

George Jackson, Escape Artist

George Jackson earned a place in history through being the only prisoner ever to escape the Oatlands Gaol three times. Not once, not twice, but *three times* Jackson escaped from the stone fortress in the heart of Oatlands. Jackson set a record that was never to be beaten in the life of the Gaol, and prompted the Gaol's architect, John Lee Archer, to observe that without vigilant Javelin Men, Jackson 'could have broken out of the strongest Gaol that ever was erected'.¹

Transported at 19 years old for stealing a workbox, Jackson was a carpenter and joiner by trade². On arrival in Van Diemen's Land he was set to work as a carpenter in the King's Yard, an assignment which ended abruptly when he was found to be pilfering government cedar. A serial absconder, Jackson spent time at Port Arthur, where he probably worked in the ship yards.

By July 1837, Jackson was working on the Campbell Town road gang (helping to build the Campbell Town Bridge). In December 1837, he was brought before Captain Forth on the curious charge of "receiving a mantelpiece". Captain Forth dismissed the charge for want of evidence, but went on to say that 'there is no doubt the man is guilty'. Noting that Jackson had 'repeatedly absconded of late', Captain Forth decided to send him to the station at Jerusalem (Colebrook) to face trial on a former absconding charge³. On route to Jerusalem, Jackson was lodged in the Oatlands Gaol.



The Oatlands gaol ca 1890 (Tasmanian Archive & Heritage Office)

¹ TAHO CSO 24/87/1812 – Note that this folio is actually a continuation of Archer's report from CSO 5/97/2165

² TAHO CON 31/1/24 George Jackson per *Enchantress* & TAHO CON18/1/6

³ TAHO LC83/1/2 14th December 1837

The Oatlands Gaol had only recently been finished; with stone walls 24 feet high it must have seemed escape proof. However, disagreements between architect John Lee Archer and Governor George Arthur had resulted in some serious design flaws. Also, Gaoler Thomas East could never have anticipated the sheer tenacity of someone like George Jackson, who managed to escape the gaol twice in the first weeks of February 1838. Both times he was caught. On the first occasion, his existing sentence was extended three years; on the second, he was sentenced to be removed to Port Arthur and worked in chains for eighteen months.⁴ But these sentences in no way diminished Jackson's determination to escape; if anything, the prospect of returning to Port Arthur probably spurred him on even more. On the 23rd February, 1838, Jackson made his third and final escape from the gaol. By this stage, several precautions would have been taken against his escape. Firstly, as with all absconders, whatever clothes he was wearing on entering the gaol would have been changed for prison slops. Secondly, rather than sharing a ward with the 'felons', Jackson was confined to a solitary cell. And last, but by no means least, he was fettered with 24lb leg irons.⁵

For his first escape, Jackson had managed to cut a hole through his cell door large enough to crawl through, despite it being a 'double inch boarded door of gum, nearly equal in hardness to English Oak'⁶. This had been the painstaking work of five days, and raised grave concerns about the management of the gaol – after all, how did the Gaoler or Javelin Men manage not to notice such a hole, for five whole days? To add to the problem, at this early stage there was no night watch at the gaol. Instead, once the prisoners had been placed in their respective cells or wards for the night, both Javelin Men and Gaoler simply retired to their apartments. In other words, if a prisoner could escape his cell – and Jackson managed it three times – he could then manage the rest of his escape unnoticed. Which is exactly what Jackson did – having crawled out the hole in his cell door, he simply walked into the outer yard, where, through the carelessness of the Javelin Men, he found a large axe and iron wedges, and promptly used them to knock off his leg irons. With the aid of the axe, he managed to knock the box lock off the main gaol gate. From there all he had to do was walk out.⁷

In the evening of 23rd February, 1838, Jackson made his last escape from the Oatlands Gaol. This time around, he adopted the ingenious expedient of lifting his entire cell door off its hinges and putting it back in place, giving it the appearance of being locked and secure. (This was no mean feat; a cell door of this size and thickness would have taken a great deal of strength to lift and remove, let alone doing so surreptitiously). Later that night, once the Javelin Men were in their quarters, Jackson removed the door and once again found himself in the yard, unwatched. And luckily for him, no-one had yet fixed the lock on the main gate. Instead, it was held in place by two nails, which would have presented no problems at all for a man like Jackson. So, once again, George Jackson simply walked out the main gate, and vanished into the night.⁸

