

Getting rid of problem families: Mary Beacroft and her three sons

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Luke Beacroft (or Baycroft, as the family was sometimes referred to in the official records) was eleven and his younger brother John was only eight when they were brought before the Stockport magistrates in November 1841, charged with larceny and vagrancy. They were whipped and imprisoned for two months on that occasion. The Superintendent of Police, Mr Sadler, noted that these boys were already old offenders and that they and their two brothers had already cost the County of Chester between £400 and £500, an enormous sum for those times and in today's money between £34,000 and £43,000. (That is, between about \$60,000 and \$80,000 AUD)

So, what had befallen the Beacrofts to bring them to this situation? And what could be done about this problem family?

Nothing is known of the mother Mary's background, but the father, Luke, was the second youngest of the ten surviving children of Joseph and Betty Beacroft of Stockport. His eldest brother James was a miller by trade and prospered, a number of his children becoming successful teachers and several of his grandchildren became doctors. Another brother joined the Army and served in India for many years. His sisters married, mostly to men involved in some way in cotton manufacturing. There is no hint of trouble with the authorities in any of these families.

The suggestion of trouble for Luke Beacroft, who worked as a dyer, came early. In 1825, aged twenty-four, he was sentenced to three months' hard labour for non-payment of his bastard child. Three years later, in December 1828, he married Mary Mitchell (who is identified in the convict records as Mary Hibbens) at Manchester. Five sons were born in quick succession: Joseph, Charles, Luke, John and James. Their last child, a daughter Elizabeth, was born in January 1839. Shortly afterwards, Luke Beacroft died, leaving Mary to raise the six children on her own.

That Mary could not manage in her role as sole provider for her family soon became clear. When the census was taken on 6 June 1841, it appeared that all might be well. Mary, described as a housekeeper, was living in the home of 70 year old Charles Hitchens, a tailor, and his son Charles, also a tailor, in Higher Hillgate, Stockport. Her sons Joseph 14, Charles 12, Luke 10 and John 8 are all described as cotton doffers, so everyone in the household, except for 5 year old James and 3 year old Elizabeth, was employed in some capacity.

A little delving beneath the surface of the official record reveals a much grimmer picture. Life in the cotton mills, especially for children, was appalling. Often, employers opted to hire pauper children as they were readily available, they were cheap and the workhouses kept up a steady supply of children. After all, if they were in employment, the children cost the workhouse nothing. Discipline was fierce inside the mill. As doffers, the Beacroft boys replaced full bobbins with empty ones, a job that required speed and dexterity. Overseers armed with whips or heavy leather straps beat those who did not keep up the required pace. The children worked long and arduous hours (15 hours a day, 6 days a week) in conditions so appalling that in the 1830s, the life expectancy of the poor in nearby Manchester was only seventeen, the early deaths brought on by working long hours in rooms full of dust and fibres, often in little more than rags and suffering from malnutrition. Those of you

who watched the BBC dramatisation of Elizabeth Gaskell's novel *North and South*, will be able to visualise what life must have been like for the Beacroft boys.

By 1841, too, Stockport had endured over twenty years of unrest and social disorder. At the forefront were the Chartists, a group whose aim was to gain political rights and influence for the working man. Things were so bad in Stockport in 1841, for example, that there were riots, mobs attacked mills and nearly all the mills closed. It has been estimated that by March 1842 nearly thirteen and a half thousand Stockport people were living on about one shilling a week, including 3d received from a Relief Committee.

Suddenly, the family's situation as suggested in the 1841 Census does not look quite so rosy. In November 1841, Luke and John, brutalised by their lives in the mills, and now unemployed, appeared before the courts and we have our first official glimpse of what their future might hold. They were whipped and imprisoned at the Knutsford House of Corrections for two months where the treatment of eleven year old Luke made it into Hansard. In 1843, an inquiry was held into the treatment of prisoners at the House of Correction in Knutsford. It is recorded there that before he was sent to Parkhurst, Luke was 'flogged so carelessly, that his eye was severely injured by the thong.'

Just a few months later, in April 1842, John, still only 8 years old, was brought before the courts again and sentenced to three months' imprisonment. Seven months later, in late November 1842, he was found guilty of larceny (he has stolen books) and sentenced to 7 years' transportation. He remained in England for another two years, and in that time was taught the trade of tailoring. He was 13 years old when he arrived in Van Diemen's Land on board the *Lord Auckland* and served his sentence at Point Puer where he spent several short periods in solitary confinement and once received 36 lashes for being absent without leave. These were his only offences and he received his Free Certificate in November 1849, seven years to the day after sentencing. He was 15 years old.

