

THOMAS & GEORGE COOPER

The **Cooper brothers'** grandparents were likely to have been squatters and settlers in the Forest of Dean in the western part of the County of Gloucestershire, England. This area only became inhabited in 1750-1800 when the local authorities were disorganised and failed to prevent encroachment into what had been Crown land (hunting land for medieval kings and timber for navy vessels after that)

Theirs was an isolated, rural, and recently formed community.

The brothers were children when they lost their mother in 1844 and by 1851 were living apart, working as coal miners. They were "Forest boys" - rough and independent. In 1861 **Thomas Cooper**, aged about 32, had a wife and four children. His brother **George**, younger by 7 years, was unmarried.

On the evening of the 17th August 1861, **Thomas and George Cooper** were in the company of two other men at Speech House Inn in the township of West Dean. Police Sergeant Samuel Beard of Littledean, aged 37, was also at the Inn. He had been planning to watch for sheep stealers later night. He became suspicious of the group.

The policeman ducked out of the Inn and hid behind a bank. The **Cooper brothers** and their friends eventually left with their dogs at around 10.45pm and the policeman followed them. At some point Sgt. Beard decided to approach the men, believing they were setting nets for game. The poachers resisted arrest and beat the policeman severely, damaging his jaws and fracturing his skull. He was not discovered until 4am the next morning, by a tree with blood pouring out from his mouth and ears.

Sgt. Beard died a week later from his injuries, but not before he had identified his assailants. This was the first murder of an on duty policeman in Gloucestershire and the crime caused outrage.

The four men were tried at Gloucestershire Assize in December 1861 and were all sentenced to 15 years for manslaughter. The severity of the sentence took many by surprise. The prisoners were still at Gloucester in early 1862 but were likely transferred to Millbank Prison, London prior to transportation.

The two **Cooper brothers** appeared to have been able to remain together through the penal process in England. They were assigned consecutive Convict numbers and arrived at Fremantle in May 1863 on the same ship. By 1865 they were Probationary Convicts at the Toodyay Convict Depot. The brothers were noted for their good conduct and for their great attachment to each other.



On the morning of February 10th, 1865 they were working together using explosive charges to drill for water through rock. At 6.45am a shot-hole was drilled at the base of the well shaft. It was primed and then set to detonate after the men had climbed out. However, it failed to go off and after waiting an hour and a half the two brothers went back down the well to re-drill the hole and re-set the charge. This was not an unusual task; the brothers had reportedly done this dozens of times during their working lives.

At just past 9 o'clock, when the two brothers were still working about 8 metres below ground, there was an explosion. The Depot medical officer was on the spot and both men were pulled up and transferred to the Infirmary nearby.

Further medical aid was sent for from York and Dr McCoy arrived as promptly as possible that evening. Today the road distance between York and Toodyay is just over 60km and is about an hour's drive. In 1865 the journey by horse and cart, on less formed roads, took much longer.

Both men's injuries were horrific. **George's** arms were smashed and he also suffered other dreadful wounds. It was a mercy when he died at 11pm that evening. Thomas lost an eye and was wadding, placed between the powder and the tamping, was driven in under his chin by nearly 5cm.

George was buried in the Toodyay area at an unknown location; the current public cemetery at Toodyay was not established until after this date.

Thomas eventually recovered, although for a while his condition was considered precarious. He received his ticket of leave in April 1865, which allowed him to seek work within a nominated district, as long as he reported regularly to the local magistrate.

Two years later, **Thomas** was employed at the Gwalla copper mine, located 50 km north of Geraldton and near the current town of Northampton. A settlement developed around the mine-site which operated between 1859 and 1868, and later re-opened in 1907.

On the 14th August 1867 **Thomas** was at work in the Gwalla mine. He lit a fuse for a blast. The blast did not go off and he went back in to find the cause. As he drew near the location of the charge there was an explosion and he lost his life.

It was six years - almost to the day - that **Thomas and his brother George** had tried to avoid being caught poaching a few hares on the other side of the world.

Information about the Cooper brothers' lives prior to their arrival at Fremantle has been generously shared by Thomas Cooper's great-great-grandson, Steven Carter who resides in Nottingham, England.

THOMAS COOPER

Number: 7049

Born: 1829

Died: 14th August 1867

Arrival date:

29th May 1863

Ship: *Clyde*

Ticket of Leave:

26th April 1865



Physical description: Blue eyes, round face, fresh complexion, middling stout build, slightly pock-pitted skin, height: 5ft 9in (175cm), light brown hair

- Sentenced (with younger brother George) at Gloucester, England for manslaughter – 15 years
- Married with four children, collier (coal miner)
- Illiterate
- Arrived at Fremantle in possession of a hymn book and a manual
- Badly injured (lost an eye) on 6th February 1865 from an explosion while digging a well at the Toodyay Convict Depot
- His brother, George Cooper, died in the same blast
- Two and a half years later died (aged 37 or 38) in a mine explosion at Gwalla (Northampton)
- Has a great-great-grandson currently living in Nottingham, England

GEORGE COOPER

Number: 7048

Born: 1836

Died: 6th February 1865

Arrival date:

29th May 1863

Ship: *Clyde*

Ticket of Leave:

Not allocated at time of death



Physical description: Grey eyes, full face, sallow complexion, middling stout build, scar on head, height 5ft 7in (170cm), light brown hair

- Sentenced in 1861 (with older brother Thomas) at Gloucester, England for manslaughter – 15 years
- Unmarried, collier (coal miner)
- Semi-literate
- Arrived at Fremantle in possession of a hymn book and possibly some postage stamps
- Died from an explosive blast (aged 28 or 29) while digging a well at the Toodyay Convict Depot



- His brother, Thomas Cooper, was also badly injured in the same blast but survived
- Buried at Toodyay in unknown location