

MEET WILLIAM THOMPSON

“I contemplated the naked figures, faintly perceptible in the gloom, with feelings of horror.”

William spent twelve months underground, harnessed with three other men to drag loaded coal carts. There he saw things that marked him for life.

William was a young shoemaker, transported in 1841 for Life for burglary. He was sent to the Coal Mines where he served twelve months underground. There he worked in appalling conditions and witnessed two shocking accidental deaths, all of which made a deep impression on him. He was relieved to be removed to the shoemaking shop, which also offered many opportunities for private profit.

After two years William was sent to the Brown’s River Probation Station, where he soon began trading pilfered soap and boots, usually keeping just one step ahead of the overseers. In late 1844 he was released to find his own employment. He went to a Mr Martin as shoemaker and remained there for four peaceful years. But suddenly he was arrested; Martin accused him of spying on his daughter while she was in the lavatory. William indignantly denied it; he said that he was clearing his eel trap in the nearby stream. But he was sent to the treadmill in the Prisoners’ Barracks for six months hard labour in chains, and then to the Bridgewater Road Gang. After that he went to Port Arthur, where he was first assigned to the timber carrying gang, then to the shoemaking shop. There he saw an overseer stabbed to death by a disturbed prisoner.

After eight months at Port Arthur he found work with a master shoemaker in Hobart. There he met his future wife, convict Elizabeth Millar. They married



*William Thompson circa 1901, photographed by John Watt Beattie.
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in 1852, and went on to have seven children, and many descendants.

A visit to the Coal Mines Historic Site, about half an hour’s drive from Port Arthur, makes a fascinating adjunct to a trip to Port Arthur. Collect a map and guide notes from the Visitor Centre before you go.

AMAZING STORIES, EPIC HISTORY