

JANE NOTTINGHAM

[*Duchess of Northumberland* (2), 1853]

by

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While it is not difficult to feel sympathy for almost all of the 13,500 (approx.) women who were transported as convicts to Van Diemen's Land (VDL) between 1812 and 1853, the stories of some of the women evoke more pity than others. One of the most pitiful, perhaps, is that of Jane Nottingham.¹ Born at Brimfield, Herefordshire, England, around 1820, she was only six or seven when her mother died and afterwards seems to have had to fend for herself. Before she was in her twenties, she had turned to crime, often with violence. She was imprisoned frequently. Unattractive, unloved, unmarried and unwanted, she was wretchedly unhappy when, in 1851, she was convicted of arson. Sentenced to transportation for her crime, she admitted to being pleased that she was about to be sent away because she would be better off anywhere else than where she was presently. In late 1852, she was put aboard *Duchess of Northumberland*, the last ship to take female prisoners to VDL before the cessation of transportation, but, tragically, did not even get to set foot on the land to which she had been banished. On 15 February 1853, after only forty days into a voyage that was expected to take about one hundred and fifty, she passed away and was buried at sea.²

This is Jane's story:

Although there is some doubt about the year of Jane's birth, it is likely that she was born in 1821. Church records at Brimfield, Herefordshire, England, show that she and her brother John were baptised there on 17 March 1823.³

Nothing is known about her childhood but, following the death of her mother in 1831, it is probable that she was obliged to find work to support herself. The 1841 census of England shows her as a 'servant', aged twenty, in the household of John Jay, a farmer at Kimbolton, near Leominster, Herefordshire. Ten years later, however, her circumstances were quite different. The 1851 census lists her as a 'lodger' in the home of William Taylor at Tenbury, a few kilometres north of Kimbolton.⁴ A note in the census document states that she was receiving 'parish relief' at this time.

Many English parishes had found that maintaining a workhouse for those who were unable to provide for themselves was a too-costly thing to do. Instead, they had encouraged those who

1 Conduct record: CON41/1/37, image 164; Indent 15-1-8, image 100; Police No. 137; FCRC ID: 131653.

2 Death, age: Medical journal of Mr. Charles Smith, surgeon aboard *Duchess of Northumberland* in 1852/53 at www.femaleconvicts.org

3 Burial of mother, Jane Nottingham, aged 53, 25 October 1831: findmypast.co.uk.

4 findmypast.co.uk, ref. HO107, Piece 429, Book 16, Folio 17, page 5, via FCRC contributor Eileen Ball at www.femaleconvicts.org, August 2020.

were able to live independently in lodgings to do so - and they had instituted a system of 'parish relief'. Commonly, this took the form either of a regular pension or casual payments on an 'as-required' basis, thus allowing those in need to feed and clothe themselves. Of course, some workhouses had to be maintained for people - the very young, the sick and the elderly, especially - who were not able to live independently.⁵

How much 'parish relief' Jane was getting is unclear but it seems certain that, by 1850, she had been supplementing whatever charity she was given with the proceeds of her criminal activities. By this time, she was already very well known to the police. On 12 June 1850, she was arrested for assaulting Mrs. Elizabeth Lambert, the Assistant Matron of the Tenbury Union Workhouse, the establishment responsible for providing her with her parish relief. As it happens, she had only recently been released from that place after having been incarcerated there for a month on a charge of 'malicious trespass'. There is reason to believe that she had felt that Mrs. Lambert had wronged her in some way during her time there and that, after her release, she had decided to get even with her.⁶

Taken to Birmingham Prison about thirty-seven miles (sixty kms) away to await trial, she was described in the Admissions Register as being twenty-six years old and single, five feet and one inch (155 cms) tall, with a brown complexion, dark brown hair, and grey eyes. She had scars on her left hand and several moles on each arm. She could read imperfectly.⁷

It was also noted in the Register that she had already served a total of twenty-five prison terms and that she had been in custody at fifteen different gaols. Her most recent offence had occurred in April 1850 when she had been committed to Shrewsbury House of Correction for two months after having been found guilty of 'breaking windows'.⁸

At her trial in early July 1850, Jane was convicted of assaulting Mrs. Lambert and sentenced to six months' imprisonment.⁹ That experience, however, had taught her nothing. In fact, it might well have exacerbated her anger, frustration and rebelliousness. Less than six months later, she committed the offence that led to her conviction and transportation.

