

Bushrangers at Timor Caves, New South Wales Australia

Part 1 – Captain Thunderbolt

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There have been numerous instances during the 1800s and early 1900s where bushrangers/outlaws have utilised caves as hideouts to evade capture. Either individually or in a gang, they roamed the inland regions of Australia, robbing citizens or institutions and at times committing murders. Some examples in New South Wales are James McEwan at Jenolan Caves, the Ribbon Gang at Abercrombie Caves and Ben Hall's Cave in Weddin Mountains National Park.

The discovery of two bushranger signatures in Main Cave (TR1) at Timor, New South Wales could be yet another example if the signatures can be verified as authentic. The signatures in question, "Fred Ward 1865" (alias Captain Thunderbolt), written with reddish-brown chalk or ochre, and "Jimmy Governor 1899", written with black lead pencil, are inscribed on the wall in obscure locations well inside the cave. They are both written in the style of writing characteristic of the time. The signature of Fred Ward at Timor was observed as early as the 1890s by a local resident and again in about 1910 as detailed in the book 'Timor Caves' published by the Sydney Speleological Society in 1976 (James et al, 1976). It should be noted that this book quotes Ward's signature date incorrectly as 1856.



Jimmy Governor's signature at Timor was located by Newcastle and Hunter Valley Speleological Society (NHVSS) members in 2007 (Argent, 2007; Smith, 2019 and 2020).

Over the years, there have been a number of comprehensive and well researched books published about the life and crimes committed by each of these notorious outlaws and their gangs, but none specifically mention the outlaws visiting Timor Caves.

So what drove these men to become bushrangers and what did they do during their reign of terror to sear their names into Australia's history? What historic evidence can be found to substantiate the authenticity of each signature? To set the scene let us look at the background of these outlaws and whether they were in the Timor area during the year inscribed alongside their signature. This article is split into two parts: Part 1 dealing with Fred Ward (Captain Thunderbolt), and Part 2 about

Jimmy Governor. Part 2 will appear in the September journal.

Frederick (Fred) Wordsworth Ward, alias 'Captain Thunderbolt' (1835 1870)

Fred was the youngest of Michael (Scottish ex-convict) and Sophia Ward's 11 children. Around the time of Fred's birth, his parents moved from Wilberforce, New South Wales to nearby Windsor (Baxter, 2011, website 1).

Michael "financed his elder children's education at the Church of England school at Wilberforce, and probably paid for Fred to attend the local Windsor school after the family's relocation there" (Baxter, 2011). Fred's elder brothers were stockmen and regularly took Fred droving (which would have kept him away from schooling). Fred's father finally gave up his agricultural pursuits in the mid 1840s, moving his family to West Maitland in the Hunter Valley.

In early 1847, at the age of 11, Fred entered the paid workforce, working for the owners of Aberbaldie Station near Walcha, New South Wales, as a "generally useful hand" to accompany the new owner and his family from Morpeth to their Aberbaldie property. He had been highly recommended as a skilled horseman and knew the 240 mile route well (Baxter, 2011, Chapter 7). Over the next 10 years, Fred worked at many stations in northern New South Wales, including a year at Total, the famed horse-stud near Paterson (Walker, 1957). His outstanding horsemanship skills were soon recognised and became a valuable asset in his work on the property (Brouwer, 2002; Baxter, 2011).

In 1855, he was employed by Augustus Anderson to drive a mob of cattle down the Hunter Valley to market. At Murrurundi, their mob mixed with another and, at Muswellbrook, Anderson sold two illegally acquired bullocks. Anderson and Ward were soon brought to trial by the rightful owner - Anderson being convicted and Ward getting off with a plea of "I know nothing, I was only employed by Anderson to drive the herd down the country" (Baxter, 2011).

In 1856, Fred's nephew, John Garbutt, who was one year older than Fred, became the ringleader of a large horse-and-cattle-stealing operation, and enticed other members of the extended Ward family to join him. Fred, now aged 21, helped drive some four dozen stolen horses from a Lambs Valley property (owned by his brother William) to Windsor where they were sold at auction. Ward and his nephews, John and James Garbutt (both sons of Fred's sister, Sarah), were all convicted - the Garbutts of horse-stealing and Ward of receiving stolen horses knowing them to be stolen (*Maitland Mercury* 13 May 1856, 14 August 1856). They each received a sentence of 10 years with hard labour and were sent to Cockatoo Island penal establishment on 27 August 1856 (Baxter, 2011).

