

Defiant Scoundrel or Gentleman Bushranger?

Researched & Written by Arnold Goode, Uralla.

The Thunderbolt legend lives on most strongly in the New England district of northern New South Wales and especially around Uralla.

Of all the bushrangers who engaged in their illegal and often colourful careers in Australia during the first 100 years of white settlement, Thunderbolt, hero or horse thief, was at large for probably the longest period. For almost six years and six months he was pursued by regular mounted Police, especially commissioned bounty hunters and enlisted Aboriginal trackers. Bushrangers were regarded as heroes by the battling small landholders who also recognised their common enemy as the Government and the Law. They considered Thunderbolt to be a victim of circumstance and they sympathised and identified with him.



The Police force was over governed by Parliament, was grossly underpaid, under trained, overworked and supplied with horses of dubious breeding. Fred Ward finally met his match on the afternoon of 25th May 1870. He "bailed-up" firstly John and Liza Blanch near their Inn, then James Coghlan and an Italian hawkler, Giovanni Cappusotto. Resenting this action, Cappusotto alerted the Uralla police Officers Mulhall and Walker. The Police exchanged shots with Thunderbolt and Constable Walker gave chase. Thunderbolt was finally cornered in a waterhole in Kentucky Creek some 4 kilometers distant. A coroner's inquest was held on the body of Fred Ward at Blanch's Inn and he was buried in the Uralla cemetery.

Thunderbolt began his life as Frederick Ward at Wilberforce near Windsor, N.S.W., in either 1835 or another reference states 16th May 1836. The birth date is not recorded. His father was a convict, Michael Ward, transported to the colony in the "Indefatigable" in May 1815 and his mother Sophia arrived two months later in the "Northampton". About 1846, upon Michael gaining his convict freedom, the whole family moved to the Maitland area.

As a youth, Fred Ward became well known for breaking and training horses. When he was about 20 years of age he fell foul of the Law. Helped by James Garbutt, they drove stolen horses from his brother William "Harry" Ward and Michael Blake's farm at Lambs Valley for sale at the Windsor sale yards. Several of the horses were recognised as being Messrs. Zuill and Reynolds' property. Others were marked with the famous Tocal brand. (i). Fred Ward and James Garbutt were sentenced to ten years each with hard labour to the infamous Cockatoo Island prison in Sydney Harbour. (ii)

On the 1st July 1860 Fred Ward was released on a ticket of leave to work in the Mudgee district. While working near Mudgee, he made acquaintance of Mary Ann Bugg, a well educated half-cast aboriginal girl who had been recently widowed. When she returned to the Hunter Valley to take up work at Dungog, Ward followed her. They married sometime in September 1861, possibly at Stroud. (iii) After their marriage he borrowed a horse to report to the Mudgee Police for muster, but on arriving late he found his 'ticket of leave' revoked for failure to "attend muster". In addition he was charged with stealing the horse and was sent to serve the remainder of his original sentence. Two weeks after Fred Ward's return to prison, Mary Anne Bugg gave birth to their first child, Marina Emily Ward. (iv)

Defiant Scoundrel or Gentleman Bushranger?

Researched & Written by Arnold Goode, Uralla.

Mary Anne Bugg followed Fred Ward to Sydney and assisted him and another prisoner, Fred Britten, to escape from Cockatoo Island. They swam through shark infested water to the mainland on the night of 11th September 1863. The two men headed for New England and stole a double-barreled gun and some pork from a widow on Gostwyck run, near Uralla. Several days later, Sergeant Grainger came upon the escapees attempting to hold up a mail coach at the "Split Rocks" (soon to become known as "Thunderbolt Rock") south of Uralla. Fred Ward was shot through the knee but managed to escape. (v)

The two men separated and Ward alone robbed the tollbar at Campbells Hill near Maitland. He proceeded to pound on the wall of the office and demanded the surrender of the toll money. It was this act which earned him the name "Thunderbolt". (vi)

Thus began the bushranging legend of Fred Ward, also known as Captain Thunderbolt.

The following list records crimes purported to have been enacted by Thunderbolt and his gang over the following years:

- 25 mail coach robberies
- 16 hotels and stores
- 16 stations and residences
- 6 hawkers
- 1 tollbar gate
- 80 thefts of horses
- 1 escape from lawful custody
- and numerous firing on Police in their line of duty.

