

'A Fine Passage': Insights into Early Australian Convict Transportation

Issue 7: The Britannia Cashbook

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Summary

Papers from the merchant ships which carried convicts and stores to New South Wales in the late 18th and early 19th centuries are rare. One of the few survivals is a cashbook from the Britannia, Captain William Raven, which transported stores and provisions to the colony in 1792. Instead of going whaling after she had fulfilled her contract, the Britannia undertook two voyages to the Cape of Good Hope on behalf of the civil and military officers of the colony (the beginnings of the legendary Rum Corps), and two voyages to Batavia and Bengal on behalf of the NSW government.

The account book provides us with detailed information about the management of a merchant ship that was based out of Port Jackson over a period of four years, and because it records Raven's transactions while he was in port, it contains invaluable information about the petty traders and tradesmen of Sydney in this early period, some of them convicts still serving their time.

The Botany Baymen

Every ship which arrived in Sydney Cove throughout the late 18th and early 19th centuries needed to undertake repairs, take on fresh provisions, and replace some of the crew. From the First Fleet onwards, there were entrepreneurial traders and tradesmen willing to service these vessels – for a fee.

There are no surviving business accounts for any of these early traders, although the State Archives of NSW does hold a cashbook for the *Britannia*, a storeship which arrived in Sydney Cove in 1792 and remained in the region until late 1796. This records the goods and services purchased by Captain William Raven from shortly before they sailed from the Thames until the ship returned to England five years later, the prices he paid, and in many cases, the businessmen from whom he purchased them. It is an invaluable source of information about the petty traders operating in Sydney Cove in the early years of the colony.

The Britannia, Raven

The *Britannia* was a 296 ton merchantman, owned by a consortium led by the London shipowner and shipbroker, John St Barbe. Following her launch at Sunderland in 1783, she had mostly been used in the West India trade. Her master, William Raven, was a naval lieutenant on leave, a former shipmate of John St Barbe, and part owner of the ship.

She was commissioned for her voyage to NSW in December 1791, as part of a supply chain established by the British government to ensure that the colony survived until it could become self sufficient. St Barbe had intended that the *Britannia* would go whaling after she unloaded her cargo, and Raven had already fitted her tryworks and was preparing to go fishing off the coast of New Zealand when, in October 1792, she was commissioned by the civil and military officers of the colony to sail to the Cape of Good Hope for ‘necessaries’, for the use of themselves and their families.

She returned in June of the following year, and was shortly thereafter contracted by the Acting Governor, Francis Grose, for a voyage to Bengal to purchase provisions for the settlement. But when she touched at Batavia on her way north, Raven was informed that war had broken out between Britain and France, and the waters between Java and India were infested with French privateers and ships of war. He purchased what he could at the Dutch settlement and hurried back to Port Jackson, arriving in June 1794.

She was then taken up by the civil and military officers again, for a second voyage to the Cape of Good Hope, this time with an overtly commercial intent. When the *Britannia* sailed back into Port Jackson in March 1795 she was carrying livestock and consumer goods, and more than 25,000 gallons of Cape rum. Three months later, she sailed for India one last time, again under contract to government, although there is evidence that she was also carrying private commissions from some of the officers and gentlemen.

On her return, Governor Hunter engaged her to carry home a number of passengers, on government's account, and when she sailed from Norfolk Island in October 1796, she had on board Lieutenant Governor Philip Gidley King and his family; David Collins, the Judge Advocate and Colonial Secretary, and his mistress; Captain William Paterson and his wife, several lieutenants of the NSW Corps, and a variety of invalided soldiers and convicts whose time had expired. She arrived at Liverpool in June of the following year, having spent four and a half years navigating her way around the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

The Cashbook

The *Britannia's* account book is a bound volume, 156 pages in length. The first 38 pages were used by Raven as a ledger for the *Britannia*, with Disbursements on the left hand page and Credits on the right, covering the period from January 1792, when the ship was still in the Thames, until August 1797, when she had returned to the River once more. The entries are written in a fair hand.

By 1799, the book was back in New South Wales, presumably to assist in the recovery of the ship's debts, and it was taken over by Thomas Abbott, a local merchant and emancipated convict, who used it as his own day book until 1807. Abbott recorded the book debts of his customers, as well as promissory notes and bills of exchange, some of them drawn on himself. These entries are written in a rougher hand, many of them crossed out as debts were repaid.

