

John Ward

(abt 1812-1883)

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Carolyn Huston

Researching John Ward has been hampered by the frequency of the name "John Ward" many of which were born in Ireland in the early 1800's and who were in England between 1841 and 1881. As a result, the first document about his life was in 1879 when he was shown in the index of prison registers for HMP Wakefield¹. Wakefield prison first opened in 1595 as the West Riding House of Correction⁵ was rebuilt in 1770 and again in 1847. In the 1800's HMP Wakefield took prisoners from a wide area of West Yorkshire, including Leeds. The 1878 records show that 9,840 prisoners were committed to the prison, and that the daily average of prisoners held in the prison was 1,236⁵. Prisoners at the time were held in individual cells, with a hammock to sleep in, a 3 legged stool to sit upon, and bathed in warm water every two weeks⁶. Today the prison is used as a high security prison and holds 751 prisoners⁷.

John Ward was one of 20 prisoners named John Ward shown on the page and had been a coachman before being imprisoned¹. He was aged 65 and gave his place of birth as Dublin¹. He had been incarcerated at some time in 1879, and his sentence may have included hard labour, but the register did not list the offence nor the length of sentence¹. It did, however, describe his height as 5ft 5in and showed he was 'no settled'¹ which was the equivalent of the modern expression NFA or 'no fixed abode'.

The 1881 census showed John as an inmate in Leeds Union Workhouse on Beckett Street in Leeds². He was listed as a widower, aged 63, and his occupation was that of a domestic servant, a groom. The census return showed that he was unemployed and born in Ireland².

John Ward died sometime during the three months of April, May or June in 1883³, probably in the workhouse or the attached Infirmary. His body must have been unclaimed because his burial was not carried out until 6th July 1883⁴. The body had come to the cemetery from the Leeds Medical School which suggests that he was 'donated' to the medical school for dissection. The medical school would have paid for his burial which in the non-conformist sector of Beckett Street Cemetery in a shared grave, number:22563⁴. His non-conformist burial and his Irish roots strongly suggest that he was a Catholic. His age, as given on both his civil death registration and burial, was 74^{3,4}. The wide variation in his age suggests he either lied or was uncertain about the year of his birth, not uncommon in the 19th century when many people were illiterate.

In summary, there is very little known about John Ward before he was shown in the workhouse in the 1881 census. He was Irish and seemed to have worked with horses. He described himself as a widower and probably that was true. Certainly, he was alone and had no family in Leeds to claim his body. There are no clues as to how long he had been living in England, nor how long he had been in West Yorkshire. He had been in prison just prior to his admission to the workhouse but, other than

that, he has left behind him no real trace of his life. His was a sad, but fairly common story, of the inmates of workhouses.

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References for John Ward

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5. 'Prison History: West Riding House of correction at Wakefield'. Available at <https://www.prisonhistory.org/prison/west-riding-house-of-correction-at-wakefield/> (Accessed 23 July 2020)
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