

FRANCIS HORROCKS

Monday 26 September 1892, 8 a.m.



(Image: QSA, ID2947)

Origins: Queensland
Year of birth: 1875
Religion: Church of England
Education: 'Read & Write'*
Occupation: Stockman
Height: 5' 8½" (174cm)
Weight: 10st. 1lb (68kg)
Place of trial: Brisbane
Offence: Murder
Location of offence: Hemmant, outer Brisbane
Burial location: Portion 6B, grave 27
 (* Police prisoner records)

Francis Horrocks, 'The Hemmant Murderer', was the youngest white person ever executed in Queensland. At 17 years old, jobless, nearly broke and behind in rent, he premeditated the brutal murder of a young migrant, Rudolph Weissmuller. The unsuspecting victim was a new resident of the same boarding house that Horrocks lived in. Horrocks had bought an axe with the last of his money and carried it to farmland at Hemmant, on the fringe of Brisbane. He led Weissmuller there on the premise of a work opportunity – but really lured him there for his cash and a watch.

The case against Horrocks was circumstantial but strong, as he had incriminated himself in several ways. He had left the tomahawk at the crime scene, there were witnesses to everything but the actual deed, and he was seen with the watch in his possession. He left his boarding house immediately after the incident but was arrested soon after with some bloodstains on his clothing. He offered no explanation in defence, but simply denied his guilt. His amazing indifference carried on up to his execution. After being found guilty, sentenced to death and moved to

Boggo Road, he wrote a brief confession to an Anglican Minister, but remained silent after this:

I desire to acknowledge that I am guilty of the crime for which I have been condemned to death, and to express my deep sorrow for the deed.

(Signed) F.C. Horrocks; Witness: D. Ruddock
(*Queenslander*, 1 October 1892)

There was a public furore over the hanging of a (white) seventeen-year-old, and the newspapers were full of protests about it. Several petitions from around the state calling for the commutation of his death sentence were produced, but to no avail.

When he was hanged, reporters observed that he died as he had lived – unmoved and callous. Apparently he slept soundly, rose at about six o'clock in the morning, and had a hearty breakfast, after which the Reverend David Ruddock joined him.

On the scaffold he appeared to be an unconcerned spectator of the events around him. He had an expressionless face and acted calm and aloof. He ignored the gathered officials, giving recognition only to the Reverend who laid his hands on Horrocks' pinioned arms and spoke to him as the condemned man briefly bowed his head. The execution was quick and efficient.

His family, well respected in Brisbane, supplied a good coffin, which was drawn through the large crowds gathered outside the prison and followed by a mourning coach. The crowds then headed to the cemetery to observe the funeral service in portion 6B. The Reverend Ruddock conducted the graveside ceremony as the coffin was lowered. It had been inscribed with Horrocks' name and the dates of his birth and death. Below this was a silver plaque with the simple words 'At Rest'.

In the afternoon several members of the municipal council decided to start a fund to provide a headstone for the grave of Weissmuller, who had been buried in an unmarked pauper's grave in Toowong Cemetery.