

A bushranger at Bondi Junction

AND CURRENCY —



Sketch of Johnny Gilbert, c. 1860s

The Waverley Hotel was an early local hotel which used to stand near the corner of Bondi Road and Waverley Crescent, Bondi Junction. It was described as 'a bush shanty standing about 200 yards from the road'.

On Saturday, 14 January 1854 the hotel was the scene of a murder when publican John Davis was found hacked to death. A newspaper description of the crime scene gives a sense of the bloody scene:

'On the left side of the head was a terrible gash extending from eye to the ear, the bed and bedding being saturated with blood. Under the bed was found a blood-stained axe which had done the deed.'

The isolation of Bondi Junction made locals even more fearful that a murderer was loose in their midst, with the newspaper going on to explain:

'This event has struck no small degree of dismay into the residents of the neighbourhood...there being no police protection, the nearest point...they could send for a constable being Paddington, a distance of nearly three miles.'

Suspicion immediately fell upon John Davis's nephew, Joseph Roberts, described as a 'mild looking youth said to be 17 years of age' who worked with his uncle at the hotel and was now missing.

Several mounted police started a search and Roberts was found 228 km from Sydney at Collector, near Canberra. He stated that he was riding to the goldfields. Evidence of Roberts' guilt was purely circumstantial and local residents vouched for the boy's good character.

Mrs. Davis, the murdered man's widow later gave evidence that 'her unworthy spouse was a habitual drunk'. She had married him in September 1853 and stayed only three days with him.

Roberts appeared intelligent at his trial and pleaded not guilty to the charge 'in a firm and collected manner'. The trial created intense interest and when the case was heard on 6 April, 1854 the court was crowded and the officials had difficulty in maintaining order.

Despite the fact that he fled on the night of the murder, and when arrested was found to have £200 on him (and his uncle was known to carry large sums of cash on him) the jury found him immediately not guilty of Davis's murder. He left soon afterwards for the Goulburn district and reports begin of him falling in with a 'bad crowd' or a 'flash gang'.

Joseph Roberts was born in Canada and following world wide publicity about the gold discoveries in Victoria had come to Australia with his uncle in the 1850s. They arrived in Melbourne from New York in 1852 on board the *Revenue*.

Roberts is listed at 10 years old, making him only 12 years old at the time of his uncle's murder. This conflicts with contemporary newspaper reports describing him as being 17 years of age. It is unknown whether the age recorded at his time of arrival in Australia is correct or not.

In his book *The Dictionary of Australian Bushrangers* Roy Mendham claims that after the murder of his uncle Joseph Roberts became 'Johnny Gilbert' a bushranger who later rode with infamous Australian bushrangers Ben Hall and Frank Gardiner and was a key part of their gang.

In a wanted notice for Johnny Gilbert from the Colonial Secretary's Office in 1863 describes him as:

'Between 22 and 24 years of age, boyish appearance, 5 feet 7 or 8 inches high, between 9 and 10 stone weight, slight light brown straight hair, worn long in native fashion, beardless and whiskerless; has the appearance and manner of a bushman or stockman, and is particularly flippant in his dress and appearance.'

Joseph Roberts/Johnny Gilbert was killed by police on 13 May 1865 at Binalong, 37 km north-west of Yass. His body was taken to Binalong Police Station where it was put on display and locks of his hair taken for souvenirs. He was buried on 16 May, in the bush near Binalong, where his grave can still be seen today on the outskirts of the town.

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