

## **An Adelaide Gaol Execution**

### **Charles Streitman**

#### **Executed 24 July 1877**

Wallaroo was not only the largest town on Yorke Peninsula in 1877 but it also boasted the largest copper smelters outside Wales. Copper mining and smelting had overseen the town's rapid growth to greater than 3,000 people but the fatal epidemics of typhoid and cholera had taken their toll on the population. Hundreds of lives were lost and in one black year almost a third of the children in the town died.

Charles Streitman had already lost two of his five children when further tragedy struck in April 1877. His wife was gravely ill and another of his three remaining children was also sick.

Charles Streitman came from Holland and had a life at sea before settling in the coastal town of Wallaroo in 1863. It was said that his sailing days ended when he was struck by lightning while high up in the rigging during a thunderstorm. He fell a great distance to the deck and although he survived the fall he was troubled by epilepsy and terrible headaches from then on.

Streitman settled in Wallaroo following the fall, married and earned a living as a carter with a team of horses moving goods to and from the busy docks. He was a reliable and industrious worker but had a liking for drinking beer at the Wallaroo Inn, run by Matthew Lower.

By 1877 Streitman was in debt to Lower for the sum of £11-3-0. Whatever the reason for the debt, Lower was determined to recover his money and had a summons issued for repayment.

When Streitman received the summons he hired a lawyer to appear on his behalf. However, the Clerk of the Court, Charles Gold, failed to record the appearance and judgement was awarded against Streitman. This gave Lower legal claim over Streitman's goods and chattels.

The bailiff Lucas Sharples and his assistant Robert Woodhead made their way to Streitman's house to effect immediate payment. Charles Streitman was enraged that judgement had been issued against him when he was represented by a lawyer. Sharples persuaded Streitman to accompany him to the Clerk's office to sort the matter out while Robert Woodhead stayed at the Streitman house.

The clerk explained that it was a special summons which required an affidavit and advised Streitman to see a solicitor. Streitman responded by saying that he was an ignorant man, unable to read or write. He added in exasperation, "I came here looking for justice and there is no justice". The clerk advised him to see the stipendiary magistrate in the morning but seething with rage Streitman uttered, "Don't worry, I'll settle it tonight."

Streitman went to drink at the Globe Hotel and then to the Wallaroo Hotel where he challenged Matthew Lower to "come outside and settle it" but Lower refused the offer and told Streitman to leave.

The consumption of beer had taken its toll.

As Streitman left the bar he muttered the threat to a man named Joseph Pengelly whose father worked for the local undertaker, "I'll have a coffin for your father to make tomorrow".

When Charles Streitman arrived at his two bedroom miner's cottage he found that Robert Woodhead was still there, sitting on his sofa. He checked on his dying wife and children and then without further word he grabbed a kitchen knife, plunged it into Woodhead's arm and then deep into the base of the neck. Woodhead staggered to Dr. McPhillip's house but his life could not be saved. He survived long enough to make a statement to Arthur Edwards, the Stipendiary Magistrate, before dying from blood loss soon afterwards.

Lance Corporal William Smith was notified that a murder had taken place and went to arrest Streitman. When he got to the house he found the suspect was sleeping on the couch. Smith managed to slip handcuffs on Streitman before waking him up and advising him of the charge. Streitman immediately became very violent and it took two officers over an hour to get him the one kilometre to the lock-up.

The trial of Charles Streitman opened in the Supreme Court in Adelaide on Tuesday 20 June 1877 before Mr Justice Stow.

## **An Adelaide Gaol Execution**

When asked how he pleaded Streitman replied, "I don't know. I can't say I feel guilty. I saw the knife and I saw the man, but I don't know anything about it."

The judge ordered that a not guilty plea be entered.

At the conclusion of the case the jury had little trouble in finding the case proven but added a strong recommendation to mercy. The judge advised that he would forward the recommendation to the Governor but informed the prisoner to put away all hope of mercy in this world and for the rest of his time prepare himself for the next.

He then passed the sentence of death.

Charles Streitman's wife, who miraculously recovered from her illness, was allowed to visit him in Adelaide Gaol. His sick child also survived.

A letter arrived from his brother the night before his execution but it was written in Dutch and Streitman was unable to read it. Efforts were made to find a translator but none could be found.

The following morning, 24 July 1877, Streitman was lead to the scaffold between the walls, reciting prayers with a minister. At the foot of the scaffold he shook hands with the Gaol Governor, John Howell, and thanked him for his kindness.

On the drop he asked the executioner to arrange the rope so he shouldn't suffer but in the haste to finish his work the hangman, Benjamin Ellis, drew the bolt without first strapping the ankles.

Streitman dropped about three feet but rebounded and got his knees on the platform from where they had to be forcibly removed. The knot caught him under the jaw and instead of instantaneous death his chest continued to heave and fall as he gasped for breath.

It was a further 22 minutes before all signs of life ceased.

He was later buried between the walls in the north west corner of the gaol.

oooOOooo