

## THOMAS BENSON'S CONVICT SLAVES ON LUNDY

By

A.F. LANGHAM

17 Furzeffeld Road, Reigate, Surrey RH2 7HG

Thomas Benson, the son of a prominent Bideford merchant, became Sheriff of Devon in 1746 and MP for Barnstaple soon afterwards. He traded successfully with the New World, the ports of Bideford and Barnstaple becoming the focus for an annual import of more than a million pounds weight of American tobacco. In 1747 he secured a government contract to transport convicts to work on plantations in Maryland and Virginia, thus providing a profitable return cargo for his vessels.

In 1748 Benson leased Lundy Island from Lord Gower for the annual sum of £60. It provided the opportunity to offload tobacco from America, and repackage it into smaller amounts for smuggling to the mainland. It also allowed him to offload the convicts, having received the £20 per-head transportation fee, rather than having to carry and feed them across the Atlantic. Convicts were housed in the castle keep and employed building walls and enclosures. Other tasks may have included the repackaging of tobacco, either for smuggling or export.

Below the keep but within the castle grounds is Benson's Cave, 17m long, 5m wide and 5m high, artificially quarried into the shale. It probably dates from the time of the Civil War when Thomas Bushell, a mining engineer, held the island for the King.

The original cave was later enlarged and the presence of a capstain on an engraving by Grosse in 1775 suggests that goods of some considerable weight were being transported from the Landing Beach to and from the cave.

During 1960 the author carried out a systematic survey of the walls and ceiling inside the cave and discovered thirty-eight inscriptions scratched or chiselled in a style and typography quite distinct from modern graffiti (fig. 1). By consulting the *Exeter Quarter Sessions* and the *Registers of Exeter Gaol* (which list the names of prisoners sentenced and awaiting transportation), interesting similarities with the inscriptions were revealed (tables 1 and 2). For example, it would seem that seventeen convicts sentenced to transportation spent time on Lundy and that the dates of their sentences fall into two groups, one in 1749, the other in 1752, suggesting perhaps that Benson landed two shiploads of convicts at a three-year interval. By comparing inscriptions with the relevant historical sources, it may be suggested that seven or eight of the initials date from a 1749 passage to the island, and ten of the initials from a 1752 shipload. One must remember, however, that the inscriptions are open to varying interpretation. Some of the convicts may never have inscribed their initials, most would have been illiterate and may have had the inscriptions carved for them, while some may not have been familiar with the shape or order of letters in their names. Thus some discrepancy between the names in table 2 and the inscriptions in fig. 1 may be explained.

A further suggestion arises from the comparison between engravings and the record of "seven or eight (of the convicts who) took the longboat belonging to the island and made their escape to Hartland and were never heard of afterwards"(1). This occurred in the summer of 1752 and may describe the escape of the seven or eight male convicts transported in 1949 and therefore known to have been slaves on the island for at least three years.

In July 1752 Benson made the mistake of allowing three of his houseguests to visit Lundy, including Sir Thomas Gunson, Sheriff of Somerset. Benson remarked to the effect that he had been contracted to remove the convicts from the kingdom and that Lundy was beyond recognised limits. Benson was, however, exposed and eventually fled

the country. The fate of the remaining convicts is not known although presumably they were removed and sent on to America to complete their seven year transportation order.

By studying the engravings in Benson's Cave, it has been possible to provide physical evidence for the presence of convicts on Lundy as well as suggesting their identity. They provide graphic illustration for a period of Lundy's history little understood beyond historic description and the limited availability of secondary source material.

FOOTNOTE 1: from 'Journal of the time we spent on the island of Lundy in the years 1752 and 1787' by a Gentleman. (In *The Cave and Lundy Review, and Critical Revolving Light*, published at Barnstaple in 1824).

IA    IB1751    AB    GB    WSC1726    IC    BC  
  
TC    HD    EF    WH    EH1780    PH  
  
SH (written 2H)    DI    HH1750    WH1750    Wf    DJ  
  
JJ    WL    GM    IM    PM    IN (written I/I)    EN1756  
  
IP    MP    HR    IR 1751    IR    WR 1751    MW1751  
  
IS 1709 (date may be 1789 = 1749 or 1769)    SS    +1747    DW

**Figure 1:** Inscriptions in Benson's Cave (NB. f = late Medieval form of J)

1746	1747	1748	1749	1750	1751	1752	1753	1754
EB	MG	MB	RB	TB	RL	CB	RC	JB
PT		PN	JB	MM	MR	JB	RC	SB
			JB	JT	MS	EC		AB
			JC	MT		CC		JC
			TC	JW		AD		TE
			AD			JG		CH
			MD			AH		WG
			HD			JH		JH
			JI			DJ		EL
			SK			IM		RN
			JL			AM		SP
			CS			JM		JP
						GP		TP
						MR		JR
						TS		AY
						ES		DT
						SS		JV
						AW		JW
						WW		JY
						JW		WY

**Table 1:** Initials of convicts sentenced to transportation by Exeter Quarter Sessions 1746-1754.

**1749 convictions**

Richard Blackmore  
 John Buttall and/Joseph Bucknole  
 John Clarke  
 Thomas Cook  
 Henry Dimont  
 John Inch  
 Sampson Kerswell

**1952 convictions**

Christopher Banbury  
 Ann Hopping  
 Daniel Jeffrys  
 Jane Monstephen  
 Ann Martin  
 Mary Rice - the 'H' of the HR inscription is weak and could be MR  
 Mary Radcliff - could be represented by MP, HR, IR or WR  
 Thomas Sangum - could be represented by IS1709 (his year of birth?)  
 Sarah Spencer

**Table 2:** Probable names of convicts on Lundy