Cowan's dad revealed in archives

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Archival evidence has been found that confirms Kenneth Brown — the father of Edith Cowan, the first woman elected to an Australian parliament — was executed for killing his second wife.

The evidence was contained in old convict records held by the State Records Office.

It quashes the 140-year-old conspiracy theory that Brown avoided execution by escaping custody and fleeing to the US.

Not only does the evidence show Brown was hanged in the old Perth Jail on June 10, 1876, but also that he was regularly visited by his then 15-year-old daughter Edith.

The murder and subsequent trial attracted extensive media attention.

Brown was a prominent local citizen, an explorer and a pastoralist. Mt Kenneth, near Mt Magnet, was named after him. He sold cavalry horses to the Indian Raj. And, in 1873, one of his horses, Victorian, became the first WA-owned runner in a Melbourne Cup.

Brown's first wife — and Edith's mother — died in childbirth in 1868 when Edith was seven. Edith was sent to a Perth boarding school and Brown moved to Victoria, where he married Mary-Ann Tindall in 1873.

After a stint in New Zealand, the couple and their two children moved back to WA and settled near Geraldton.

But the marriage was in trouble and there are numerous reports of Brown's antisocial behaviour and violent nature.

On January 3, 1876, while packing to move house, Brown shot his wife dead.

Constable James Thompson was first on the scene and discovered Brown standing near the body and holding one of his daughters.

Brown told him: "There she is, dead enough. I have done it, there is no use denying it. For God's sake let me have one last look at her before you take me away."

Const. Thompson said Brown then stooped down, put his right hand on her shoulder and kissed her cheek. After two trials resulted in hung juries, a third trial found Brown guilty of wilful murder and Chief Justice Archibald Burt sentenced him to hang.

But several years later, the eldest daughter from his second marriage claimed she met her father in a hotel while travelling around the US. It was a highly improbable story but one that has been sustained by conspiracy theorists throughout the decades.

In 1907, The Sunday Times newspaper reported: "It has been often asserted that Kenneth Brown was never hanged and many people believe it to this day".

But State Records Office senior archivist Gerard Foley said information found this month in WA's convict records had revealed the details of Brown's execution.

Mr Foley said these records include convict registers, character books and letterbooks.

But it was the "occurrence book", that records the daily comings and goings at jails, that provided the most compelling evidence.

"The occurrence book reveals Kenneth Brown received a large number of visitors," Mr Foley said.

"Kenneth Brown's daughter Edith turned 15 in 1876 and a Miss Brown is recorded in the occurrence book as visiting with Kenneth's mother Mrs Brown on March 6. On April 1 it states 'visited by Miss E Brown', so she visited alone. Again she is listed as visiting with Master C Brown on May 15.

"At 6am on Saturday June 10, 1876, Warder Fishwick is recorded as being 'on duty inside' the condemned cell and the dean of Perth attended at 6.15am. At 7.30am, the sheriff arrived at the prison and at 8am Kenneth Brown was executed.

At 9.30am the coroner E.W. Landor arrived to conduct an inquest on the body. At 4.30pm, the occurrence book shows Kenneth Brown's body was 'removed by his family under permission of the proper authorities'."

In an essay published by the Royal WA Historical Society in 2015, local lawyer and amateur historian Aidan Kelly concluded: "The family never escaped Kenneth's shadow but arguably they strove to atone with something positive. Edith Cowan's motivation to address social inequities, particularly as they related to the support and treatment of women, the right to birth control and the universal benefit of education has been attributed to the circumstances of her parents' lives."

State Records Office senior archivist Gerard Foley. Picture: Steve Ferrier