

JOHN JOHNSON & THE MACPHERSON MURDERS

In the second week of January 1889, 61 year old Expiree and Scottish-born, **John Johnson** decided to board for a short time with the Macpherson family. They lived in a cottage (with two rooms and a lean-to) on the Hawthornden estate in the Toodyay valley.

John Macpherson and his wife Joanna had been on the property for ten years, managing it for the owner, Daniel Connor. They had a 15 year old daughter, Janet, and an 11 year old son, Duncan.

Johnson paid the family a pound to bed down in the cottage lean-to at night while he searched the surrounding bushland during the day for hardened sap (the shining, amber globules of gum) that collected on the trunks of some of the local trees.

(The sap, otherwise known as gum arabic, is edible and after being collected, dried and powdered was used for a variety of purposes, including as a stabiliser in food, paints and inks. It could be traded at stores for goods.)

“Gumming” was an occupation that suited **Johnson**’s solitary nature. After about five days of roaming the bush **Johnson** changed his routine and hung around the Macpherson’s vegetable garden all morning. It was Wednesday 16th January.

At about 11.30am Janet came to harvest some cabbages. **Johnson** caught hold of Janet and despite her objections kissed her. She screamed and ran back home to tell her father.

Johnson denied Janet’s allegation, and blamed Janet’s mother for putting words into her daughter’s mouth. **Johnson** and John Macpherson argued. After collecting his things from the house **Johnson** left with his dog, angrily declaring he had been planning to stay another fortnight.

The rest of the day was uneventful and the family went to bed at 9.00pm. Janet slept under the window. Her mother and brother were in another bed in the same room and her father slept on a sofa in the dining room. The front and back doors of the cottage could be opened from the outside.

About an hour later Janet was woken by a man grabbing her feet. She shouted for her father, waking her mother who also sounded the alarm. Her father responded wanting to know what was going on. **Johnson** had returned and he declared he was going to shoot them all.



Janet fled through the window to the sound of a gun, and ran to her closest neighbour about 2 km away. **Johnson** had shot John Macpherson in the dining room, killing him at close range. He then fought ferociously with Joanna Macpherson, fatally injuring her by fracturing her skull. Next he returned to the bedroom and bashed Duncan Macpherson on the head, leaving him for dead.

Footprints found the following morning indicated Johnson had then chased after Janet Macpherson for some distance before giving up. Frustrated, Johnson hid his gun under a bush, retraced his steps, retrieved his dog and belongings and left the scene.

Duncan survived but never fully recovered his wits, and Janet found a home with kindly Mrs W.R. Piesse. After the inquest she never spoke again about her experiences that terrible night.

At 7am the following morning **Johnson** visited his friend Thomas Robinson who lived 25 km from Newcastle (now Toodyay) in a northerly direction from the McPherson cottage. **Johnson** paid his friend £5 for a double-barrelled gun and some ammunition, and then confessed that he had “croaked” an old man, a woman and a boy. Before he left he threatened to blow out the brains of anyone who tried to arrest him, and failing that would slit his own throat with the razor he was carrying.

Robinson found out the real circumstances of the murders on Thursday afternoon, and over the next couple of days denied having seen **Johnson**, fearing he would get into trouble for helping him. It was not until after the Macpherson funerals on Saturday that Robinson finally told the Police the truth. **Johnson** had left Robinson’s house in the direction of the Victoria Plains road and was heading north.

In the meantime **Johnson** had been spotted by others. On Thursday afternoon, Ellen O’Dea, who lived at Mount Anvil, about 29 km north of Newcastle, had seen Johnson at her place at about 1pm. He returned three hours later and got a drink at the well near the homestead. Ellen then saw him go in the direction of the main road. She did not learn of the murders until Friday morning at which point she immediately sent word to the Police.

On Saturday morning two Police officers and an Aboriginal tracker were nearing Mount Anvil. They met Mr. Clune who said he had seen a man lying down near the O’Dea house at 4 o’clock the previous afternoon. The Police went to the spot indicated by Mr Clune and found **Johnson**’s body. It was about 17 paces from the road and 135 metres from the O’Dea well.

Johnson had committed suicide by shooting himself in the neck in the right angle of the jaw while lying on his back. This was determined to have happened “on or about” Friday 18th January.

Robinson was censured for withholding information. It was felt if he had been truthful sooner; **Johnson** would probably have been caught alive.

JOHN JOHNSON

Number: 6011

Born: 1827

Died: 18th January 1889

Arrival date:

28th January 1862

Ship: *Lincelles*

Ticket of Leave:

15th February 1863

Conditional Pardon:

21st May 1866

Certificate of Freedom:

13th March 1869



- Sentenced in 1858 at Doncaster, England for stealing – 10 years
- Unmarried, labourer, Scottish-born
- Semi-literate
- Found casual work in the Toodyay area and then later in other parts of Western Australia as a labourer, carter, general servant
- Around 1880 returned to settle in the Toodyay area, preferring to work alone



- Murdered Mrs and Mrs John Macpherson at the Hawthorden property, Newcastle (now Toodyay) and then committed suicide (aged 61) a few days later
- Buried at Toodyay in unknown location