

Fake News

Some of you might remember the bulk of this from Rowland Parker's articles in the Laurentian, but since then computer database have arrived....

In April 1788 the local paper reported a major fire in the village of Foxton. "On Tuesday last, about three o'clock in the afternoon, a fire broke out in a wheat case belonging to Mr William Hurrell, of Foxton in this county, which raged with irresistible fury till past midnight and destroyed seventeen dwelling houses, a malting office containing a considerable quantity of malt, a great number of barns, outhouses, stacks etc. A man who had been confined for 20 years as a lunatic, perished in the flames notwithstanding every endeavour was used to save him. Several pigs, calves and sheep were burnt. It is supposed the premises were maliciously set on fire. We are sorry to add, that a very considerable part of the property was not insured."

The parish register records that on April 6th 1788 Philip Bateson 38, was buried after being burnt to death in a sudden fire.

This incendiary activity was not an isolated incident and in October 1791 the newspaper reported that Mr Hurrell had another fire.

Swiftly followed in December 1791 by another fire the report concluding that:- "we are sorry to say there is reason to believe the premises were both times maliciously set on fire."

The last report in the paper on 31 December 1791 seemingly concluded this affair:- "We congratulate the public on things being now in a fair way towards tracing out the authors of the late dreadful fires which have so often alarmed the different villages in this neighbourhood. On Saturday last a warrant was

issued by the Rev. W.L. Mansel to apprehend John Evans Sen. A man aged upwards of 80 and Richard Wallis a boy not yet 13, both of Foxton in this county, being charged on a violent suspicion of having been concerned in the late fires which have broken out at Mr. Hurrell's of Foxton aforesaid. On their examination before magistrates it came out on the confession of the boy, that at the instigation of the old man, and a shilling reward the old man instigated him to set some more of Mr. Hurrell's property on fire which the boy accordingly consented to do. And caused the last very alarming fire, which our readers remember to have broken out at Foxton, about ten days ago. The boy moreover confessed that the old man, when he first applied to him said "if you will set Mr. Hurrell's ricks on fire I will tell you who fired the town about three years ago" and that upon the boy's consenting to do so, Evans said "he himself was the man" Upon this day were both committed to the castle.

The last article leaves you with the impression that an old man, either mad or with a grudge against Mr Hurrell set the first fire himself and for the last two fires enlisted the help of a gullible boy. Presumably some dire punishment would be meted out to the old man and the boy might be let off, but the parish register records the burial on January 11th 1795 of John Evans (84) pauper. In other words he was back in the parish and not in gaol when he died. On the other hand from Norfolk Assizes in 1792 : "Richard Wallis, for arson. Recommendation: transportation for life."

New South Wales prison register records an absolute pardon on 14 Feb 1803 for Richard Wallis. The latter records also have a recommendation for absolute pardon for Richard Batley Wallis on 4th June 1804. Either of which might be the Foxton arsonist.