

## **An Adelaide Gaol Execution**

### **George Hughes and Henry Curran**

#### **Executed 16 March 1840**

On the evening of 26 January 1840 Michael Pffender and his family were alerted by their barking dogs to the presence of three men approaching their house.

The Pffender's were a German immigrant family who were living by the Para River.

The men, James Fox, George Hughes and Henry Curran, asked if there was any food in the house as they had been hunting emus and had not eaten. Minna Pffender prepared them a meal of bread, butter, eggs and also gave them some wine. The men said they would return to town when the moon rose. They offered to sell Michael Pffender one of their loaded guns but he told them he didn't want it.

As the visitors were leaving they asked how much they were to pay for the meal but then pushed the Pffenders onto the bed and while holding a gun to them, demanded their money. The robbers then proceeded to ransack the house and threatened to set fire to the dwelling unless they were told where the money was. They then left with articles of clothing and a bag stolen from the house.

James Fox seemed to be an unwilling participant in the venture and had returned some of the articles to the Pffenders. He was about to return some more when Hughes and Curran noticed what was happening and ordered him to cover the Pffenders with his gun while they continued their search.

When the group had left the house and things seemed quiet, Minna Pffender went to raise the alarm with neighbours. As she was leaving she was pushed to the ground and saw one of the men point a gun at her before a shot rang out. Mrs Pffender was not hurt and managed to run to the back of the house and hide in the darkness.

James Fox, George Hughes and Henry Curran were captured a few days later and charged with theft of property to the value of £5 and firing with intent to murder Mrs Pffender. They were also charged with theft of money, guns and food from other settlers two days later.

When they appeared in court to answer the charges they all pleaded not guilty. The Advocate General opened the case for the prosecution and then Mr Mann who had been appointed defence counsel, cross examined both Michael and Minna Pffender at length. The only other witness to be called was sub-inspector Edwards of the mounted police who investigated the robbery and attack. Mr Mann then spoke at considerable length on behalf of the prisoners before the judge summed up.

The jury retired and returned after a short time to find the three accused guilty but recommended James Fox to mercy. The judge then passed the death sentence on all three.

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While awaiting execution, the three men were held in the 'Stone Jug' where guards discovered that Hughes and Curran were cutting through the rivets securing their leg irons. Governor Ashton recommended to the Government that for security they should be transferred to the police barracks under the charge of Inspector Alexander Tolmer.

Tolmer confined the men in a room next to the guard-room and had iron bars installed across the windows. He visited the prisoners at random times throughout the night and found that once again Hughes and Curran had almost cut the rivets with pieces of watch spring. Heavier irons were supplied from the gaol and securely riveted by a blacksmith.

The men had been permitted to receive small quantities of tobacco from their friends and it was thought that the springs had been hidden in one of the packages.

On the morning of the execution, 16 March 1840, three coffins were brought to the police barracks but James Fox was reprieved and his sentence commuted to transportation for life. Fox subsequently died aboard the *Mary Ridgeway* while en-route to Sydney during April 1840.

The execution was carried out at the police barracks on North Terrace.

On the scaffold Hughes behaved with total indifference to his fate. He asked for a whiff of tobacco and then charged and kicked violently until the hangman was obliged to call for assistance. It took two men to restrain Hughes while the hangman made his preparations.

Curran, however was resigned to his fate and expressed the wish that his end would serve as a warning to others. He also appealed to Hughes "to be quiet and die like a man".

When the bolt was drawn Hughes made a desperate spring for life and caught the side opening of the trap with one foot. The Colonial Chaplain, Rev. Charles Howard, immediately went forward and kicked the foot off to complete the process. The bodies were later cut down and buried on site.

In 1892, human bones were discovered on North Terrace during building works. The bones were thought to be those of Hughes and Curran.

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