

# ANOTHER LOCAL CONVICT FROM ICKENHAM GEORGE WILLDEN

by Susan Toms

For several years I have been working as a volunteer at the National Archives on a series of records referred to as HO17, Home Office: Criminal Petitions, Series 1 1819-1839. These records are the petitions sent in by friends, family, officials and the prisoner asking for mercy and a mitigation of the sentence, when it was deemed to be too severe. This was the only recourse open to people to change a sentence until the establishment of the Criminal Court of Appeal in 1907.

Last year I was very interested to come across a petition relating to Ickenham which I decided to research more fully.

The case involved George Willden/Wilden/Weildon (all these variant spellings are used in the records, I will be using the first) of Ickenham who was tried at the Old Bailey on the 29 November 1832 before Justice Bosanquet for housebreaking on the 20 November. He broke into John Lawrence's house in Ickenham and stole a silver watch valued at two pounds.

According to the trial proceedings John Lawrence suspected the accused immediately he returned home to find his window had been forced open and his watch missing because he had seen Willden near his house on his way out. He noticed nail marks from a shoe on the window frame and when he went to find Willden to confront him with his accusation he claimed the marks on the window matched the nail marks on Willden's shoe. Further damning evidence at the trial came from two boys John Southam aged 14 and William Lipscomb aged 13, both of Vine Street Uxbridge, who testified that they were out playing by the church-yard when they asked the prisoner, who was passing, for the time and he pulled out a watch.

When Willden was first taken into custody to appear before the magistrate he denied the charge but then he relented and revealed the watch's hiding place on Uxbridge Common

where it was found by Constable William Ingram.

At this time housebreaking was a capital offence and so the recorded sentence was death with the annotation on the back of the petition 'to be considered at Report in Council 6 February 1833'. See Fig. 1.

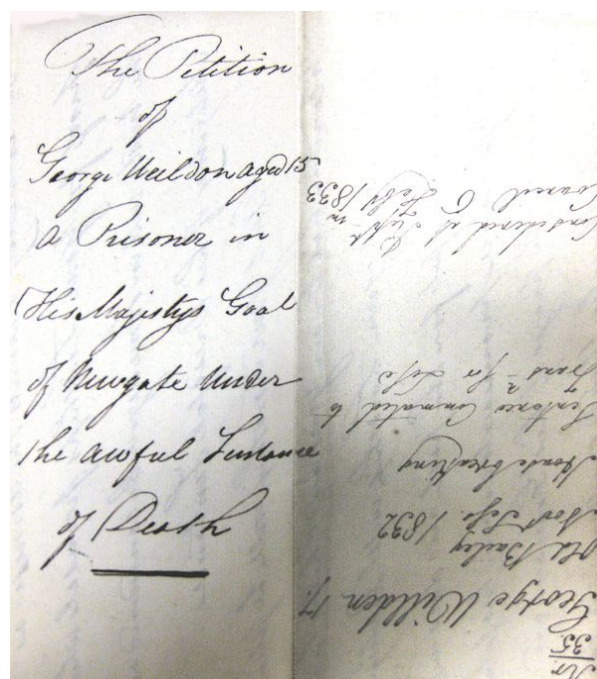


Fig. 1

However the trial proceedings noted that the prosecutor John Lawrence recommended mercy and there was a petition also asking for a mitigation in the sentence. This petition was from the prisoner and it was undersigned by four people: T.T. Clarke, Elizabeth Weedon, Thomas Collett and Saltonstall. This last signature refers to Sir William Saltonstall Wiseman.

The reasons given for clemency in the petition included the prisoner's young age of 17, it was his first offence, he had used no violence and had even told the police where he had hidden the watch, he came from a respectable industrious family who had given him a good upbringing, and he was a good worker.

These favourable facts were confirmed in the Report in Council which listed the mitigating factors of the prisoner expressing regret for his crime, that no violence was used, that the prosecutor suffered no injury or loss and wished the prisoner to be sent to the penitentiary or refuge for the destitute and that finally the prisoner was recommended for mercy by the committing magistrates T.T. Clarke and William Saltonstall Wiseman. All these factors did have some effect as Willden's sentence was commuted to life transportation.