In June 1860, after serving four years, Fred and his nephews were released early on "tickets of leave" for good behaviour (Brouwer, 2002; Baxter, 2011). The three men then moved to Mudgee (their assigned area), where John Garbutt, now aged 26, met and married a 42-year-old wealthy widow, Elizabeth Blackman, who

owned Cooyal Inn and station. Soon after, Fred gained work at Cooyal Station (Baxter, 2011).

In 1861, Fred met Mary Ann (nee Bugg), who was then living with an ex convict, James McNally, and her children at McNally's Cooyal farm, north east of Mudgee. Mary was born to an ex convict British father, James Bugg, and an Aboriginal mother called Charlotte. Mary was educated with five years of colonial schooling in Sydney after her father provided financial backing for her education. She was also taught food gathering, tracking, hunting and bush survival skills by her Aboriginal mother. Mary first married, at the age of 14, to Edmund Baker, 24 years her senior. Their marriage lasted just a year or two and they had one daughter. Mary then had children to two more partners, John Burrows followed by James McNally. Fred was to be the father of her seventh child (Baxter, 2011, website 2).



By the time Mary was pregnant with Fred's child, both John and James Garbutt had breached their ticket-of-leave and were back in gaol at Cockatoo Island serving the remainder of their previous sentence (plus, in John's case, another five years) (Baxter, 2011). So Fred was well aware of the consequences of breaching ticket-of-leave regulations, which included not leaving his allotted district. Despite this, probably at the insistence of Mary Ann, Fred left the Mudgee district to take Mary Ann back to her father's farm at Monkerai near Dungog for the baby's delivery. He returned late for his three monthly muster which resulted in the authorities revoking his ticket of leave on 13 September 1861 (Brouwer, 2002). The problem was compounded because Fred had arrived back in Mudgee on a "stolen" horse, although, at the trial, the owner admitted the horse had simply gone missing from his property and, despite hearing that it had been seen near Cooyal, he had not attempted to retrieve it. Fred was convicted and returned to Cockatoo Island prison to serve the remaining six years of his

original sentence (plus an additional three years' hard labour for being in possession of a stolen horse) (Walker, 1957). Two weeks after Fred's reimprisonment, Mary gave birth to their first child, Marina Emily Ward, at Dungog (Oppenheimer, 1992).

The prison conditions were very harsh and Fred, along with other prisoners, received barely enough (unpalatable) food. Their prison gang work was hard during the day. At night, the small cells' conditions were intolerable. Solitary confinement, in sweltering, humid heat or freezing cold as the seasons dictated, and the stench of open sanitary pans was commonplace as extra punishment for stepping out of line. Fred endured this extra punishment on several occasions.

On 11 September 1863, Fred Ward and a companion, Frederick Britten, slipped away from their Cockatoo Island work gang and remained in hiding for two days before swimming from the north side of the island - most likely to Woolwich. Many accounts claim that Mary Ann assisted in Fred's escape - but she had remained working in Dungog during his imprisonment and escape.

Following the prisoners' escape from Cockatoo Island, the Government posted a £25 reward to anyone providing information leading to the capture of each escapee. The New South Wales Police Gazette (14 October 1863, p 307, "Description of Escaped Prisoners") describes Ward as "a labourer, 27 years of age, 5 feet 8 inches high, pale sallow complexion, light brown curly hair, hazel grey eyes, mole on right wrist and two warts back of middle finger of left hand".

Sometime after making good their escape, Ward and Britten split up. Fred reached Mary Ann at Dungog and spent several weeks living with her at a Chinaman's residence in Paterson. After being disturbed by police, he fled to join up with Britten and they travelled up the Hunter Valley via Singleton - stealing two horses at St Clair station and continuing on to Gostwyck, south-east of Uralla. Here they robbed a shepherd's hut on 24 October 1863 (*The Armidale Express*, 31 October 1863).

