

FRED WARD 1835-1870
CAPTAIN THUNDERBOLT

With most folk heroes there are many versions of their exploits and it is difficult at times to sort out the fact from the fiction. So it is with Captain Thunderbolt, the longest serving bushranger in Australian history, even though his spree as a bushranger lasted only seven years.

By many accounts he was personable, courteous and some say he was even compassionate, all of which would have appealed to the isolated settlers of the upper Hunter region and the northwest slopes and plains in the mid 1800s. It appeared that everyone wanted to tell a story about him and as with most stories of his mysterious exploits, many were and still are, full of inconsistencies and half-truths. Our town of Gloucester is no exception. Mention Thunderbolt and wonderful stories come tumbling out like grass in the wind. Some accounts could be attributed to the exploits of imitators or simply the result of people's wild imagination. Even so they are very believable.

Because of his association with a girl from Stroud, Mary Ann Bugg, it is certain that he had intimate knowledge of the rough terrain and isolation of the Dungog, Stroud, Gloucester and Nowendoc areas where he occasionally sought concealment and refuge from the law. Born at Wilberforce, near Windsor in 1835, his family moved to Maitland about 1840. At age twelve, Fred was employed by a Mr. Milford as a "useful hand" to accompany him from the Maitland district over the range to Walcha, to take up a pastoral run. It was perhaps this experience, moving stock and loaded drays through rough and sometimes almost impassible tracks and bushland in the upper Hunter Valley, which could have given him first hand experience of the harshness of the Gloucester and Barrington Tops area.

At seventeen he was working as a horsebreaker and stockman at Tocal estate, near Paterson, New South Wales, but in 1855 he became tired of station work and went horsebreaking from north of Paterson to the headwaters of the Hunter River. It was an occupation notorious for leading some into horse stealing and Fred was drawn, perhaps by default, into a fledgling gang of young horse thieves. They were eventually caught and charged in 1856 and sent to Cockatoo Island, the "hell-hole" prison in Sydney harbour, where the conditions were wretched and the punishment brutal.

In 1860 Fred Ward was granted a ticket of leave and travelled to Mudgee to work for a Mrs. Garbutt, who was thought to be his older sister. It was at this stage that Mary Ann Baker (nee Bugg) came on the scene. She had been born in Stroud in 1834, the daughter of James and Charlotte Bugg. Her father was a shepherd for the famous Australian Agricultural Company and lived near Monkerai. In 1839, she and her brother were sent by the company, with the full consent of their parents, to the Orphans' School at Parramatta for an education. In 1846 she returned to Stroud, a confident and strong willed girl who could apply herself to most tasks. She became a domestic servant in Dungog and in 1848, she married 56 year old Edmund Baker, a shepherd and an ex-constable. They lived in the

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Monkerai area and had one child. In 1860 the family travelled to Mudgee and it was here that she left her husband to team up with Fred Ward.

The pair travelled back to the Dungog area and much later, when he was "on the road" in about 1863, she became the well-known shadowy figure behind many of his exploits. She was often referred to as "the bushranger's boy" and became indispensable to some of his robberies - supplying food and acting as a decoy when they were on the run from the law. In 1861 Ward's ticket of leave was cancelled because of his failure to report regularly to the Mudgee court. He was also charged and convicted of horse stealing from Upper Meroo, near Mudgee and sentenced to imprisonment again on Cockatoo Island. Two weeks later, Mary Ann gave birth to their first child at Dungog. (She eventually had four children to Ward.)

Life back in the island prison was intolerable for Ward and soon he and another prisoner named Britten planned their escape. There are many conflicting accounts as to how they achieved their freedom, however one theory is that in 1863, Mary Ann using the alias Louisa Mason and working as a nursery maid to a sea captain's family at Long Nose Point, Birchgrove, swam the 600 metres to Cockatoo Island at night with food for Ward. If this extraordinary feat was true, it demonstrates her incredible courage and loyalty to him. It was reputed that he had hidden in a boiler for four days to avoid detection and when a sympathetic prisoner removed his irons, he and his accomplice swam ashore and escaped. The government immediately posted a twenty five pound (\$50) reward for information leading to their capture.

On the run and heading north, Ward and Britten, committed robberies at homesteads along the way. They allegedly robbed the Northern Mail at Uralla and attempted to shoot at police. They knew now that the law would show no mercy. As often happens, the two bushrangers soon parted and Ward joined Mary Ann back at Dungog where they hid from the law at Main Creek and waited for things to die down. Now he was well and truly on his way to becoming the bushranger, Captain Thunderbolt with Mary Ann his faithful shadow. His exploits from here on are well and truly documented. They range from the attempted robbery of the Merton Mail and Tollhouse at Lochinvar in 1863 to robbery of race patrons and publicans and the Campbell Hill Toll Gate at Rutherford. From 1865 to 1870 his spate of robberies (86 in total) in the western district, the northwest slopes and plains the upper Hunter and the country towards the Queensland border are well covered in Court documents. Now with a price on his head of five hundred and fifty pounds (\$1100), which equated to five years wages for a working man in 1863, it ended with Thunderbolt's capture and death from a shotgun wound inflicted by a Constable Walker, at Kentucky Creek near Uralla on 29th May 1870. He was aged only 35. Mary Ann's demise is shrouded in mystery. Some say she died a lonely death in a cave suffering from tuberculosis while they were hiding out from the law. Another story is that after Thunderbolt's death, she lived quietly to a ripe old age of over 70, using the alias of Louisa Mason.

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It is known that the Australian Agricultural Company used rough tracks/roads to move stock across the mountain range between Gloucester and Nowendoc and to access the Liverpool Plains. No doubt, these would have been tracks used originally by the local Aboriginals to traverse the rugged landscape and it would not have been difficult for Thunderbolt to have used the same tracks. There was also a well-used stock route through Rawdon Vale over to Monkerai which lead on to Washpool and Telegherry Station where, on at least one occasion, sheep from Goonoo Goonoo Station near Tamworth were brought to the area for shearing. It was the practice for wool to be transported by ship from Port Stephens. A well-documented account of 1864 describes a party of riders, fitting the description of Thunderbolt and Mary Ann, riding through Rawdon Vale, perhaps using the stock route to Monkerai where her father lived. The curious fact that they rode with their children in horse baskets indicates that they knew how to traverse the land relatively unimpeded.

On another occasion in 1866 Thunderbolt and Mary Ann were reported to have ridden from the north, pursued by the Port Macquarie Police, into Curricabark where they robbed John Higgins' station store. Stroud Court of Petty Sessions records indicate that Mary Ann and her children were holed up at nearby Pigna Barney Creek but Thunderbolt had long gone. Mary Ann was charged with vagrancy, convicted and sentenced to six months jail but was released soon after her arrest.

Although there is little factual evidence that Thunderbolt frequented the Gloucester district, wonderful stories of him being in the area persist. Tales about Thunderbolt's Cave and stable in The Bucketts, Thunderbolt's Lookout, Thunderbolt's Oven and his stealing of a horse from the Gloucester races are all well loved stories. Unfortunately they cannot be corroborated. It may have been his incredible bushcraft or his ability to flout the law with his speedy getaways which stymied the police, that his lawlessness appealed to the "ordinary man" whose lives at the time were often harsh, monotonous and uneventful. Perhaps these storytellers of old, revelling in the reflected glory of an association with Thunderbolt, felt life was a little more exciting and bearable for just knowing him.