On 30 August 1851, the *Hereford Times* reported that there had been a fire in a hay rick at 'Burford House', the Tenbury property of Captain George Rushout, the Member of Parliament for East Worcestershire. The hay rick was a big one - twenty to twenty-five tons in size - and it had taken the efforts of a large number of people to extinguish the blaze. Suspicion for the fire had soon fallen upon Jane, referred to in the *Hereford Times* article as 'a woman of bad

5 <https://www.londonlives.org/static/ParishRelief.jsp>

6 The Tenbury Poor Law Union was formed in 1836 and the workhouse constructed the following year - see <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/Tenbury/>; Birmingham Prison Register via findmypast.co.uk per FCRC contributor Eileen Ball (see Note 4).

7 Birmingham Prison Register via findmypast.co.uk per FCRC contributor Eileen Ball (see Note 4).

8 Breaking windows: *Worcestershire Chronicle*, 17 April 1850, per Eileen Ball (see Note 4).

9 Assault: Criminal Register for Worcester Summer Sessions, 1 July 1850 via Ancestry.co.uk, per FCRC contributor Eileen Ball (see Note 4).

character', one who had repeatedly been involved in acts of violence. She had been taken into custody shortly afterwards.¹⁰

At a committal hearing in the days which followed, Jane had freely admitted that she had set the fire - and she had produced a box of matches to prove it! She said that her only regret was that the hay rick had not burnt to the ground completely. 'It should have done so,' she stated, 'as I set fire to it in enough places.' She then told the authorities that she had done it because she *wanted* to be arrested. When told that her action could possibly lead to her being transported for life, she answered, 'I would be better off than I am now.' A witness told the hearing that he had heard Jane say that she was going to do something which would cause her to go to prison 'or further off' - and that she had thought that if she were put into prison, and kept there long enough, she might be cured of her 'illness'. Jane had also been heard to say that 'she would do something to Mrs. Hammond and Mrs. Lambert' - the Matron and Assistant Matron of the Tenbury Union Workhouse - and that she trusted that the authorities would 'confine me here for life or that they will send me away to another country for I cannot get a living here'. She had added: 'If they will confine me, I may then prepare myself for another world which I cannot do now'.¹¹

At the conclusion of the hearing, Jane was fully committed to trial and held in custody pending a date to be set. In the meantime, the *Hereford Times* reported that Captain Rushout had rewarded the people - about one hundred and thirty in all - who had helped to save his hay rick by inviting them to 'Burford House' where they had enjoyed his hospitality and had each been presented with a gift of cash varying from two shillings and sixpence to seven shillings and sixpence.¹²

It was to be seven months before Jane's case came to court. Unfortunately, a transcript of the trial, held at the Shrewsbury Assizes, Shrewsbury, Shropshire, on 17 March 1852, has not been located but its outcome has been well documented. As expected, Jane was convicted. She was sentenced to transportation for fifteen years.¹³

On 3 May 1852, she was transferred from Shrewsbury Prison, Shropshire, to Millbank Prison, London, where she joined a number of other female prisoners who were awaiting transportation to VDL.¹⁴ On 16 November 1852, she was put aboard *Duchess of Northumberland* which, with George Mitchell as Master and Charles Smith as Surgeon-superintendent, sailed from Woolwich on 28 November 1852. On board were a total of 219 female convicts - and thirty-four children that they had been given permission to take with them.¹⁵

10 Precis of *Hereford Times* article, 30 August 1851, by Eileen Ball (See Note 4);

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Rushout,_3rd_Baron_Northwick

11 *Ibid.*

12 findmypas.co.uk per FCRC contributor Eileen Ball (see Note 4).

13 http://oldbritishnews.com/convicts/index.php/transported_convicts-17/

14 findmypas.co.uk per FCRC contributor Eileen Ball (see Note 4).