However although he had avoided the death penalty the sentence of life transportation was still very severe since effectively it meant that he would never see his family again. He also had to endure terrible conditions on the hulks where prisoners were housed while awaiting a ship to transport them on the hazardous journey to Australia or Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania). On the 23 February 1833 George Willden was sent to the hulk *Justitia* which was moored at Woolwich. See Fig. 2.



**Fig. 2**

**This illustration, attributed to George Cruikshank, shows the death of a boy prisoner on the hulk *Justitia*.**

(Alan Brooke and David Brandon  
*Bound for Botany Bay*, TNA 2005)

This hulk of 260 tonnes was in use from 1830-1855 and was 'not noted for its cleanliness'. On board his conduct was recorded as good on the Quarterly Return for January-March 1833. He was described as having a fresh complexion and being of a stout build at a height of just under five feet. Unlike some prisoners who languished for months and

sometimes years on the hulks Willden was transported quite quickly since he sailed on the *Heroine* on the 6 May 1833 with 260 other convicts. On arrival in the colony of New South Wales at the age of 20 (this is a discrepancy since he would have been aged 18 according to the baptism records) he was assigned to James Connor in the district of Berrima. He must have acquitted himself well since later records reveal that he was granted a ticket of leave passport on the 17 August 1842 on the recommendation of the Berrima Bench in 1841. A ticket of leave passport meant that a prisoner, after serving a minimum part of their sentence satisfactorily, was entitled to earn their own living subject to reporting regularly to the local magistrates. Obviously this benefited the authorities as well since it reduced their expenditure on having to feed and house the convicts engaged on public works.

Besides trying to find out what happened to George Willden after his trial I wished to fill in some facts about his family background in Ickenham. His parents were George and Sarah Willden of Ickenham with his father's occupation being given as a labourer. I may have found a record of his parents' marriage banns in September 1800 but there is some doubt about this as the banns give the names of George Willden and Mary Godliman, both of Ickenham parish whereas the baptism records for their son give the mother's Christian name as Sarah.

George, their son, was baptised on the 21 April 1815 with the ceremony being performed by John Addison. There is also an earlier entry in the Ickenham parish registers for the baptism of a sister Hannah Willden on the 17 October 1813 but I could not trace any records for his other siblings even though he was reported as being the youngest of nine children.

There is no reference to his parents in the 1841 Census for Ickenham but it does list a Francis Willden, aged 37, an agricultural labourer, his wife Elizabeth and two children Ann, aged four months and George aged four years. These dates indicate that Francis could be an older brother of the prisoner.



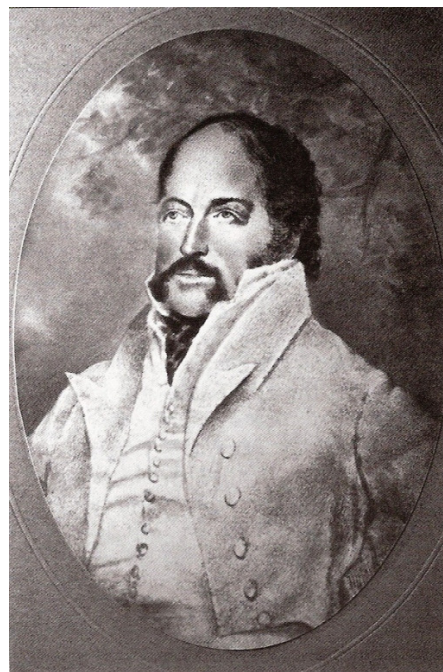
Morris W. Hughes in his book *The Story of Ickenham* mentions an entry in the 1847 Court Rolls that 'persons being in receipt of parish relief did dig up part of the waste land at Ickenham Green for gardens' and one of these defiant gardeners was Francis Willden.

Francis Willden's young son George Willden appears in the 1861 Census as an agricultural labourer and later in the 1891 Census he is now married with four children, Henry, James, Ruth and Sydney but still employed as an agricultural labourer. His sister Ann unfortunately was not so long lived as there is a record of her burial on the 16 December 1860 aged 20. Their mother Elizabeth was buried on the 3 September 1872 aged 74. An article *Ickenham Village School* in the Society's 1984 Journal states that the school records mention several children with the surname Willden which provides further proof that the family retained a long association with Ickenham but most do not appear to progress beyond working on the land.