A year after John had been sentenced, his brother Luke appeared before the courts on 27 November 1843. He was thirteen and was sentenced to 7 years transportation. Like his younger brother, he was not transported immediately and remained in England until mid 1848. He spent the first five years of his sentence at the Parkhurst Boys Prison on the Isle of Wight. He was 18 when he arrived in Van Diemen's Land on board the *Ratcliffe*. There were 27 other Parkhurst Boys on board. The Parkhurst scheme was designed to rehabilitate young offenders in England, then they were sent to the colonies to become apprentices to local settlers. Luke trained as a carpenter under the scheme. The only notation on his convict record once he arrived in Van Diemen's Land was in January 1849 when he was assigned to a James Reeves of Oatlands, so possibly he was apprenticed to Reeves.

Then it was the turn of brother Charles, tried in January 1844 aged 14, found guilty of larceny (he had stolen money from a shop drawer) and sentenced to transportation. Like his brothers, he did not leave England immediately. Unlike his brothers, he was not sent to Van Diemen's Land, but arrived in Victoria in August 1847 on board the *Joseph Soames*, aged 17. He arrived not as a convict, but as an Exile, not from Pentonville, but from Parkhurst. On board were 85 other Parkhurst Boys. The Exile system was an initiative brought in by prison reformers later in the year he was tried, 1844. Under the scheme, he served part of his sentence in England, and as an Exile, was pardoned on board the ship to Australia. He had been trained as a carpenter as part of the scheme and on arrival at Geelong was given employment. As a skilled worker in a growing colony, his newly acquired trade should have stood him in good stead.

So, by January 1844, only three of the Beacroft children remained in Stockport with Mary: 17 year old Joseph, 8 year old James and 5 year old Elizabeth. Whether Mary knew that her other three children were still in England at this time is not known.

In January 1848, in her forties, Mary was brought before the court, charged with larceny and sentenced to 7 years' transportation. By the time she sailed for Van Diemen's Land six months later, her sons John, Luke and Charles were already in Australia. Did she know this? Did she know that Charles had in fact gone to live in Victoria and not Van Diemen's Land? Did she commit her crime in order to join them in the colonies? And if she was attempting to reunite with her family, why did her daughter Elizabeth not accompany her? Perhaps by then Elizabeth, who was only nine, was no longer living with her mother. Could this be the reason that she was left behind? Her sons Joseph and James disappear from view after the 1841 census, so I have assumed they died.

Mary Beacroft arrived in Hobart on 6 August 1848. At that time her son Charles had also slipped from view, but was perhaps still living in Geelong. Her son John was serving his sentence at Point Puer and Luke was living in Oatlands. The last sighting of Luke was in 1851 when his sentence expired. Despite following a number of promising leads, I have discovered no sign of son John after the expiration of his sentence in November 1849. Mary married a Henry Pearce in Hobart in September 1849 and apart from one punishment for 'disorderly conduct' at Three Hut Point (present day Gordon) she did not offend again and was Free by January 1854. At this point she, too, disappears from view.

Going back now to daughter Elizabeth left behind in England: By 1851, when she was 13, she was working as a servant for an elderly Yorkshire farmer and his wife. Elizabeth, too, made her way in and out of the records, reappearing in the 1871 Census in Manchester, still unmarried and working as a braid maker. She did not prosper and twenty years later, described as a laundress, she was a resident of a Manchester Workhouse. Ironically, the only member of the family who can be traced beyond the 1850s is the child left behind, who somehow made her way in the world, despite her inauspicious start in life, but who never managed to move beyond a life of poverty.

So, did this family ever reconnect? It's impossible to tell.

Looking back on the fragmentary evidence that I have uncovered, the disappearance of the Beacroft family could lead to the conclusion that the reforming efforts of the English authorities were successful and that the Beacrofts went on to live uneventful lives. After all, the times they appeared in the official records were when they were on the wrong side of the law. Could the silence of the records suggest a successful assimilation into mainstream society under assumed names?

This seems unlikely, however. When I posed the possibility of a reformed family to Janet McCalman of the Founders and Survivors project, her response was that the boys' 'youth and their collective crime history do not bode well' for a crime-free later life.

Of course, the boys could have changed their names after sentence and relocated to other colonies or New Zealand or even America. We cannot tell. And variations of the spelling of their surname (23 to date) have made the quest to discover what happened to the Beacroft boys a frustrating exercise littered with deadends. Of their mother's life after her marriage to Henry Pierce, there is nothing to tell, either.

It seems, then, that although more than half the members of the family unit relocated to Australia, the Beacrofts did not 'reconnect', or if they did so, it was under assumed names and in places unknown.