Fred Ward relied on his ability to outwit and out distance the mounted Police and he would only resort to gunfire to hasten proceedings or when being fired upon. Other outlaws frequently joined him, but at times they became a liability. This brief account is typical of a Bushranger's life, "Fred Ward has again made his appearance in these parts by sticking up the mail man and rifling the mail bags. The mailman, after crossing a creek and on gaining the further bank, heard a horseman ride up behind him and order, 'Bail up'. He was ordered about 80 metres away while Thunderbolt opened and rifled anything of value, including an amount of gold from the pouch of the saddle". William Monckton (a compatriot of Ward), who narrated the book "Three Years with Thunderbolt" gives many similar accounts. In addition numerous plays, films, books, poems and television mini series have villainised his numerous outrages on Her Majesty's Mail and dramatised spectacular "bail-ups" of passengers in mail coaches or wayside inns.

Thunderbolt had endured the worst of the Colony's barbaric convict system being twice imprisoned on Cockatoo Island.

Several times he suffered solitary confinement in its dungeons. His escape from this prison fortress embarrassed both the Government and its penal system. Fred Ward now became a bushranger by circumstance and for the following six years he defeated every attempt at recapture. During his freedom Fred Ward displayed great courage and at times compassion and humour. He was a champion horseman and a wonderful judge of a well bred horse. Using these two characteristics, Ward continually evaded capture. His attachment to Mary Ann Bugg in his early career and his attempt to settle as a family was greatly admired. The Police continually harassed his endeavors, which kept him on the move, at times leaving Mary Ann and the children to fend for themselves.

Defiant Scoundrel or Gentleman Bushranger?

Researched & Written by Arnold Goode, Uralla.

Twice "Mrs. Captain Thunderbolt" was arrested and imprisoned and twice the N.S.W. Parliament debated her situation. Both times the N.S.W. Governor, Sir John Young intervened and ordered her release. (vii)

Over a period of time Mary Bugg's health became critical through being constantly compelled to be on the lookout for Police patrols. Fred Ward nursed her, but he was forced to seek help. Making her comfortable, he rode to Mrs. Bradford's home on the Goulburn River. Ward described her condition and the site of their hideout. Mrs. Bradford and Rev White found the shelter and brought her back in a cart. Dr Brown and Constable Boon were sent for, arriving a few minutes after Mary had breathed her last. Thunderbolt indicated to Mrs. Bradford that he was leaving there and going north. Within several weeks he had visited Goonoo Goonoo station and he now, possessed the thoroughbred racehorse "Combo". Thunderbolt's bushranging escapades have now become history. It was his skill as a horseman and his love of horse racing that the "selectors" in the bush greatly admired. He acquired famous racehorses and either used them as common mounts to outpace the mediocre Police horses or he traded them for profit. Among his annexations were Beeswing, Combo, The Barb, Eucalyptus, Come-by-Chance, Toy Boy, Talleyrand and Kerosene.

Thunderbolt attended the Tenterfield races on 17th and 18th March 1868. He mixed freely with the patrons and saw Minstrel win the Maiden Plate of 40 sovereigns. He determined to acquire this racehorse as it returned to the Warwick district. Ward established himself at the spectacular Goonoo Goonoo gap to await Minstrel's arrival. To fill time, Ward stopped a German Band following their season in Tenterfield. He obtained sixteen pounds which was all of the band's takings, considering this amount to be paltry, Ward had them perform their acts and play their musical instruments on the roadside. This delighted Ward and as the Band was leaving he handed Peter Wirth a small amount and asked for a forwarding address. Several weeks later Thunderbolt sent to Wirth's Band in Warwick a letter containing the full amount of purloined money. (viii)

135 years have passed since Thunderbolt's death near Uralla, but stories of his exploits still circulate in the Uralla district. How great-grandfather met Thunderbolt one day while mustering cattle in a lonely place and shared a yarn and a billy of tea. Similarly, great-grandmother would hang a blanket as a signal on the clothes line if troopers were riding in the area. Other families would leave food in an outhouse on the off-chance that the bushranger would pass that way.

May these legends live forever.

Vale - Fred Ward – Captain Thunderbolt.

The best researched book on Thunderbolt is "A Ghost Called Thunderbolt" by Stephen Williams

- (i) Maitland Mercury 21/4/1856.
- (ii) Maitland Mercury 14/8/1856.
- (iii) "A Ghost called Thunderbolt" by Stephan Williams - page 22
- (iv) Maitland Mercury 3/11/1863.
- (v) Maitland Mercury 22/12/1863
- (vi) Armidale Express 12/5/1866 & Maitland Ensign 9/3/1867).
- (vii) "A Ghost called Thunderbolt" by Stephan Williams - page 118

This file has been downloaded from the Thunderbolts Way website.

Please visit us at <http://www.thunderboltsway.com.au>