

Captain Thunderbolt

The last of the New South Wales bushrangers, Frederick Wordsworth Ward, better known as "Captain Thunderbolt", ruled the highways and byways of New England High Country and beyond for much of the 1860s.

Fred was born in the Windsor district of New South Wales during the mid-1830s. His family later moved north to the Maitland district, where in 1853, he began working at the famous 'Tocal' horse stud as a horse-breaker and stock hand.

In 1856, close relative, John Garbutt, became the ringleader of a large horse and cattle stealing operation, and enticed other members of the extended Ward family to join him. Fred helped drive some four dozen of the stolen horses (many from Tocal) to Windsor. The horses were recognised and Fred was subsequently arrested and found guilty of "receiving" stolen horses. He was sentenced to 10 years hard labour at Sydney's infamous Cockatoo Island prison.



After four years in prison, he was released on a "ticket-of-leave" to the Mudgee district. Here he met a young woman named Mary Ann Bugg, the daughter of a convict shepherd and his Aboriginal wife. Mary Ann fell pregnant to Fred who took her to her father's farm near Dungog for the baby's birth. After leaving her with her family, he rode back to Mudgee, but arrived late for his muster on a 'borrowed' horse. As a result, he was returned to Cockatoo Island to complete his original sentence with an additional three years for possessing a "stolen" horse.

On 11 September 1863, Fred and a companion, Frederick Britten, slipped away from their work gang before swimming to freedom through Sydney Harbour's shark-infested waters. The pair made their way north where, late in October, they were spotted by police near the Big Rock (now Thunderbolt's Rock), south of Uralla. A gun battle ensued, with Fred being shot in the left knee before making his escape into a nearby swamp. The two fugitives soon separated with Fred travelling south to the Maitland district. On 22 December 1863, he robbed a toll-bar operator at Rutherford, west of Maitland, afterwards informing his victim that his name was "Thunderbolt".

Soon afterwards, Fred collected Mary Ann and they headed for the lawless north-western plains where they remained quiet until early 1865. Fred then formed his first gang when he joined forces with three other men, launching a bushranging spree that ended when one of the gang members was shot at Millie in April 1865. Later that same year, he joined forces with another two felons but his second gang disbanded soon after one of them shot a policeman during a shootout at Carroll.

Fred returned to Mary Ann, taking her back to the Gloucester district where they hid out in the isolated mountains. In March 1866, Mary Ann was captured by police and imprisoned on vagrancy charges, but was released after a Parliamentary outcry. Fred resumed bushranging activities in 1867 after Mary Ann was again captured by the police and imprisoned.

After acquiring a young apprentice, Thomas Mason, Fred was active again, robbing mails, inns and stores in the Tamworth and New England districts. Mason was captured by police in September 1867. In 1868, Fred took on new apprentice, William Monckton, and picked up where he had left off. They separated in December of that year and, a few weeks later, Monckton was also captured by police.

During the following year-and-a-half, Fred ventured out on only a handful of occasions. He was shot and killed at Kentucky Creek, near Uralla, on 25 May 1870 by Constable Alexander Binning Walker. He now lays at rest in the Uralla Pioneer Cemetery where his headstone has become a popular attraction for visitors.

Sources: based on information from Wikipedia and www.thunderboltbushranger.com.au.

While in Uralla don't miss the following Thunderbolt related sites:

McCrossin's Mill Museum - Salisbury Street

- *"The Life and Legend of Thunderbolt"* - An exhibit containing artefacts relating to Thunderbolt's daring escapades, including pistols and saddles he used and the table his body was displayed on at the Uralla Courthouse.
- *Thunderbolt Paintings Series* - a series of nine paintings by artist Phillip Pomroy depict the dramatic events of the final day of Thunderbolt's colourful career.

Thunderbolt's Rock - New England Highway

Thunderbolt's Rock is a time-worn cluster of granite boulders located 6km south of Uralla, on the New England Highway. Originally known as 'Big Rock' or 'Split Rock', the boulders afforded Thunderbolt the perfect vantage point for monitoring the approach of unwary mail coaches.

Thunderbolt's Grave - Pioneer Cemetery, John Street.

The headstone was erected in 1914 by residents of Uralla as a memorial to Captain Thunderbolt. However, it is now shrouded in controversy as debate continues over who is actually buried there...or whether anyone is buried there at all!

Thunderbolt Statue - Cnr Salisbury & Bridge Streets

Found casting his steely gaze over Uralla's main street, this life size statue of Captain Thunderbolt was produced as a Bicentennial project and designed and cast by sculptor, Denis Adams. It was unveiled in 1988.

Constable Walker Memorial Plaque - Cnr Salisbury and Bridge Streets

Sitting quietly a few metres East of the Thunderbolt Statue, this often over-looked memorial was produced in 1970, at the time of the centenary of the death of Captain Thunderbolt, and commemorates the bravery of Constable Alexander Binning Walker.



Thunderbolt related sites further afield:

Thunderbolt's Cave - Thunderbolt's Cave Road, Black Mountain

Thunderbolt used this cave as a hideout to hold up coaches as they climbed the notorious Devils Pinch south of Guyra. The entrance to the cave is well signposted from the New England Highway and the road to the car park is in excellent condition and suitable for all vehicles. The cave is just a 200 metre walk from the car park.

Thunderbolt's Hideout - Mount Lindsay Way, Tenterfield

Thunderbolt used the large area between the rocks to stable his horses, and the small shelter under the large rock as a place to camp. The top of the rock made an ideal lookout, as this was the main road to Warwick during the gold-mining days. Travel north on the New England Highway from the Tenterfield Visitor Information Centre for 1km and turn right onto the Mt Lindsay Road. Leave your vehicle at the "Thunderbolt's Hideout" sign and follow the track to the hideout, it is an easy walk, about 300m from the road.

Wilson's Store - New England Highway, Moonbi

On 2nd October, 1868 Thunderbolt, along with accomplice, William Tavener, held up Henry and Grace Wilson's Moonbi store. The store is long gone, but the stone storehouse still stands and can be seen at the corner of the New England Highway and George Street.