Voyage to NSW

The earliest entry records the payment of two guineas on 23 January 1792 made by Raven to Mr Cromarty, 'more than before charged', confirming that this was the continuation of an earlier book. This was possibly Samuel Cromartie, a waterman working in the Thames. More significant is the next entry: £50 paid to Cruden for sundries, the details of which were contained in invoice No.1 – this was William Cruden, a well-known slopseller at Gravesend.

There was a payment of £22.13.4 to Mr Rooney at Teneriffe for sundries, and smaller sums to unnamed merchants at Buena Vista on the coast of South America, for an ox, a hog and some goats (fresh meat for the crew), and 42 fir planks (possibly for the ship or for sale in the colony).

Tradesman and Traders at Port Jackson

The *Britannia* arrived in Port Jackson in late July 1792, and over the next four years, Raven would employ a large number of local tradesmen to undertake repairs and supply him with a range of goods and services. In his journal, David Collins proudly quoted Raven on the quality of the work done by the tradesmen of this infant colony:

The *Britannia* being now nearly ready for sea, having had some very necessary articles of repair done to her, and which the master declared had been as well executed by the artificers of the colony as if the ship had been in England. . . ¹

She discharged the last of the government cargo in mid-August, at which point, Raven employed a caulker for 23 days, at a rate of 2/6 a day, to waterproof the ship. He is not named, but many of the 'artificers' are, and in studying these records, we learn a great deal about the tradesmen of the early colony: blacksmiths and stonemasons, carpenters and coopers, sawyers and wood carvers, cabinetmakers and joiners, plumbers and tinmen, ropemakers and nailmakers.

A number of these men were convicts who had not yet served their time or been pardoned. Some of them were tradesmen whose skills were so highly valued that they had been granted unofficial leave by the Governor, an early form of the 'ticket of leave'. Others were employed on task work, so they had time for themselves at the end of the week.

Thomas Abbott was one of these. A carver and gilder from a respectable background, with a wife and family, Abbott had been sentenced to seven years transportation in September 1790 for picking a pocket. The crime had been committed in a London crowd that was awaiting the arrival of the King, and because of recent security scares, and the fact that the victim cried out in alarm, the court took a hard line. This was probably not Abbott's first offence: there is evidence suggesting prior engagements with the law.

He arrived in NSW on the *Albemarle* in 1791 and seems to have been given the Governor's leave almost immediately to work on his own account. It is possible that he brought with him the recommendation made by the sentencing judge that, because of his respectability, he should be allowed to take himself into exile rather than being transported. And while he was legally a transport, this document, along with letters of recommendation from respectable figures in the City of London, would have stood him in good stead.

In September 1792, not long after her arrival, Abbott was paid £12.6 for carved work on the *Britannia*. Two months later, he was doing woodwork on the *Atlantic*, a Third Fleet ship which had recently returned from a government-commissioned voyage to India. And over the next two years, he undertook several more jobs on the *Britannia*.

Abbott would go on to become a highly successful and wealthy Sydney merchant, with a farm in the Hawkesbury, several other properties, including a general store in the town, and shares in two or three vessels used for trading in the colony.

Francis Cox had also arrived with the Third Fleet, under a seven year sentence that would not expire until 1797. He was a blacksmith, a high trust profession since they also functioned as locksmiths. By 1795, at a time when he was still serving his sentence, Cox was being employed as a locksmith – in May of that year, Raven paid him £14.6 for cleaning and repairing locks on the *Britannia*, again the following month and in September 1796. In later years, Cox would win government contracts for work on the Sydney gaol and at the hospital, and when he passed away in 1831, he was described in the papers as 'an old and much respected inhabitant of this colony'.

To these names we might add Thomas Hodgetts, William Read, John Robley and Thomas Storer, blacksmiths; Richard Minifie, a tinman; William Priest, a nailmaker; and Thomas Jennings a ropemaker – other convicts who had not yet served their time. But of course, there were also emancipists among these tradesmen.

James Bloodworth, a First Fleet convict, had been given an absolute pardon in 1790 because of his service to the colony as a convict supervisor. A master bricklayer from a family of bricklayers, David Collins described him as 'a most useful member of the settlement'. There was not a house or building in the

settlement, he wrote, that did not owe something to him. Bloodworth was paid for stonework on the *Britannia* in May 1795, probably related to the hearth.

