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The forgotten story of the Coventry Weavers Riot – and how the city saved the life of one of its own

Thomas Burbury was sentenced to death for his part in the riot of 1831. But thanks to the people of Coventry, his sentence was commuted – and he went on to have an incredible life the other side of the world.

By Rachel Stretton · Coventry Live · 18 October 2026, 12:04



Old weaver's houses in Coventry before they were demolished in 1973

The 'forgotten' story of a Coventry riot is set to be brought to life in a new novel – charting the conviction of a young silk weaver and how the people of the city saved him from a death sentence.

Thomas Burbury was just 21 when he attended a meeting in 1831 between the workers and masters of the industry, close to where the Weaver's House stands in Coventry today. But the meeting descended into violence – and Thomas was accused of being the ringleader.

Tried and convicted, he was sentenced to death. Author Sarah Thornton, who was born in Tasmania, grew up hearing the story of her ancestor after a relative had traced their history in the 1970s.

His criminal history, however, had been 'swept under the carpet'. "Everyone said he was a private settler," Sarah said in an interview with CoventryLive. But becoming a lawyer, then a writer, sparked her curiosity and she began researching his life.

"I knew he was a machine breaker," she said. "I was quite proud of that. He had an incredible life in Van Diemen's Land – it was like the Wild West back then. He apprehended a sheep-stealing gang and ended up getting a formal pardon."

The family's profile doesn't end there. Incredibly, given how the Burburys came to be in Australia, the first Australian-born governor of Tasmania was a descendant of Thomas – Sir Stanley Charles Burbury.

As she began researching Thomas's life, Sarah found a wealth of information and quickly realised she had enough material for two novels – one on the Coventry riot and Thomas's contested part in it, and another on his life in Tasmania.

As part of her research, Sarah visited Coventry and walked the streets where her ancestor had roamed, visiting Spon End where he had lived with his wife and 18-month-old child.

“I had chills up my spine walking those streets,” she said. “It was just surreal.”



Weaver’s House is the only remaining cottage on Spon Street. Image: Rock Drum / Creative Commons

Who was Thomas Burbury?

The story of the Coventry Weavers Riot happened against a backdrop of economic hardship. With the Napoleonic Wars over, cheap silk was being imported from Europe.

“The weavers were desperate,” Sarah explained. “It was a perfect storm. Many were out of work. They had met to try to get the master weavers to pay them properly – they were supposed to get paid a certain amount per yard but many of the masters weren’t paying them that price. These meetings were usually very civilised.”

But that day – November 7, 1831 – the gathering ended in chaos and rioting. Josiah Beck’s mill was burned down and a factory owner was seriously beaten.

It’s unclear what sparked the riot, although Sarah said a parliamentary enquiry carried out shortly afterwards suggested the weavers had been provoked, an idea she explores in her novel.

There was an immediate clampdown by authorities and the suspected ringleaders – including Thomas Burbury – were arrested in the middle of the night.

But according to Sarah, his role in the uprising may not have been what authorities made out. Rather than being a violent ringleader, it’s possible Thomas Burbury stepped in to prevent the factory owner being beaten to death.



Author Sarah Thornton's ancestor is Thomas Burbury, a Coventry silk weaver who was transported to Tasmania after being convicted of rioting.

"The people of Coventry saved his life"

Justice was different in the 1830s. While others convicted of being involved in the riot had their sentences commuted to transportation, Burbury remained under sentence of death. But thousands of Coventrians signed petitions, adding their voice to Burbury's cause, along with the city's then-MP, Edward 'The Bear' Ellis.

"The people of Coventry really saved his life," Sarah said. Incredibly, with just hours to spare before he was due to be executed, Burbury's sentence was commuted.

It's a thought-provoking story for Sarah – not just as an author but for the impact on her family.

"I feel really grateful," she said. "And what I love is that – the names of people who spoke up for him in the trial, you know their descendants may still be living in Coventry today. What a spirit of community, to refuse to give up.

"It's not so much the injustice that stays with me, it's the persistence of those people, the fact that, in the end, the authorities had to bend to the will of the people of Coventry. To me that's amazing."

She also spares a thought for Thomas, the young man caught up in a tide of violence, whose story shows how history is about ordinary people – not just kings and rulers and dates to memorise.

"What's so powerful to me is someone falling foul of the law, deservedly or undeservedly, and their entire world collapsing," she said. "He was married, he was 21 with an 18-month-old child. From one moment in time he was swept up in violence that day, a knock on his door in the middle of the night, his entire life changed forever."

Sarah's book about Thomas Burbury and the Coventry Weavers Riot, Unwoven, will be available on her website in November.

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