I was also interested in the background of the other signatories of the petition. The easiest one to identify was T.T. Clarke since this was Thomas Truesdale Clarke, the owner of Swakeleys House who was a local magistrate for the Uxbridge Bench. (See Fig. 3). It was in this capacity that he signed the petition in favour of George Willden and he was the committing magistrate when the prisoner was brought into custody on the 23 November 1832. Unfortunately a few years later on the 15 July 1840 he was to die in mysterious circumstances (there is an entry for his burial on the 23 July 1840 in the Ickenham parish registers) when he was found within his own grounds lying on his back in the River Pinn with the shallow water only covering his face and not the rest of his body. It was reported he had been 'low spirited' for weeks but the coroner remarked that 'he thought it would be best not to stamp the family of the deceased with the stigma of insanity'.

The jury brought in a verdict that Mr Clarke 'had been found dead in the waters of a certain brook...but how he came there, there

was not the slightest evidence before them to show'. On the same day that the jury reached their verdict which deferred to the feelings of the Clarke family by not mentioning insanity, another local family was not treated so sympathetically. As the jury were returning to the village it was reported that James Winch, who was groom to Mrs Clarke's brother had hanged himself in the outhouse of his cottage. At the inquest it was reported that he had not been well and 'not in his right mind' for several months and the discovery of Mr Clarke's body had strongly affected him. However this time the jury had no doubts about returning a verdict of suicide while suffering temporary insanity which caused the family great distress.



**Fig. 3**  
**Thomas Truesdale Clarke 1774-1840**  
(Eileen M. Bowlt *Around Ruislip, Eastcote, Northwood, Ickenham and Harefield: People and Places*)

The other Uxbridge magistrate who signed the petition was Sir William Saltonstall Wiseman, 7th baronet, who was well-known in Uxbridge for his philanthropy and public service. Besides being a magistrate he was also chairman of the Board of Guardians of the Uxbridge Union and of the Uxbridge Savings Bank. He was also involved in the Uxbridge Free School, the Uxbridge

Auxiliary Bible Society, and the Literary and Scientific Institute. He died in 1845 and there is a memorial tablet to his memory and that of his second wife Eliza, who died in 1862, in St. John the Baptist Church Hillingdon.

The Ickenham parish records show that Elizabeth Weedon/Weeden was buried on the 9 August 1833 aged 81, some months after she signed the petition. However, the family had a long association with the village and occupied several farms in the area.

The final signatory, Thomas Collett, is listed in the 1841 census as a farmer aged 60. In the 1851 census he is listed as Registrar of Births and Deaths with an address at Long Lane, Ickenham. He lived to the age of 81 and his burial on the 7 August 1860 is listed in the Ickenham parish registers. In 1871 his son James Collett is listed as a farmer and parish officer and by 1881 he has risen to the office of Collector of Rates and Taxes with an address at Ivy Cottage, Long Lane, Ickenham. However, his social standing cannot have been enhanced by the behaviour of his wife. In the *Buckinghamshire Advertiser & Middlesex Journal* of the 28 March 1874 there is the following notice to all the shopkeepers in

Uxbridge and its vicinity: 'The wife of James Collett of Ickenham, having absconded from home, the said James Collett will not be responsible for any debts contracted by her after this date.'

The victim of the crime, John Lawrence, is listed in the 1851 census as a labourer and living in Marsh Lane, Ickenham, and ten years later he is listed as a lodger in John Ratcliff's household, also in Ickenham. He was buried on the 12 April 1863 aged 70. As already mentioned in the previous article by Celia Cartwright it is a possibility that it was the same John Lawrence, who was involved in both cases.

Although our convict George Willden endured the hardship of transportation and separation from his family it is possible to argue that for some prisoners such a sentence presented them with more opportunities to make something of their lives in a new country. The family that he left behind in Ickenham had very few opportunities to escape the poverty and poor living conditions of nineteenth century rural Middlesex with its definite class divisions.

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