15 <http://members.iinet.net.au/~perthdps/convicts/shipsTAS.html>

Before the ship sailed, Dr. Smith had spoken to the convicts about the perilous position they would be in at sea. Obviously in an attempt to encourage orderly behaviour and self-discipline, he had handed out tracts for them to read, some of which contained accounts of shipwrecks and similar maritime disasters. But reminding the women of the dangers of their present circumstances was not the only form of control on board. Smith had also introduced the women to ‘The Box’, a place for the solitary confinement of those who committed misdemeanours during the voyage.¹⁶

Gilbert James Inglis, the purser on *Duchess of Northumberland* on this voyage, described ‘The Box’ and the way it was used in a diary in which he recorded aspects of shipboard life which he found interesting, strange or amusing. Before the vessel had departed, he had written:

*The doctor rather frightened the women into a quieter mood by putting them in mind of the solitary confinement box, which is a box about six feet high by about two feet square just so they can stand upright in it.*¹⁷

Being unable to lie down, sit or even squat in the ‘The Box’, meant that it was a cruel instrument of punishment but, not altogether surprisingly, Jane spent time in it. Inglis’s diary note for 11 January 1853 reads in part:

*Jane Nottingham, the ugliest woman I ever saw (her age I believe is 26 but you would take her for fifty), was put in the box for insulting language and disorderly conduct. She has been confined in 29 different jails and I believe her last offence was setting fire to a haystack.*¹⁸

‘The ugliest woman I ever saw!’ How awful! If Inglis’s description of Jane is credible, it is little wonder that she was as angry and difficult as she was! But there is probably another reason for her irritability at this time. She was not well.

In his medical journal, Smith noted later that while most of the women had ‘suffered a good deal’ from sea-sickness, the number who had been treated for more serious illnesses was ‘unusually small, being altogether sixty-one’. Unfortunately, Jane had been one of them. On 15 January 1853, just a few days after her confinement in ‘The Box’, she had reported ill to Smith, who had admitted her to the ship’s hospital and treated her for severe diarrhoea. Sadly, she was never able to leave the hospital again. She passed away a month later.¹⁹ Of her, Smith wrote:

This woman has led a most dissipated and wandering life & has been in 24 different Prisons for various misdemeanours. She is also of a potent and intractable disposition and appears to be at times partially insane ... Her present illness has

16Bellis, G. (2019). ‘This looks more like a register of deaths than a journal...’, in Royal Museums Greenwich blog, 14 October 2019, at <https://www.rmg.co.uk/discover/behind-the-scenes/blog-looks-more-register-deaths-journal>

17 *Ibid*; see also *Diary of Gilbert Purser on the convict ship Duchess of Northumberland, 1852-1853* (<https://collections.rmg.co.uk/archive/objects/505948.html>) (RMG ID: JOD/150).

18 *Ibid*

19 Death: At sea, 14 February 1853 – see: <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C11542119>, medical journal of *Duchess of Northumberland*, convict ship from 16 November 1852 to 21 April 1853 - Reference: ADM 101/254/1C, accessed 20 July 2020 ; see also: https://www.femaleconvicts.org.au/docs/ships/DuchessOfNorthumberland1853_SJ.pdf;

*been brought on by damp feet, change of food, etc ... The skin is of a dusky & unhealthy hue & the tongue is covered with a thick dark brown or black fur. With great thirst. Indicative of grave derangement of the digestive organs ... a small wine glassful every 3 or 4 hours ... [she] has now a sunk & exhausted aspect ... Various astringents combined with opium were tried from time to time ... with generous diet. These remedies however produced no permanent beneficial effect. Low muttering delirium with great prostration of strength set in & she gradually sank and died ...*²⁰

So, what is to be made of poor Jane Nottingham? Although she seems to have been a violent bully and not at all likeable, it is impossible not to feel some sympathy for her.

Could she have been, as Dr. Smith suggested, ‘partially insane’? She herself had spoken of looking forward to time in prison as a means of curing her ‘illness’. Was she aware that she had problems with her mental health? Or were the problems she encountered in life simply the result of an unfortunate early life and a physical appearance that not only made it difficult for others to befriend her but also robbed her of self-esteem.

What a wretched, short life she lived!

20 ‘The Medical Journal of Dr Charles Smith, *Duchess of Northumberland* (2), 1852-1853 at https://www.femaleconvicts.org.au/docs/ships/DuchessOfNorthumberland1853_SJ.pdf