Three days later, while they were waiting to ambush the mail near the Big Rock or Split Rock (now Captain Thunderbolt's Rock), they were spotted by troopers. In the ensuing gunfight, Ward was shot in the back of the left knee, an injury that left a critical identifying mark that helped to identify his body after his death. They both fled on foot before remounting their horses tethered further down the valley and escaped (*The Armidale Express* 31 October 1863, Baxter, 2011). Soon after they "bailed up" the Tamworth mail coach but missed a parcel of gold. The pair separated a few weeks later. Ward crowned himself with the nickname "Captain Thunderbolt" during the Rutherford toll-bar robbery on 21 December 1863 (*Maitland Mercury*, 22 December 1863).

He then returned to the Dungog area to see Mary and committed a number of robberies in the area (*Maitland Mercury*, 26 January 1864). Fred had a wide network of support, including his father in law and the extended Bugg family (Ramsland, 2001; Baxter, 2011).

But it wasn't until the *Maitland Mercury*, on 2 January 1864, published an article which formally connected "Captain Thunderbolt" as being Ward who had earlier been part of the gang from Lambs Valley, and who had been convicted of horse and cattle stealing. Thunderbolt was said to have taken refuge in the Tangorin Mountain, east of Singleton (*Maitland Mercury*, 2 January 1864, Baxter 2011).

This was all happening at a time when there was unrest in the remote communities, and far reaching outposts

of white settlement were intent on acquiring more land and pushing the indigenous population off the land. In 1861, the New South Wales Crown Land Acts were introduced by John Robertson, which allowed persons to select between 40 and 320 acres of land belonging to the Crown anywhere in New South Wales. There was much opposition from “rich squatters who believed themselves invaded by small settlers. These settlers often sided with the likes of Ward, creating a network of safe houses across the country” (Brouwer, 2002). Many civilians also felt they were trapped in a colonial caste system which made it extremely difficult to climb the social ladder, and the institutional rule of the well to do was seen to punish severely those without money. For example, being in possession of a cow that had strayed from its owner’s paddock was often considered as theft and punishable with a gaol sentence. However, for the well-to-do, money could secure legal representation with the services of a good lawyer or barrister and result in the case being thrown out of court.

Thunderbolt gained a reputation of being the “gentleman bushranger” as he followed an outlaw code of behaviour: robbing the rich not the poor; being courteous to women; not committing acts of unjustified violence; being brave and courageous; and eluding capture by trickery or deception. With the support of many civilians sympathetic to his cause, Thunderbolt became the longest surviving outlaw to evade capture or death (Baxter, 2011).

Historic reports indicate that Fred, Mary and her two youngest children camped on the Culgoa River (near Brenda) from May till around December 1864; however, it is most likely Fred went further afield to steal horses. It was reported that Fred had left the Culgoa district in mid December, supposedly to steal horses from Mr Reynold’s station on the Paterson River, then he was expected to return to Mary Ann at Culgoa, having left a favourite racing mare at the camp (*New South Wales Police Gazette*, 1865).

During early 1865, Thunderbolt was joined by three others as they went on a spree of robberies over a vast area from Brewarrina to Moree and over the Queensland border. There are too many robberies to detail in this article. Always one step ahead of pursuers, their frequent robberies became more daring as the weeks rolled by.

On 2 February 1865, Thunderbolt and two others robbed Jeremiah Barr at Bokhara River (north of Brewarrina) and stole cheques and orders valued at £15.

On 16 March 1865, Thunderbolt and three accomplices armed with 15 revolvers and two rifles, held up Mogil station (west of Moree), “threatening the inmates with instant death if they dared to move” (*Maitland Mercury*, 18 April 1865, Baxter, 2011).

On 1 April 1865, the police followed Thunderbolt’s gang to Narran Lake and found Thunderbolt’s camp inhabited by Mary Ann, two children and stolen goods. Mary was arrested for possessing stolen property, but on the journey back to Bourke she feigned labour and was dropped off at Wilby Wilby station on the Narran River. Thunderbolt’s gang then “bailed up” Wilby Wilby station and rescued Mary Ann and her children. They all then headed to the Tamworth district. Fred employed an Aboriginal woman to assist the heavily pregnant Mary Ann during her confinement, hiding out most likely in the Borah Ranges, north-west of Manilla. Records are quite fragmented; however, it is believed Mary gave birth, in mid 1865, to Elizabeth “Eliza” Ann Ward (Baxter, 2011).

