

BRIGHTON BUSHRANGERS



Bushrangers on the St Kilda Road, 1852 (1887, oil on canvas) by William Strutt (1825–1915) courtesy of Ian Potter Museum, University of Melbourne.

Centre couple: Samuel & Matilda Bawtree tied up together (see below)

BUSHRANGERS

Complaints about lawlessness, violence and police inefficiency are not new in Melbourne. In the 1850s The Argus newspaper was conducting a campaign for greater police activity in the control of crime. They complained that sticking up in the streets, housebreaking and assaults seemed to occur daily, and indeed, were no longer considered newsworthy. However, one crime which, for its unrivalled audacity was considered worthy of quite lengthy reports was the case of the Brighton Road bushrangers.

On the bright, sunny, Saturday afternoon of 16th October 1852, a group of bushrangers held up and robbed a total of nineteen citizens in Brighton Road in the space of two and a half hours. The first victims appear to have been William Keel and William Robinson of Brighton who were driving in a cart down Brighton Road towards Brighton. After they had passed the St. Kilda racecourse and somewhere in the vicinity of Glenhuntly Road, they saw two men walking a little in front of them. There were two or three men with guns beside them, and they were looking in the trees, apparently for birds.

Suddenly Keel and Robinson were surrounded, with guns pointed at their heads and that of their horse. At first, when they were ordered out of the cart, they thought the whole thing was a joke. Then, when they were roughly told that their brains would be blown out if they did not hurry, they realized that it was serious, and got out of the cart. They were quickly robbed of £28 and £46 and ordered to take their cart into a nearby wattle thicket. Here a halter was cut in shreds and used to tie them together. They were ordered to sit on the ground while two men stood guard over them with double-barrelled guns.

A few minutes later they were joined by the two men they had seen on the road. They had also been robbed and were tied and made to sit down. For the next two and a half hours the bush rangers continued to hold up passers-by, rob them

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and tie them together in the scrub, although some escaped them.

The Brighton Omnibus passed, loaded with passengers, but the robbers were engaged with another victim at the time and had to watch it go by. A Mr. Moody was riding along the road on horseback. He was ordered to stop and surrender, whereupon he spurred his horse and galloped off to St. Kilda, followed by shots. Mr. McCombie also claimed to have noticed the activities ahead of him and retreated unrobbed.

Mr. and Mrs. Bawtree were less fortunate when they drove by from Brighton at about 4.30 p.m. Two armed bushrangers on foot came up pointing guns at them, and ordered them to drive their gig into the bush. One of the men became very abusive, using very "blasphemous and violent language". He drove the stock of his gun into the panel of the gig and threatened to "blow their brains out" if they resisted. The gentle Mr. Bawtree asked the man not to use such language and violence in front of Mrs. Bawtree, but the men roughly ordered the couple out of the gig. The gig was ransacked and a valuable double-barrelled gun and powder flask taken. Mr. Bawtree was then searched but nothing was found on him. He begged that his wife be spared the indignity of being searched, but was answered with more foul language and the searching of Mrs. Bawtree. They were then ordered back in the gig and taken to the hiding place and tied to the other eight victims already there.

At one stage the ring leader told the guard to put the victims together so that if he fired and missed one he would kill another. Mention was also made to one man already having been killed that after-noon and his body being put down a waterhole. However, no mention is made of his body in any of the reports. More people were robbed during the next few hours, until there were nineteen captives sitting in a ring in the bush, all tied together.

Finally, at sunset, the bushrangers withdrew their guard, mounted their horses which had been tethered in the bush, and rode off in the direction of South Yarra. Their victims released themselves and went on their ways. The gang seems to have comprised between four and six men, none of whom wore any disguise. There was much calling and cooeing about the bush which confused their victims and possibly led them to believe that there were more men than was actually the case. Some days later five bushrangers, thought to be the same gang, spent an afternoon bailing up travellers near Dandenong.

This event seems to have made the police a little jittery. They took to holding up anyone found on the streets after dark and frightened people as much as had the bushrangers. A spate of arrests followed, but only two of those arrested were identified by any of the victims. Most of those arrested were later released for lack of evidence and there seem to have been no convictions for this crime.

References:

The Argus, 15.10.1852; 19.10.1852; 20.10.1852; 1.11.1852; 2.11.1852;
Melbourne Morning Herald, 19.10.1852.

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