

Convict story - 1

My name is William Horten. I arrived at Tocal farm near Port Macquarie in NSW in 1833 when I was only 16. At that time there were more than 30 other convicts living there. We'd been assigned to work for Mr Webber. He'd been on this farm since 1822 when the land was granted to him. Convicts had cleared the property, constructed huts, built his cottage, planted his crops of corn, wheat and barley and they'd made kilometres of post and rail fences from trees they'd felled. It was hard work, but when I'd first arrived I thought anything was better than being on that ship. However, I'd seen cowsheds and pigsties that looked like palaces compared with the miserable hut eight of us had to share.

Although three-quarters of us had some education and could read. We were a rough looking group, many with tattoos on our arms. The cheap clothes we wore, that we had to pay for with the little money we earned, weren't too clean. Most of us had come from England or Ireland. Some, like me, had been handed down life sentences, but most of the others only had to do seven years. There were other younger blokes like me, but most of them were in their twenties or thirties. Then ... there was Old Michael, who must have been about 60.

We slept on beds with mattresses stuffed with straw and were given a ration of flour and meat every week which we had to cook ourselves. But I soon learnt how to make the best damper. We only got tea and sugar sometimes as a reward and if we were lucky, some tobacco too. There were a few convicts who had their own small veggie gardens.

In 1834 Mr Clarke, the manager for the new owners Caleb and Felix Wilson, arrived. There were some, like Hugh Murdock, who were very pleased to see the end of Webber. This was because he'd been given 50 lashes in 1830 and had his ticket of leave stopped just for telling a magistrate that Webber was a harsh master. This was considered disrespectful! I wouldn't dare say so, but I think Murdock was probably right because about the same time this happened, Webber sentenced two other men to death for stealing tea, coffee and sugar. Their sentences were changed to three

years in irons, building roads, which may have seemed just as bad.

Not that Clarke was any different. A year after he arrived I was given 50 lashes because I tried to run away and 50 more for neglecting my work. And believe me, I never want to meet the three sisters again. (The three sisters, if you don't already know, are three poles in a triangle that we're tied to when we're flogged. Flogging was also called 'getting a red shirt', but I don't think I need to explain that one, do I?)

Somehow I managed to keep out of trouble after my flogging and I stayed and worked at Tocal. At that time there were about 3000 sheep on the property and between three to six teams of bullocks were used for ploughing. There was still plenty of work for us to do.

In 1841, I was given my ticket of leave. This means I have to stay and work in the district and I have to report to a magistrate every three months. If I do this and my behaviour is good enough, I can earn a conditional pardon. But because of my life sentence for stealing from my master, a shoemaker in England, I don't think I'll have much chance of ever getting an absolute pardon and being able to return home. Still, life here now isn't too bad.