Thunderbolt and his gang then headed north-west again and undertook a spate of robberies. On 24 April, one

of the gang was shot and captured while the others escaped (Bendigo Advertiser, 10 May 1865). Thunderbolt permanently parted ways with his last two accomplices in May 1865 and returned to Mary and the children.

Between October and November 1865, four new villains joined Thunderbolt to form his second gang; one which went on to commit a large number of robberies over a wide area of northern New South Wales from Quirindi to the Queensland border. The government was becoming increasingly concerned at the brazen robberies and, on 4 December, posted a £100 reward for Thunderbolt’s apprehension and £50 for each of his accomplices (*New South Wales Government Gazette*, 1865).

On 8 December 1865, Thunderbolt’s gang robbed Benjamin Cook’s Bird in Hand Inn at the hamlet of Quirindi (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 December 1865). Throughout December, Thunderbolt and his gang committed robberies or were spotted around Currabubula, Carroll, the Culgoa district, Collarenebri and Moree in the far north of New South Wales (Baxter, 2011).

In late December 1865 or early January 1866, Thunderbolt left the gang and rode the horse he had stolen from a property on the Horton River back to where the three children, Mary Ann and her female assistant were residing near the Borah Ranges. They all then travelled to the Gloucester district, while the rest of the gang continued to commit a few more robberies before being caught (*Maitland Mercury*, 29 March 1866).

On 13 March 1866, the female assistant escaped from Mary Ann and nine days later arrived in Stroud to report she had been with Thunderbolt for 10 months, engaged to assist Mrs Thunderbolt during her confinement. She had wanted to leave after the child’s birth but Thunderbolt had kept her tied up at their camp near the headwaters of the Little Manning River (now Upper Manning, in the vicinity of Barrington Tops National Park) (*Maitland Mercury*, 29 March 1866). The female reported that Thunderbolt was quite crippled, with a hurt back after falling off his horse, “also suffering from a bad knee, preventing him from getting about without assistance; that his wife herself had to put him up on horseback; his wife always accompanies him (dressed in men’s attire) out to plunder; that she has a large butcher’s knife fastened on the end of a stick, rides up alongside the cattle and with this instrument she hamstring the beast, and then kills it. They principally live on beef (very seldom they have flour), wild yams, and wattle gum. The last place they stayed at they remained from June to January, near to a station of a Mr Parnell, and were never molested. The informant made her escape while Thunderbolt’s wife was out after beef; she wandered six days through the bush before she came to an inhabited place, and three days from there to Stroud, living on yams and wattle gum during that time. She asserts that there is no one else with Thunderbolt except his wife and three children” (*Maitland Mercury*, 29 March 1866).

On 23 March 1866, a “blacktracker” and three police located Thunderbolt’s camp. Thunderbolt escaped capture but was separated from Mary Ann and the three children, who were captured and taken to Mr Hooke’s Curricabark station, from where they escaped soon after (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 April 1866, Baxter, 2011). When captured, dressed in men’s clothing, Mary Ann insisted she was “the Captain’s Lady” rather than what the police called her (Brouwer, 2002).

Mary Ann was again arrested on 27 March 1866, at Pigna Barney Creek (about 50 miles east of Murrumbidgee), on a charge of vagrancy; convicted and sentenced in Stroud

Court to six months' goal. The Government revoked the conviction several weeks later and she was released from prison.

Thunderbolt must have recovered from his back injury by now, as he committed more robberies during 1866, and these escalated in frequency through to late November 1868. During these years, there were two periods of time when Thunderbolt had a new accomplice join him before they parted ways or were captured by the law.

However, Thunderbolt managed to make good his escape after each robbery. The robbery locations covered many areas in the headwaters of the Hunter Valley and would have taken him past the Timor Caves on a number of occasions as he crisscrossed the country to stay ahead of the law. The full chronological list of events is far too lengthy to list here and is not of relevance to this article. However, you may choose to read some of the excellent publications which detail his life and escapades.

On 25 May 1867, reward for the capture of Thunderbolt was raised to £200 (Sydney Morning Herald, 29 May 1867). This was increased to £400 on 24 December 1868 (New South Wales Government Gazette, 1868). From early December 1868, Thunderbolt was on his own - undertaking fewer robberies over a vast region between Uralla and the Queensland border. "On 25 May 1870 he was surprised while testing an inferior horse and was chased and shot by Constable Alexander Binney Walker at Kentucky Creek near Uralla" (Crittenden, 1976).



