

THE ELUSIVE PIMPERNELS

Reporters of the 1920s and '30s sometimes got to interview escapees, who came across as being all-too-proud of their escape efforts. Newspaper stories were full of their boasting, and they were presented as being 'clever' or 'daring' in the manner of the characters seen in Hollywood movies of the time.

The best-selling novel *The Elusive Pimpernel* told of the adventures of an upper-class hero and his exploits while on the run in revolutionary France. In 1935 the story was made into a popular movie called *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. For a time, newspapers used the term 'pimpernel' to describe any 'daring' prison escapee, often glamourising and sensationalising their exploits.

Four 1920s/30s escapees from Boggo Road were portrayed as 'pimpernels': Percy Lee, Ernest Richards, and Charles Watson were the first three. It was at the end of this period that Boggo Road's most famous escapologist Slim Halliday started making headlines. All of these men escaped from the old No.1 Division.

1926: Percy Lee

Percy Lee was the only prisoner to get away from Boggo Road and not be recaptured as an escapee. Although he was eventually returned to a prison, he never saw the cells of Boggo Road again. In the journalese typical of the time, the *Truth* newspaper gave this description of Lee:

"In the city of Yarra his forte is likewise regarded as proficiency in the art of subjecting the pockets of unsuspecting persons to his painless examination. Only a few weeks had passed when Lee gained an accumulation of good conduct marks that brought him many of the benefits that are allowed under the rules of the gaol.

He was an industrious and submissive captive. His laughing brown eyes and penitent grin dispelled any thoughts of treachery on his part, and he did his work so well and readily that the impression was given that he was making the best of his lot and

was working out his time with the best possible grace so as to make the time hurry by.”

Percy was a ‘dip artist’ – a pickpocket – serving 12 months for his crime. Inside Boggo Road his good behaviour had made him popular with the warders, and he was trusted enough to be allowed to work outside the walls.

Lee’s escape was well planned and involved help from mates outside the gaol. The plan was put into action one August morning in 1926 with an accomplice hiring a taxi in Albert Street and going to the Albert Hotel to pick up a second man. Moving on to the Palace Hotel, South Brisbane, where a third man joined them, they went on to a house in Hope Street to pick up a parcel of clothing. Trying to co-ordinate the timing without raising the taxi driver’s suspicions, they stopped next to the gaol at Park Road Station, pretending to have missed someone. They moved on to Burke Street, separated from the gaol by a fence. As a trusted prisoner, Lee was working outside the gaol on this fence.



Percy Lee, 1926
(QPG, 21 AUG 1926)

The car approached the gaol, and as they passed, Lee ran up and jumped into it. “Drive as fast as you can” he shouted, and when the driver realised the other men had a gun, he did what he was told. The warder barely had time to draw his revolver and fire two quick shots before the car was gone. It was all over in seconds. Lee changed his clothes in the car before they all got out at Melbourne Street railway station - now called South Brisbane station - and told the driver, “Keep your guts, or your brains will be knocked out”.