Richard Harding, a blacksmith pardoned in 1793, was in partnership with John Haddock, the 'armourer smith' of the NSW Corps, when they sold their services to Captain Raven that same year. The following year Harding undertook smithing work on the ship on his own account.

Among the men whose sentences had expired were John Baughan, a highly-respected cabinetmaker; Thomas Joseph, a sawyer who sailed to and from the Cape in the *Britannia*; Joseph Holden, a joiner; and Edward Robinson, a wheelwright.

In some cases, the cashbook provides us with information that transforms our understanding of certain convicts. For example, there is little in the historical record to suggest that *John White* was a carpenter when he arrived in the colony in June 1790: he had been transported for stealing from a stable. Nine months after his arrival, he was acquitted of stealing carpenter's tools from the *Supply*, a charge that acquires new significance when we know that in September of the following year, White was employed for several days as a carpenter on the *Britannia*. This makes it likely that in 1791 he was working on the *Supply* when the tools went missing and that he was suspected of taking them for use in his own business.

William Chapman was transported for stealing lead, and in his later years, he would be described as a plumber, glazier and painter – although he was also a butcher and a baker at different times throughout his life. But the fact that he performed plumbing services on the *Britannia* in 1793, 1794 and 1795 confirms that this was his original trade, and that the lead had been stolen for own use.

Other men sold Raven pork and corn, pumpkins and greens, wood and charcoal. Henry Hacking, formerly a quartermaster on the *Sirius*, sold pilotage services. Peter Dargin, a former marine, hired out his boat.

The Port Jackson Economy in the 1790s

A number of books have been written about the NSW economy in the early 19th century, but no work has been done on the micro-economy which developed in the colony in these early years, and some historians have dismissed the possibility that the petty traders might be entrepreneurs in their own right,

assuming that any of the convicts or emancipists who were engaged in commerce must have been working as agents of the gentlemen and officers. The account book demands that we look at this world differently.

Trade with Visiting Ships

Convicts, emancipists and soldiers had been selling goods and services to mariners from the earliest days of the colony. This began with the First Fleet: women did washing, ironing and mending for the ships' officers and crew members; men were employed as caulkers.

We know that convict carpenters assisted in repairing the *Lady Juliana* while she was in port in 1790 and the *Atlantic* when she returned from Bengal in December 1792, and there can be no question that the ships of Second and Third Fleets benefitted from local artisans in a similar way.

The *Britannia's* account book is evidence of the extent of this trade from September 1792, and we know that an English whaler, the *Chesterfield*, put into Sydney Cove in November 1792 for repairs, and over the six months that followed, there were a number of foreign vessels in port: the *Hope*, an American trader, which came in to wood and water; the *Shah Hormuzear* which arrived from India in February 1793 with an investment for sale in the colony. The *Altrevida* and the *Descubierta*, the ships of the Malaspina expedition, arrived in March 1793 and purchased produce from the local fishermen, clothing from the soldiers and convicts, spirits from public houses at the Rocks and sexual services from the prostitutes who plied their trade there.

We get some idea of the scale of this activity from Philip Gidley King's journal for Norfolk Island. When the *Pitt* touched there in April 1792 on her way to India, Captain Manning purchased 285 fowls, 87 pigs, around a ton of potatoes, a great quantity of pumpkins and other vegetables from the local settlers. And when the *Shah Hormuzear* arrived in May of the following year, Captain Bampton paid a hundred pounds to the blacksmiths, carpenters and sawyers to build him a longboat, and 30 gallons of spirits to the convicts who assisted in bringing in the timber to make the planks and boards.

The Petty Traders

The *Britannia's* cashbook also reveals trades that were previously unknown to students of the early colony.

Fishmonger – Thomas King (aka Thomas Day) sold fish to Raven's people, not as a fisherman but as an intermediary, a fishmonger. This interpretation is reinforced by the knowledge that after his escape from the *Mercury*, a convict transport bound for America in 1784, King made his way to Fish Lane, the home of London's fishmongers. We knew of oyster sellers operating in the settlement from late 1788, but this is the first evidence of a fishmonger.

