor Paterson granted Charles farming land in Toongabbie. At around this time Charles and his young family were residing in the Windsor area on the Hawkesbury River. In 1811 another daughter, Edna, was born and on 11 July of that year Charles was granted a “conditional pardon” (this type of pardon granted convicts freedom as long as they remained in the Colony).

Charles, now living at Windsor, was a self-employed small ship builder and operator. His small ships were to carry grain, timber and other supplies along the river and around the coast to Sydney and Newcastle.

In 1814 a second son, Henry, was born. Charles was granted permission to marry his long-time partner Mary and they married at St. Matthew’s Church, Windsor on 4 September 1815.

A book on the life of the successful convict settler Paul Bushell (“Paul Bushell – Second Fleeter” by Louise Wilson, B. Ec Sydney) reveals that on 29 September 1819, nine local residents including Paul - “certified the accuracy of a petition by Charles Beasley, a Windsor publican and dealer. Beasley’s petition stated that he arrived in May 1798 aboard Barwell and had been a free subject now for ten years. From the flood inundations of the past three years, he had suffered losses totalling nearly £2,000, arising from the destruction of his own crops and the extension of credit to settlers incapable of making repayments. In these floods he had used his own boat to help save the lives and property of his fellow creatures. Although his character was irreproachable, his financial losses meant he was unable to pay

his suppliers and his house had been taken from him, depriving him of support for his (first) wife and seven infant children. For eight years at the Hawkesbury and four in Sydney he had held a spirit licence without complaint. He now sought a spirit licence to augment a 'commodious dwelling house with ten rooms and outbuildings' necessary for the accommodation of travellers which he had erected in Windsor. The petition succeeded because Beasley was soon licensed to sell wine and spirits at an unnamed outlet in Windsor."

By 1820 Charles and Mary were raising seven children, he had a spirit licence, 130 acres of land, three horses, 70 cattle, 50 pigs and also the shipping business and several inns. Charles had become a successful innkeeper, auctioneer, shipbuilder, licensed victualler and it seems a well-respected resident of the colony.

During 1821 his first daughter, Ann, gave birth to Charles' first grandchild. Sadly, that same year, his wife Mary died aged 39 years.

In 1823 Charles remarried, this time to Hannah Needham (aka Port), again at St. Matthew's Church at Windsor. Hannah had a son from a previous relationship. Charles and Hannah's relationship produced another four children. After Charles' death Hannah became the second wife of the widower John Forrester, son of the First Fleeter, Robert Forrester.

Charles' good fortune seems to have again been in demise as on 3 January 1829 his estate was auctioned off to pay creditors. Maybe floods, drought or bushfires or perhaps his generosity in again extending credit to settlers may have all played a part in his misfortunes. During this year his daughter Ann died and Ann's two daughters, Sarah and Jane, were burned to death while drawing spirits by lantern light in the cellar of the "Macquarie Arms Hotel" at Windsor.

Prior to his death, Charles made one last attempt to have his conditional pardon made absolute, which if successful, would allow him to return to England. Sadly this was not granted. This application for an absolute pardon indicates that he was wanting to return to his native England. It also appears that he never forgot his family in England as seven of his children bear the same names of his own brothers and sisters.

Charles died on 30 November 1837 aged 61 years and is buried in a substantial stone slab covered grave in the grounds St Matthew's Church at Windsor, NSW.

In what can only be described as harsh and horrendous conditions, Charles became an industrious and upstanding member of the new colony and it appears did his very best to provide for his large family.

I am sure there are thousands of Australians grateful that Charles William Beasley's death sentenced was commuted and instead received, for his crimes, penal transportation for life to the new colony of Australia.

Lynette Robinson
Australia
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