

Isaac Johnson of Monks Eleigh

In 1779, a House of Commons committee was set up to determine where convicts sentenced to transportation could be sent, as the American colonies had been lost to them by Lord North. The committee invited the celebrated botanist, Joseph Banks, soon to be knighted, to address them and give his views. He had accompanied Captain Cook on “Endeavour” in the rediscovery of Australia in 1771.

He told the committee the soil was good and with an abundance of fish, freshwater and wood and in his opinion a colony of felons could support itself with a year.

William Pitt the Younger had become Prime Minister in 1783 and wanted to keep the French away from the trade routes of the Far East and India. A new bill had been passed in 1784 authorising the revival of transportation to places other than America. It was capital and Lord Sydney, the Home Secretary, who announced that “Botany Bay” on New South Wales (which Cook had named that part of Australia) was to be the place where English felons were to be sent to relieve the Hulks prisons which were bursting at the seams.

Captain Arthur Phillips took the first prisoners there in 1786; transportation was to last for 18 years until 1860, when more than 160,000 would have left these shores, 24,000 of them were women. 2000 of the total were to come from Suffolk, suffering horrific privation, and touching almost every parish in the county.

Monks Eleigh was no exception, Samuel Cutcher, John Howe and John Ratcliffe were transported in 1838 and William Grimwade in 1843.

Perhaps the best recorded and notorious case was that of Isaac Johnson. His relationship with Nathaniel Holms of Tye Farm had been soured as he had had them arrested in 1830 on suspicion of stealing a pig. He was brought before the bench but discharged for insufficient evidence.

Johnson was yet again detained in Bury Gaol charged with stealing four saddles and bridles and other harness, his brother John and John Able were charged with him.

Whilst in custody, he was further charged with “having maliciously killing three gelding and two mares, the property of Mr Holmes of Tye Farm, Monks Eleigh”.

He was arraigned at Bury St Edmunds Trinity Sessions, 5th July 1831, presided over by Rev. Dr Collvile, Rector of Lawshall.

The offence took place in February 1830, stated Mr Holmes. His men had left the horses on the evening of the 27th. Next morning they had found 4 dying in the stable and one dead in the yard. Mr Baker, a veterinary surgeon said that he had found one dead and the others suffering greatly, they died soon after, and he found poison in their stomachs. An analysis proved it to be arsenic.

Robert Baker said he had come to Bury in January 1830 and Johnson had asked him to bring them a pound of arsenic. He took it to Johnson’s house, he was there

with his brother, prisoner told him “he would poison Holmes horses as he owed him a grudge, because it took his dogs away from them, after he had been coursing hares and would mix it with “pollard”. That night they went to Tye Farm and emptied it into the troughs.

The animosity between Johnson and Holmes had become deep-seated and he had tried to borrow a sovereign to buy an airgun “to put an end to his (Holmes) long corpse.” Also he had intended to use the remainder of the arsenic on Sir Robert Pocklington’s (Chelsworth) pheasants.

Robert Baker, having turned Kings evidence, was claiming, however, the prisoner was allowed to address the court in his defence, “Gentlemen, which you think is the most guilty, that rascal or me, he is the guilty man and no one else”. Dr Colville in his summing up said if the jury should add perjury to the accomplice Baker’s crime and was sufficient evidence to convict Johnson. The jury after a short consultation found him guilty and he was sentenced to be transported for life. Isaac Johnson then addressed the chairman, “ You have gone as far as you can, can’t you give me some more”. He was then convicted on the other cases. Afterwards he was transferred from Bury Gaol to a prison hulk in Portsmouth and sent to New South Wales on 29th September 1831 on the “Asia” with 200 other male convicts, and the ship arrived 2nd December 1831. He was married to Mary Gates on 21 October 1819 at Monks Eleigh, and had at least two children, his wife was living in Church Street in 1841 aged 40 years.

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