



The Life of Abel Sutton

Abel Sutton is my great great grand Uncle - his sister Tabitha married Peter John Smith (born in Urchfont in 1797 - 1832), then their son Henry Smith (born in Urchfont in 1829 - 1922) was the father of my grandfather Harry Smith (born in Semington in 1878 - 1964). Abel came to my notice doing family history research on the Smith family in Wiltshire.

Abel was born in Urchfont, Wiltshire on 18th May 1807 to John Sutton an agricultural labourer born in Urchfont in 1778 who died in 1862, and his wife Jane Stone born 1776 who died in 1861.

On 20th October 1829, Abel married Sarah Boulter at Urchfont. She was aged only 15 having been born at Little Cheverell, Wiltshire on 10th February 1814. They then had four children all born in Urchfont - Sarah Jane born 11th July 1830, Solomon born 6th March 1834, Mary born 19th July 1835, and Emma born 17th June 1838. Sarah had a further child William in 1847, but the father is unknown on the birth record, and was not Abel.

I could not trace Sarah and Abel in the 1841 census, but Sarah was living in Urchfont in both the 1851 and 1861 census returns with some of her children, and described as a widow and a Pauper/Agricultural labourer. There is no mention of Abel, but also no death record for him that I can find.

That set me searching, and I found an Abel Sutton alias William Kirby arrested in Sussex, so I travelled to the Sussex Record Office at Chichester. The Brighton Patriot and South of England Free Press reported on 19th September 1837 that there had been a burglary at the premises of Thomas Lillywhite at Compton, a village inland from Havant, Sussex. A considerable amount of valuable shawls, silk stockings, lace and other articles had been stolen.

Attempts had also been made to enter the house of a Mr. Lewis at Harting, and at the Post Office at Petersfield belonging to Mr. Parsons, but the thieves were discovered and scared off before any goods were removed. The report continued to say that Kirby and two accomplices had been arrested and found in possession of many of the items stolen from Mr. Lillywhite.

The same paper reported on 26th September that William Kirby alias Abel Sutton had been remanded by magistrates to appear for trial at the next Petworth Assizes.

There was no indication why Abel Sutton should be in Sussex, but a report of 19th March 1836 in the Bristol Mercury said that an Abel Sutton, alias Abel Young, was acquitted at Wiltshire Assizes, without giving detail of the case.

Was this him, and did he meet with other criminals whilst in custody, that later persuaded him to travel to Sussex?

Abel appeared at the Petworth Assizes on 10th October 1837, where he was also charged with a burglary at the property of Amelia Tripper of Rogate, Sussex and stealing a quantity of goods valued at £5.

No newspaper report of his trial could be found. The Assizes papers noted that Abel was aged 30, so the correct age, and that he could read and write - not common in those days. Despite pleading not guilty, he was found guilty, and sentenced to be transported to Australia for 15 years for each of the two charges of burglary.

Abel was then held on the convict hulks York in Gosport from 2nd November 1837, and then Leviathan in Portsmouth from 2nd December 1837 until he was moved to the transport ship Portsea on 31st July 1838 for the voyage to Australia. The ship's captain was Sam John Lewis and the Surgeon Thomas Bell. There were 240 convicts aboard when they sailed, and only one died en route, so they must have been quite well looked after. Abel and the Portsea arrived in New South Wales on 18th December 1838.

Prison records in Australia show he was working under the control of Captain Perry, Surveyor General for Moreton Bay, New South Wales working out of Hyde Park Barracks. He was later released on license (for good behaviour) in 1846, to work at Yass in the county of Murray, New South Wales but there is no later evidence of what work he did, or that he returned to this country in the U.K. census or death records.

I think he lived in Australia under the name of William Kirby and died in Sydney in 1864, where the death record shows his father's name as John, which is correct. There is no evidence that he remarried in Australia.

However, his wife Sarah, who is shown as a widow in the 1851 census, did remarry in Urchfont in May 1872 to an Evi Gillett, an Agricultural Labourer who was born there in 1810 and died there in 1893. Was he the father of her son William who was born in 1847? It may be unlikely as Evi first married in 1833 and had ten children between 1833 and 1855. His first wife died in October 1871, so six months before he married Sarah. Sarah died in Urchfont on 21st May 1886.

OPC Notes - If any members of Wilts FHS living in Australia can find any more information about Abel/William and where he was or what he was doing between 1846 and 1864 then I would be very grateful.

The ship Portsea was built in Calcutta, India in 1807. In 1810 the British Government commandeered her to support the British invasion of Mauritius in 1811, and the transporting of captured French soldiers back to the UK. After that she traded between the East Indies and Britain, whilst between 1828 and 1835 she made two whaling voyages to the South Seas. The trip conveying convicts to Australia in 1838 was the only such voyage that she did. She then went trading to Chile, and in 1840 was recorded as a coal hulk at Valparaiso.

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