Fred Ward dead 1870

So what can be ascertained from the history books and reports to verify the authenticity of the "Fred Ward 1865" signature at Timor?

There is no record of Fred gaining a schooling, which is typical of children born to rural workers at the time. Upon being gaoled in 1856, Fred told the registrar he could not read or write, denoted as "R/W: No" in the description book (Maitland Gaol, 1856). However, in 1861, he said that he could read only (Darlinghurst Gaol, 1861). There was no reason for Fred to lie on either occasion. The two can be interchanged, meaning a small degree of reading but not enough to be functionally literate (Carol Baxter - personal correspondence).

If Fred crowned himself with the nickname "Captain Thunderbolt" in 1863 and used that name whenever he committed a robbery, why would he have written "Fred Ward 1865" on the cave wall? If he could not read or write, as he states on the 1856 prison records, then he may still have been able to write his own name as that is one thing children are taught at a young age. So maybe he could just write his name. There is also the possibility that Mary Ann taught Fred to write his name some time after they met in 1861. There is plenty of evidence that Mary Ann was competent in both reading and writing (Brouwer, 2002).

The possibility of locating Fred's signature on some document, such as a marriage certificate, was thoroughly investigated during the research for this article. On several occasions, Mary Ann claimed that she and Fred were married, but there is no evidence to support this (Oppenheimer, 1992; Baxter, 2011, and website 3).

Could Fred have been in the area during 1865? There are sketchy reports that Fred left Culgoa River (near Brenda) in mid December 1864, intent on stealing horses from Mr Reynold's station on the Paterson River in the Hunter Valley. If this is correct, then Fred could well have passed through Nundle, over Crawney Pass and on past the Timor Caves. What we do know is that Mary Ann (now pregnant with Fred's second child) was not with Fred during the period mid December to early January 1865. The documented trail of robberies between late January and early December 1865 indicate that Thunderbolt and his gangs didn't come south of Quirindi, so he is unlikely to have visited Timor in that period. But, on 22 February 1866, probably while taking Mary and the children from Culgoa down to the Gloucester District, Thunderbolt robbed a hut at Berrico near Gloucester.

Sometime in late February or early March 1866, Thunderbolt had a serious back injury that made it difficult for him to get around, let alone ride a horse. So it is unlikely that, in this period, he would have gone into the Timor Caves to write his signature. Bear in mind that it is now well past the end of 1865, which is the signature date. There is, however, the possibility that Fred had lost track of the year.

So, after exploring all available evidence, it is possible that Fred could write his name and may have been at Timor in early January 1865 or late December 1865 to January 1866, but we can't categorically say that the signature in Main Cave is authentic. However, we also can't disprove the authenticity of the signature.

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19th International Symposium on Volcano-speleology

John Brush reports that the 19th International Symposium on Volcano-speleology in Catania (Sicily) is going ahead between Saturday 28 August and Friday 3 September. The organising committee have advised him that:

It took us longer than we had expected because we had to face problems we have never encountered before and consequently had to make difficult decisions, in accordance with civil and speleological institutions. In Italy the covid19 situation is now under control: the infection is decreasing rapidly because of the vaccine campaign (to this day, 10 million people had both shots, and 20 million more had their first shot out of a population of 59 million people). With the necessary precautions (negative test or green pass) it will soon be possible to return to travel from country to country, not only in Europe but also in the rest of the world.

Last March we considered making an online-only symposium, allowing you to follow it on your PC screen, but the dramatic improving of the situation has made it possible to meet in person in Catania in compliance with the safety conditions for both organizers and participants. This means we had to cut down on some of the activities of the original program and to change some of the locations. We tried to keep the most significant and qualifying commitments such as the geological tour, the car drive to Mt. Etna and the visit of some cavities, but we had to give up the excursion to the Aeolian Islands and the planned speleological Camp on the volcano fields which are too risky for the impossibility of maintaining social distancing.

Whilst only a prospect in our dreams for those of us in "drawbridge up" Australia, perhaps some of our overseas members might be attending and could report for a future Journal?