Charcoal Burners – William Corkett was paid 19 shillings in May 1795 for charcoal. We know little about this man, but he is possibly the William Cockett, who arrived as a crew member of the *Fishburn* in 1788. Cockett or Corkett was involved in a civil court case in November 1798. This single entry in the cashbook also tells us that by 1795, charcoal burners were at work in the colony.

Medical Care – John Malcolm, a discharged soldier, was transported for stealing from Scottish servicemen while they were in London. He was sent to Norfolk Island in 1792, where he distinguished himself as a hospital assistant working under the assistant surgeon, William Balmain. On his return to Port Jackson in 1795, he might well have worked at the hospital, but the following year, Malcolm also tended to sick men on the *Britannia*, for which he was paid four pounds. It is known that there was private midwifery in the infant colony, but this is the first evidence of private medical care. On Balmain's recommendation, Malcolm was pardoned shortly thereafter and returned to Scotland. In 1824 – describing himself as a surgeon and apothecary, and claiming to have been assistant surgeon on Norfolk Island – he returned to Sydney and established himself as a druggist in George Street.

To these we can add the plumbers and tinmen, nailmakers and ropemakers – trades that would have eventually emerged in the fledgling economy, but which we now know had arrived by the middle of the 1790s.

Currency

There is no suggestion that these men were paid in kind – the entries refer to cash payments. The transactions in the *Britannia* cashbook represent the injection of more than £600 in hard currency into the colony, almost all of it going to small traders and seamen. Given that 52 ships visited Port Jackson in

the years between late 1791 (when the Third Fleet arrived) and late 1796 (when the *Britannia* sailed for home), this represents hard currency of as much as £5,000 flowing into the economy. It is possible that the masters were issuing notes of hand that could be drawn at the Commissariat, but there is no evidence of this.

Emancipist Mariners

There were also former convicts who served as crew members of the *Britannia* on her voyages across the Southern Ocean, and north through the East Indies. Some of these men took the opportunity to run while they were in foreign ports, but a number came back to Port Jackson and carried on with their lives – something that has not previously been observed this early in the life of the settlement. Several examples:

William Earl was a First Fleet convict from Wiltshire with no obvious maritime experience. It is significant, however, that on the outward voyage, he was placed in a working mess with coopers and other woodworkers, and in later years he was involved with a legal dispute with the government shipbuilder. This suggests that he had carpentry skills, which would have made him a valuable member of a ship's crew. He went to sea in the *Britannia* in 1794 and 1795, and seems to have continued to be active in the maritime world. He died on a sealing expedition to Macquarie Island in 1812.

Henry Roach – There was also nothing in Roach's background to suggest that he had spent time at sea – he was transported for robbing a man on the highway. We know that Roach was working at Watkin Tench's farm in late 1788, he married two years later and was off stores by the spring of 1795. The cashbook tells us that he sailed with the *Britannia* on her final voyage to India, and was paid on her return in 1796. If we look more closely at his background, we find that the crime for which he was transported was committed at Gosport, which might well suggest a maritime background.

Thomas Godfrey Rowley, who had arrived on the *Neptune* in 1790, sailed as a crew member on the *Britannia* in September 1794, several months after his term had expired. He ran at the Cape, evidently trying to make his way home.

He is not to be confused with *Tom Rowley*, a young Aboriginal man who had taken his English name from one of the NSW Corps officers. He joined the *Britannia*'s final voyage to Batavia and Bengal, returning home in May 1796. This

Tom Rowley is not mentioned in the cashbook, presumably because, as an inexperienced mariner, he was only paid bed and board. Rowley was accidentally shot and killed in the settlement the following year.

There were at least two other emancipated convicts who sailed on the ship but are not mentioned in the cashbook. *William Harris* accompanied the *Britannia* on her voyage to Batavia in 1793 and did not return. He was either a paying passenger, or more likely, he was working his way to the nearest port to pay for his passage. Likewise the First Fleet convict, *John O’Craft*, who left at the Cape in December 1794. These three men are a reminder that, even with the cashbook, there is still a great deal that we do not know about the *Britannia*.

Research

The author came across the cashbook in the State Archives while tracking down documents relating to the early Botany Bay ships. It took time to decipher the handwriting, establish the identity of the merchant who subsequently took over the book, and research Raven’s different suppliers. Much work remains to be done on Raven’s transactions and on Thomas Abbott’s numerous customers.

¹ David Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, Volume 1 [1798], Sydney: A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1975, p.257.