⁴ TAHO CON 31/1/24 Conduct Record, George Jackson per *Enchantress*

⁵ See 1849 Report on Gaols for procedure with absconders

⁶ TAHO CSO 5/97/2165

⁷ TAHO CSO 5/97/2165

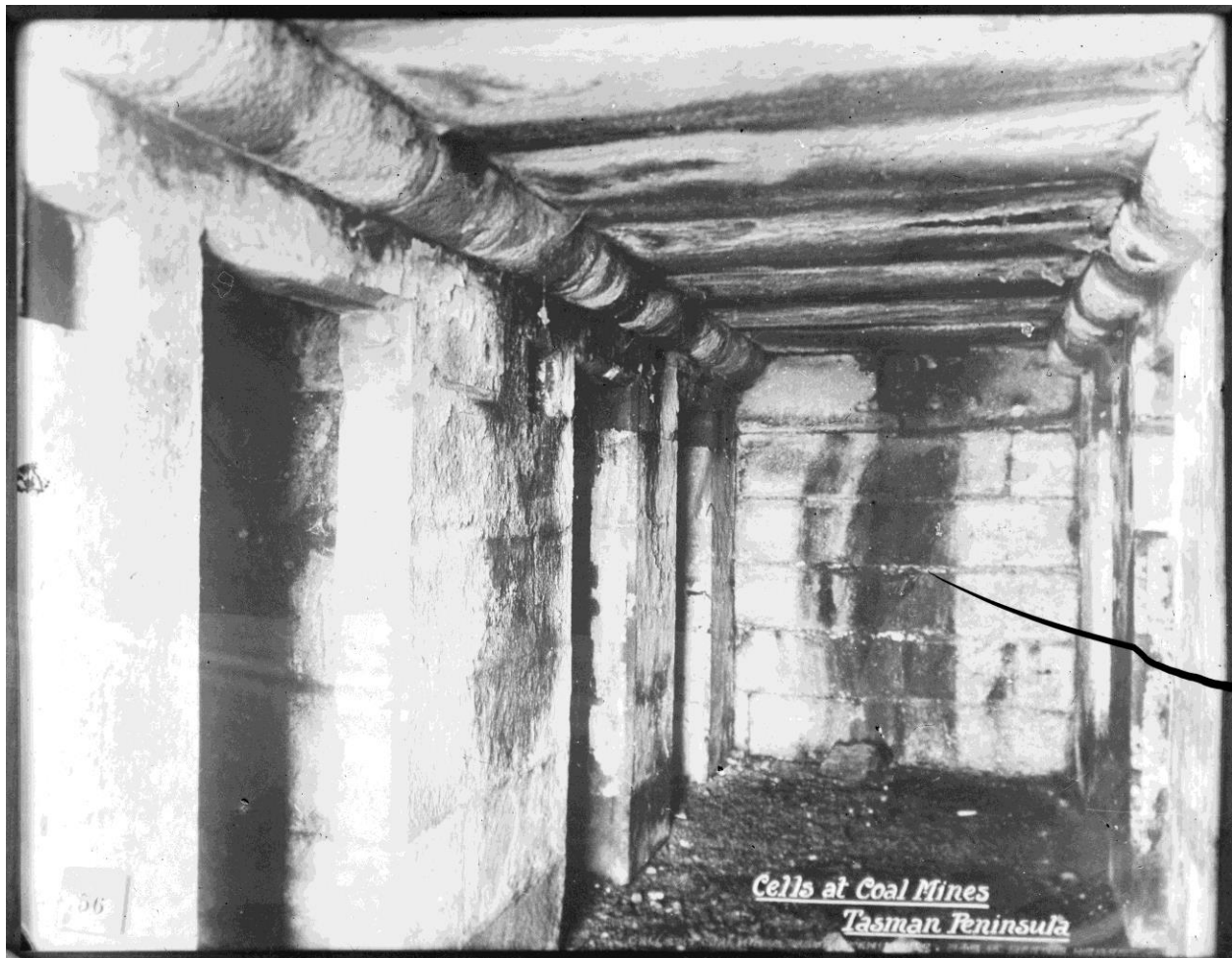
⁸ *Ibid.*



Gaol door believed to have originated from the Oatlands Gaol. Jackson somehow cut through one of these with a tin mess knife

The problem for Jackson was that surviving as a runaway was far harder than escaping incarceration. Despite making such an inspired effort at escape, he was captured several weeks later and returned once again to the Gaol. For his third attempt, the two former sentences were confirmed; in addition, he was given a flogging of 100 lashes.⁹

This was to be his last escape from the Oatlands Gaol, or indeed from any institution. A short time after, he was moved to Port Arthur, to work in the dreaded Coal Mines, where, in September 1838, he lost his cap whilst working on a jetty. In a vain attempt to retrieve it, he dived into the water, and almost immediately drowned. Witnesses reported seeing the lifeless body of George Jackson, floating under the still clear waters. He had escaped from the Oatlands Gaol a staggering three times, but there was no escaping death. He was just 25 years old.



Underground solitary cells at the Coal Mines near Port Arthur

⁹ TAHO CON 31/1/24 George Jackson per *Enchantress*