

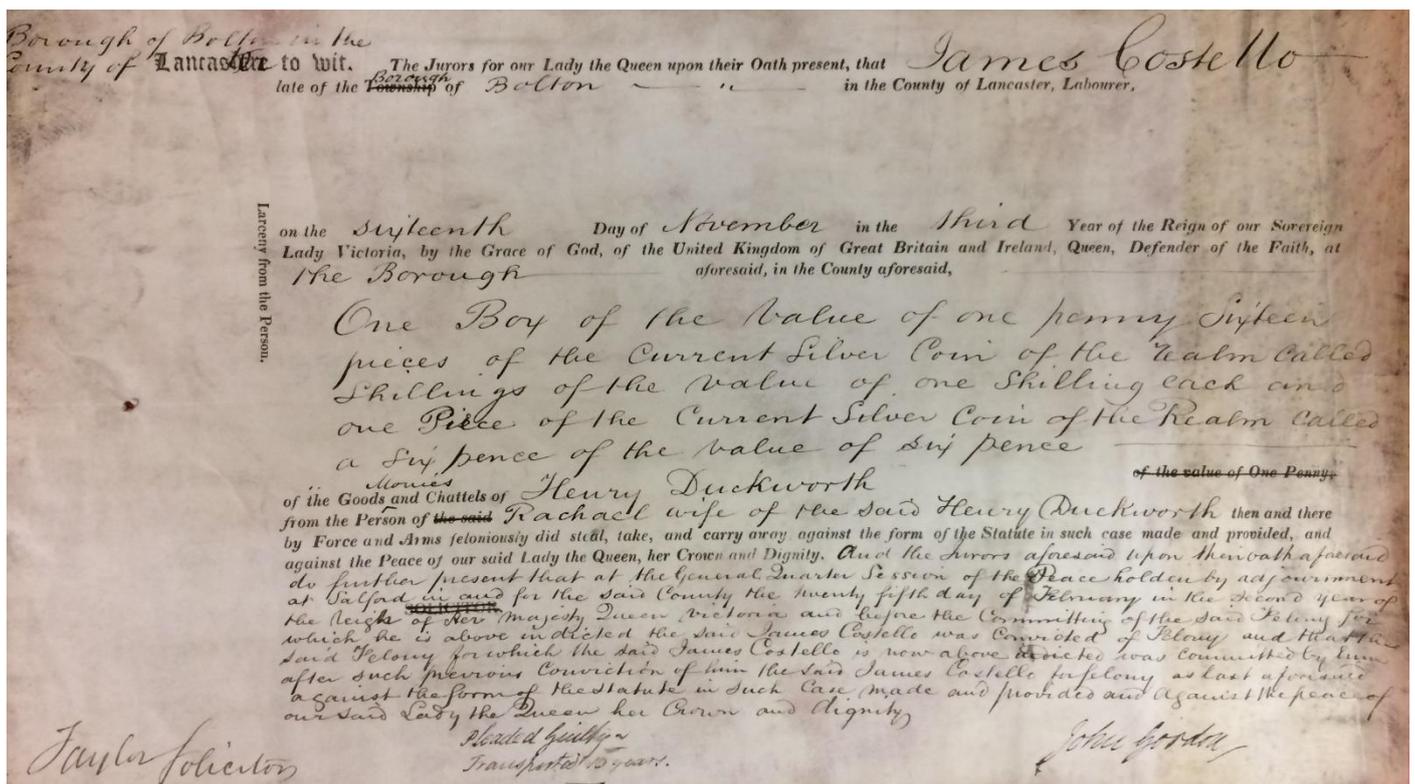
**Bolton
Council**

Museum

**At home
with**

**Bolton
Library and
Museum Services**

Just a Boy – The Story of a Child Convict



The Archives at Bolton Library & Museum Service hold many different records which document the lives of the people of Bolton. One such record series is the one pictured above which is a 'Court Indictment File', which records the details of cases brought to the Quarter Sessions Court.

The document shown here records the charges against James Costello heard in January 1840. James was charged with larceny, or theft as we know it today. He pleaded guilty to picking the pocket of a Rachael Duckworth in November 1839. His sentence was to be transported for 10

years. Transportation was a form of punishment used between the late 18th century and mid 19th century involving the relocation of criminals to British colonies to serve their prison sentences.

The Bolton Chronicle reported on the proceedings and tells us something quite shocking about James; that he was just 15 years of age. Just 15 years old and sentenced to being sent overseas without family or friends! However, we learn that it wasn't his first offence. He had been convicted and imprisoned on two other occasions for the theft of stockings, shirts and shoes. The Court Recorder declared that there was 'no hope for his reformation' and therefore he must be sent out of the country.

Using the ship passenger lists, which are available on the Ancestry website (free access for library members), we found that James set sail for Van Diemen's Land (which we now know as Tasmania) on the ship the 'Hindostan' in September 1840, and arrived in January 1841. We wanted to find out more about James' story, so knowing where he landed we got in touch with the Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority in Tasmania. Their Resource Centre carries out searches and makes information about convicts available to researchers.

They very kindly sent us digital copies of all the records they have pertaining to our James Costello. From their records we found a lot more information about James, including that he was originally from Ireland. The records also contain a very detailed physical description which would have been taken on arrival. James stood at 4ft 8.5 inches tall, he had a large round head, a flat nose, a small mouth, a large chin and was pockmarked and freckled. He was also described as 'bad in every respect' and his records reveal that he found it hard to stay out of trouble.



'Artist impression of James'

James was initially taken to Point Puer which was a prison for children between the ages of 9 and 18, and while they were set to hard labour, they did learn various trade skills, possibly to a better standard than they would have back home. However, despite a rigid daily routine and the opportunity to learn a skill, James' report card from his time at Point Puer details many misdemeanours including disobedience of orders, being absent from barracks, neglect of work, fighting and damaging government property, including ripping the sole from his boots!

His disobedience continued into his late teens and he was moved between probation centres, and on account of his 'extreme bad character' he was sent to Cascades, where the worst convicts were set to hard toil in harsh conditions.

In February 1850, at the age of 25, he finally received his Certificate of Freedom, which meant he had 'all the rights and privileges of a free subject'. However, just three and a half months later he was convicted of house breaking and stealing surgical instruments. He was sentenced to 7 years which he spent at Norfolk Island, once again he misbehaved and he was punished with hard labour in chains for disobedience, idleness, having tobacco improperly and absconding. Maybe the recorder in that Bolton Court all those years back was right – there was no hope for his reformation!

He received his Certificate of Freedom again in 1856 but was fined for being drunk on two occasions in the same year and was charged with larceny yet again in 1876. Somehow, between his incarcerations, he managed to get married, and in 1869 his wife gave birth to a boy who they named James. He died in 1892 at 66 years old, not a bad age for someone who led a difficult life much of which was spent in penal servitude.

There is still much more we would like to know about James, what his life was like in Ireland, why he came to Bolton, and what happened to his parents, so there is still research to do. Also, how fascinating it would be to know if there are descendants of James Costello living in Tasmania who know nothing of this young lad from Bolton.