Cemetery Conversations

WILLIAM AND SARAH WITT—PIONEERING PHARMACIST AND CHILDREN'S WELFARE WORKER

Story by Lance Peirson—great, great grandson of William and Sarah Witt.

William Witt was born in Salisbury, Wiltshire County, England, on the 14 December 1833, the youngest of the seven children (five sons and two daughters) of Joseph and Martha Witt. Joseph Witt, a blacksmith died in 1840 when William was six years old.

William Witt was educated at the Ivy Church Academy, Salisbury and at a boarding school in the nearby town of Downton. At the age of 12, he was apprenticed to Edwin Whitlock, pharmacist of Market Square, Salisbury, on 30 September 1846. His master departed the city for the relative safety of the countryside during the cholera outbreak of 1849, and William remained behind in charge of the business and the junior apprentices. When the epidemic subsided, William, having proved himself, was promoted to run his master's branch pharmacy in Downton, a business that he would soon purchase for himself.

Sarah Woolcocks was born in Plymouth, County Devon, England on 22 September 1833. She married William Witt on 30 October 1856 at the Morley Street Chapel in Plymouth. The newlyweds left Plymouth for London on the next day with William's older brother, Charles King Witt and his

wife Hepzibah. The party boarded the clipper ship *Queen of the Seas* with 39 other passengers, angora goats and other assorted livestock, and departed London for Australia on 5 November 1856.

They arrived in Australia, after a fast passage, on 27 January 1857, and were disembarked a few days later. The two brothers and their wives stayed only one night on land in Melbourne before they departed for Beechworth in northeast Victoria to meet up with the boys' sister Emma and her husband Eli Abbott. Eli was a grocer's assistant when he and Emma migrated to Australia in 1852, where Eli found employment with Edmund Vickery in his general store on the goldfields of May Day Hills (soon to be renamed Beechworth). Eli did well, first buying out his employer in partnership with another young grocer's assistant, and then buying the business outright. Eli was also a founding member of the Wesleyan Church in Beechworth and was a councillor in 1856 and 1857. Sadly he died after a short illness on 16 May 1861. Charles King Witt soon moved to Benalla where he had a general store and farm. He

William Witt, pioneering pharmacist

(Courtesy Stonnington History Service)

Sarah Witt née Woolcocks, wife of William

(Courtesy Stonnington History Service)

(Continued from page 1)

founded the Wesleyan church in Benalla.

By April 1857, William had established his new pharmacy in Beechworth in a building attached to Eli's General Store and spent the next few years establishing himself in the town. Sarah Witt became pregnant on the voyage from England and gave birth to the couple's first child, William Hedley Vicars Witt, on 29 July 1857. Sadly, the young William died at Beechworth aged six, in 1857.

The years from the mid-1850s, through to the 1870s were Beechworth's heyday years. The town was in the centre of a prosperous gold-mining region and its population rose sharply in the 1850s. Canvas shops were replaced with more substantial buildings of stone and timber and the major civic buildings were erected; the Town Hall, Court House, Gaol, Hospital and Asylum. William Witt's pharmacy was in Ford Street, the main commercial precinct of the town. In those times pharmacists, including William, also practiced as dentists and he was also the regional agent for the Colonial Insurance Company.

William was elected to the Beechworth City Council in October 1859 and was the Mayor of Beechworth in 1865-66. He was appointed a Justice of the Peace in 1863 and served on the Bench of the Beechworth Court for the duration of his time there. He was a founding member of the Beechworth Fire Brigade, serving as its secretary. A founding member and Governor of the Ovens District Hospital and at different times served as chairman, secretary and treasurer on the Board of Governors. He was also the founder of the Beechworth Prospecting Association, and a founding member of the Beechworth Lunatic Asylum and the Ovens Benevolent Society. In 1857 he was a foundation member of the Pharmaceutical Society of Victoria and was the Society's secretary for the Beechworth district.

Some of his friends and colleagues of these times included:

- John Castieau, Governor of the Beechworth Gaol, who would go on to become Governor of Pentridge and then Commissioner of Prisons in Victoria.
- G. B. Kerferd, a fellow councillor who in the future was elected to the Legislative Assembly and became Premier of Victoria.
- Sir Redmond Barry, the circuit judge for the district.

