

A Story from the Adelaide Gaol

The Life of Mary Ann & John McKeen – 1860 to 1943

Adelaide, South Australia.

Mary Ann Cotter was born on the 22nd September 1860 at the Kensington Town Hall Infirmary, Middlesex, England to William & Honora Cotter.

Mary Ann's Father was described as a general labourer.

Mary Ann arrived in Adelaide prior to 1879. Based on her subsequent life style, if she had been born when transportation was about, then most likely she would have been transported to Australia.

In 1879 she recorded her first conviction in a South Australian Court, for being drunk and disorderly. She was sentenced to 7 days imprisonment at Adelaide Gaol.

Within 2 months she was back in court on a charge of Indecent Language and fined 1 pound or 14 days in gaol.

From 1879 until 1889 Mary Ann was fined and gaoled on 22 occasions.

Mary married William August Hebbeman, a log splitter, in the District of Norwood on 15 March 1884.

Records reveal that William & Mary registered the birth of a son on 15th of March 1884.

On March 28 1884 Mary was gaoled for 6 months hard labour for assault of a Mr Rowe of Kensington.

In 1885 Mary faced a murder charge, the murder of William Hebbeman (her son) but was cleared by the Coroner at the inquest.

In November 1886 Mary Ann was gaoled for 3 weeks on each charge for Indecent Language & Loitering. It was during this term that the Keeper of the Gaol registered that Mary Ann Cotter had given birth to twins. A male & female registered on 17 of December 1886. The Father's name was noted as James Crawley.

John McKeen was in gaol at the time Mary gave birth but it is unknown whether they were aware of each other. Possibly yes, because of their marriage several years later, or maybe they just happened to meet several years later.

John McKeen (sometimes spelt McKean although a copy of his birth record shows it as McKeen) was born at St Pancras workhouse in the County of Middlesex, England on October 25 1845. He was the son of John & Jane McKeen.

John like Mary arrived in Adelaide at an early age.

In 1886 John was found guilty of being Idle & Disorderly and sentenced to one month in gaol. Again in 1886 for receiving suspected goods he served 3 months, and in 1888 for stealing a pair of boots, 6 months hard labour.

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At some time, John and Mary met, their marriage took place at St Barnabas College, Kemode St, North Adelaide on the 14 May 1891. Their address was also there at this time as John was working as a stone mason. A discrepancy shows his age as 38. Mary is shown as a Spinster.

In 1891 Mary had a miscarriage.

John became the Night Warder at Adelaide Gaol. The Night Warder was often also the Hangman. The Night Warder was the person who checked each cell at night from 12 midnight until 8.00am, then worked 2 hours (12 noon to 2.00pm) during the lunch hour.

His pay record shows payment as 7 shillings per night.

For his hangman's duties he was paid by the Sheriff's Department. Normally about 10-11 pounds, the equivalent of 4-5 weeks normal work.

John performed his duty as hangman in 1894, 1895 and 1897. He would have done another in January 1900, but he died before then.

It is not known if John performed Flagellator work as this would have provided additional income. In the 1870-80s both duties were combined.

Shortly after their marriage a son was born. At this time, they moved to 1 Finis St, North Adelaide where they lived until the time of his death in The Royal Adelaide Hospital in October 1900.

John is recorded as being buried in West Terrace, but authorities are unable to say where. Not an uncommon occurrence as a lot of people were buried with relatives in existing graves, and the location was not recorded. Of course relatives knew which grave until they too died then the locations were lost.

It is highly probable that Mary is buried with John as her grave and several other relatives share the same grave.

After John's death, Mary married William Collins' a gas fitter from Norwood. The marriage was performed at Parochial House, Adelaide on 15 December 1902. The groom being 43 years old and the bride 42.

Mary Ann later moved to the Mitcham area, and at her death in 1943 her address was given as Little Sisters of the Poor, Glen Osmond lately of Oval Terrace, Kensington.

Mary died in the Royal Adelaide Hospital.

A discrepancy shows her age as 79 years. It was not uncommon to drop your age back at that time.

One of Mary Ann's Twins, Honora (Honorah) Cotter married Thomas Williams a Commercial Traveller of Auckland, New Zealand, in Adelaide, on 7 May 1915.

Thomas was 30 years old and Honora 26, again an age discrepancy.

John disappeared, and as yet has not been traced.

Mary is recorded as having in her life 4 children.

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An enigma, Mary Ann's grave only records beloved mother of Nora.

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Extracts of an unpublished story on the life of Mary Ann & John McKeen. Adelaide, S.A. 2006.