

MEET WILLIAM RILEY

“He was in a most dreadful state to pass from this world to another.” - *The Colonial Times* on William Riley’s trial

Abandoned as a child, an ‘inoffensive, orderly’ boy transported at 14, a drunk by 16, a murderer by 29 – what happened to William Riley?

While convicts were digging the foundations for the Church in 1835, Joseph Shuttleworth was brutally murdered by William Riley. What drove Riley to such a violent act?

William Riley was 14 when he was transported for seven years in 1821. His record describes him as ‘inoffensive and orderly’; his mother was in an institution, father’s whereabouts unknown. From the beginning he tried to escape his new life in various ways – he refused to work, absconded, was disobedient and, increasingly, drank.

He was repeatedly flogged but did not mend his ways. After he was freed he continued to be arrested for being drunk and disorderly, but he was only fined, or placed in the stocks if he couldn’t pay. He seems more pathetic than dangerous, at least at first.

He graduated to burglary and theft, and kept drinking. But in 1833 Riley was convicted of attempted murder. Sent to Port Arthur, he was no trouble until he suddenly killed Joseph Shuttleworth with three blows to the head with a pickaxe while they were at work building the church. At his trial, William refused to speak and was led away to be hanged.



Each evening, our black-cloaked guides lead Historic Ghost Tours and relate spine-tingling stories of strange events and experiences from Port Arthur’s past.

What caused this young man to commit such a brutal crime? Was he somehow provoked by Shuttleworth? The murdered man also had a long record of many floggings for refusing to work. But instead of taking to drink like Riley, he had turned violent, and had several convictions for fighting and assault.

Three weeks before he died, he was charged with fighting in his hut; no-one else was charged. Had Shuttleworth assaulted Riley? The only clue that we have comes from Riley’s own lips. As he threw down the pickaxe he said calmly; ‘I am satisfied’.

Riley and his victim are remembered each evening at Port Arthur as the Historic Ghost Tour visits the old church, the scene of Riley’s crime.

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