

The criminals

By Jane Smith

For the most part, the passengers of the *Emigrant* were law-abiding folk. There were no known budding rapists or murderers in their number. But there were some who spent time behind bars. Some of the young men, on finding themselves free in the rowdy environment of Moreton Bay, lost their heads and suffered the consequences. Their crimes were mostly drunkenness and minor misbehaviour, and they were punished with brief sentences or fines.

These misdemeanours were often embarrassing ones. In June 1851, 21-year-old Englishman James Welsh pleaded guilty to indecently exposing himself in Queen Street and was fined £5.¹ He was fined again the following year for drunkenness, before settling down to become a respectable family man. English labourer Joseph Wright, who was also 21 on his arrival, travelled to Ipswich, where – while ‘drunk and offensive’ – he was arrested on 10 August 1851 for ‘innocently exposing his person’ on the street. Whilst in the Ipswich lock-up he tried to incite the other prisoners to break out.² Evidently unable to come up with the £10 fine, Joseph Wright spent the next two months in the Brisbane Gaol. Over the next few years he was fined more than once for being drunk and disorderly.

Irishman James Brophy was imprisoned for two days in Brisbane only months after his arrival in the colony, for going about his duties of employment in such an ‘idle and lazy manner’³. And Benjamin Eagle, a 23-year-old labourer from London, was admitted to the Brisbane Gaol from Ipswich in January 1851 (on charges unknown), and spent 24 hours in solitary confinement before being escorted to Sydney.

Likewise, some of the *Emigrant’s* crew found themselves in hot water shortly after arrival. Aside from the four deserters, seaman Edward Ward⁴ was gaoled in March 1851 and John Brooks the following year. The latter had been in Ipswich and was imprisoned in Brisbane for one month, having been unable to pay a fine of £2.

These men weren’t hardened criminals. Their crimes were likely the result of high spirits, immaturity and booze. Overwhelmingly, the passengers of the *Emigrant* were a law-abiding lot.

¹ QSA Item ID518885, *Register - depositions (1850-1854)*

² QSA Item ID5153, *Register of proceedings - Court of Petty Sessions, Ipswich*

³ *ibid*

⁴ Possibly the same seaman Ward who was in the list of the sick on board the *Emigrant* when it arrived in Moreton Bay.