



# Bushrangers near Gawler!

**George Hughes, Henry Curran  
and James Fox**



William Strutt. A Bush Hold-Up, ca. 1855. (National Library of Australia, nla.pic-an3212003)

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During 1839 and 1840, in the first years of white settlement at Gawler, George Hughes, Henry Curran and James Fox embarked on a short-lived reign of terror from the Gawler area to Crafers.

George Hughes, a native of Gloucestershire, was in trouble with the law from an early age. After he and his brother were arrested in connection with a robbery, his brother was hanged and George was transported to New South Wales for life. In 1839, Hughes and fellow convict, Henry Curran, escaped and made their way to South Australia. We can only imagine the hardships they endured as they traveled in their irons!

Somewhere along the way, they teamed up with young James Fox. John Flavel was working as a shepherd at Kingsford in January 1840 when the three men 'stuck the place up'. Shortly after they held up another sheep station, five miles from Gawler where they demanded supplies and money from the manager's wife, Mina Pffender. According to legend, Pffender's was a sly grog shop and after helping themselves, the bushrangers demanded money. Mrs Pffender refused and as she tried to escape, one of the men shot at her. Uninjured, she managed to raise the alarm and news of the incident spread quickly. A strong contingent of police was sent to the scene but by the time the police had arrived, the bushrangers had moved on.

Next they headed to Mount Crawford where they bailed up an overseer in his hut. Once again they demanded supplies and ammunition. The police were in hot pursuit and after viewing a tree that the bushrangers had used for target practice, they realised that these were extremely dangerous criminals.

The final escapade took place when the bushrangers bailed up the Sawyers' Arms Inn which was built on a site on the opposite side of the road to where the Crafers Inn is now located and which was run by David Crafer. It was here that the bushrangers robbing spree came to an end. They treated patrons to 'drinks on the house' and when the pursuing police finally arrived, two of the men, Hughes and Curran, were so hopelessly drunk that they offered no resistance to their arrest. Fox escaped but was captured later.

Charged with numerous serious offences, Curran, Hughes and Fox appeared in the Supreme Court on 3 March 1840. The most serious

offence, attempted murder, sealed their fate with a death sentence. They were sentenced to hang and the execution took place in public in front of the police barracks on North Terrace at 8 am on 16 March 1840. The Jury, however, had submitted a recommendation for mercy on behalf of James Fox and just one hour before he was due to hang, his sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. Fox died while being transported to New South Wales where he was to serve his sentence.

While awaiting execution the men were kept in heavy irons at Adelaide Gaol until it was discovered that they had somehow obtained a file and removed the rivets from their shackles. They were then taken to the mounted police barracks and placed under the watchful eye of Sub-Inspector Alexander Tolmer. Iron bars were installed on the windows and armed police patrolled outside. Even so, the men once again managed to come close to escaping by almost filing through the rivets on their irons with watch springs. Heavier irons were applied and closer guard was kept.



S T Gill. Mounted Police Barracks, Adelaide, 1840s.  
nla.pic-an238115  
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Tolmer reported that 'the men ate, drank, smoked, slept and behaved as though they hadn't a care in the world'. They also appeared unmoved by the sight of the gallows and the crowd that gathered to watch the execution. The appointment of someone to act as hangman was a problem and no-one was willing to take on the task. Governor Gawler was asked to delay proceeding but he would not go against the Court's ruling. On the evening before the hangings were scheduled a hangman was found. Heavily disguised to hide his identity, he appeared the following morning ready to perform his duty. Armed police stood guard against attack and to control the crowds.

Hughes made one final bid for freedom as he was being pinioned before mounting the scaffolding. He requested a final 'whiff of a pipe' and once he had it between his teeth he ran up the scaffold, taking all by surprise. After some effort, he was eventually restrained but when the executioner came to put the noose around his neck, Hughes rushed at him, trying to knock him over. He continued to kick and fight (even though his feet were strapped together) until two men were brought to hold him. Once the noose was around his neck and the hood pulled over his face, Hughes was at last quiet but when the bolt was pulled and the trap fell, he made a desperate spring and caught the side of the opening with one of his feet. The Colonial Chaplain went forward and kicked the foot away.

The behaviour of Henry Curran was far different. He appeared penitent and resigned and Tolmer reported that Curran's last words were 'a hope that his death would be a warning to others', and an appeal to Hughes to be quiet and die like a man.

Unfortunately for the pair, the rumoured rescue attempt by friends and sympathisers did not occur. The hangman, who was paid twenty pounds for his work, was later believed to have been 'done away with' by 'tiersmen' of the Mount Lofty area.



Bushrangers at Work, 1862  
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Alexander Tolmer, ca. 1852  
Photograph courtesy of the State  
Library of South Australia

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