



Devon Family History Society
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DARTMOOR CONVICTS INQUESTS

1869-1880

DRO Reference – 6772

DFHS Book Reference - D085

There are few documents about prisoners held in the gaol at Princetown, in Lydford parish on Dartmoor, because riots at the prison in the 1930s caused the destruction of many of the records which were kept there. The papers indexed here, relate to inquests held on deceased convicts and were deposited in the Devon Record Office in 2006 as part of the records of Fulford and Son, solicitors. Robert Fulford and his son, George Langdon Fulford, had offices in Okehampton but lived at Hatherleigh Street, North Tawton. In July 1869, Robert was appointed deputy coroner for Okehampton by Henry Adoniah Vallack, who was not able to carry out his duties as coroner due to ill-health. Henry Vallack died in 1877, and in January 1878 a meeting of the free-holders was called in Okehampton to elect a new coroner. Robert Fulford successfully campaigned for the appointment. This method of choosing a coroner was usual until 1888 when the Local Government Act made local authorities responsible for appointing coroners. At that time, before the 1887 Coroners' Act redefined the role of the coroner, Robert Fulford's duties were to sit, with a jury, on cases of sudden or unexplained death and determine the name of the deceased and how, when and where that person died. He was not expected to apportion blame. Robert continued as coroner for Okehampton district until his death on 26th September 1886. William Burd was elected coroner in his place and in November that same year, he appointed George Langdon Fulford to be his deputy.

The papers date from Robert Fulford's time as coroner. A few inquest papers have survived for the deaths of local people, but the majority of the papers are for convicts who died at Dartmoor prison, which came under the jurisdiction of the coroner for Okehampton district. The prisoners were known as convicts because they had been sentenced to penal servitude, meaning a term of imprisonment with hard labour. Records of inquests survive from August 1869 to September 1886, although the years 1871 and 1872 are missing. The files for 1878 to 1886 are the most complete. In most cases, there is a document giving particulars of the convict including his marital status, trade, date and place of conviction, his crime and sentence, previous convictions, previous places of confinement and the name and address of the next-of-kin. If the convict died in the prison hospital after an illness, there is also a document called a 'Bed-head diet ticket' listing the food and drink given to him while he was sick, and if he died through an accident or in a failed attempt to escape, there are witness statements. Sometimes there is a copy of the 'Inquisition' which is a printed form completed after the inquest to record the verdict and which was signed by the members of the jury and the coroner.

This index book does not list all the details about a convict listed in the original documents but it does indicate if more information is available. Photocopies of documents may be obtained on application to the Devon Record Office, but please note that, as blue paper was used to record the proceedings of inquests, the legibility of copies may not be very good.