- Police Superintendent Robert O'Hara Burke, the ill-fated explorer who accompanied Wills on the expedition to cross the continent from the south to the north.

William's business interests included branch pharmacies at Chiltern, Tallangatta and Rutherglen, in Victoria, and at Wagga Wagga and Parkes in NSW. He also had a sales and auction business in Beechworth and sat on the boards of three mining companies.

William was elected to the Legislative Assembly as the member for the Murray district at the Victorian elections of 1868, 1871 and 1874. Whilst far from being a great orator, William was a diligent and conscientious representative of his constituents, particular favoured by the poorer classes, the miners and cattlemen of the high country. He was instrumental in the establishment of the railway line between Melbourne and Wodonga. To this end he worked tirelessly chairing numerous meetings to garner public support in the towns along the route, gathering signatures on petitions and lobbying the Colonial Ministry. He was also a tenacious advocate of land reform and believed that every hard working man should be able to acquire his own land, in opposition to the vast estates of the squatters and pastoralists.

After his election to Parliament, William moved to Melbourne and opened a new pharmacy in Flinders Street where he lived above the shop. Sarah remained in Beechworth until 1870 with her five surviving children, young William having died in 1864. William and his family then moved to the relatively new suburb of Ballyshanassy, modern Burwood, where William was soon elected to the local governing body, the Nunawading District Road Board. In 1872 the Road Board became the Shire of Nunawading, with William as its first President, a position he retained until his retirement as President in 1880. During his time here he also served as chairman of the Bench at the Box Hill Court. The family home, *Heathersett* was on 33 acres at the corner of Elgar Road and Burwood Highway and the original two-storey sandstone house is now the administration building for the Presbyterian Ladies' College, Burwood. It was here that the last three of William and Sarah's seven children were born, though like the young William, their youngest child Charles Francis Edward Witt was to die there in early childhood.

...to be continued.

THE EXTENDED STEPHEN FAMILY AND THEIR AUSTRALASIAN CONNECTIONS

A great many of Sir George Stephen's extended family are people of note. They even include the writer Virginia Woolf who was the daughter of Sir George Stephen's nephew, Leslie Stephen. Listed below are just a few members of the Stephen family with connections to Australasia.

John Stephen (18/7/1771 - 21/12/1833) Uncle to Sir George Stephen. Worked as a barrister in St Kitts in the West Indies. He was eventually appointed a Supreme Court Judge of New South Wales in 1824 by his nephew, Sir James Stephen (see below).

Sidney Stephen (11/12/1796 - 13/1/1857) Son of John Stephen (above) and cousin to Sir James Stephen (below). Studied law and admitted to the Bar in London in 1818. Married Margaret Adlam, the daughter of a St Kitts' merchant. Moved with his father to NSW, then later to Hobart and then to the Port Phillip district. Appointed in 1850 as a puisne Judge in New Zealand. He is sometimes described as a Chief Justice of New Zealand (as mentioned, for example, on his wife's grave at St. Kilda General Cemetery). It would appear that he may have acted as Chief Justice in a temporary capacity but he was never formally appointed to the role. He died at Auckland, New Zealand. His widow, Margaret, who died in 1875, is buried in St. Kilda General Cemetery in the Church of England Compartment "B" Grave 0371 with her son, Sidney James Stephen.

Sir Alfred Stephen (20/8/1802 - 15/10/1894) Son of John Stephen and brother of Sidney Stephen (above). Cousin to Sir George Stephen. Born at St Kitts, West Indies. Arrived at Hobart in 1825 and was made Solicitor - General and then Crown Solicitor. From 1839 to 1844 he was a puisne Judge of NSW and Chief Justice from 1844 to 1873. He was a member of the NSW upper house from 1875 to 1891. His eldest son, **Alfred Hamilton Hewlett Stephen (1826-1884)**, was a prominent Anglican clergyman in NSW. His second son, **Montagu Consett Stephen (1827-1872)**, practiced law in Hobart and in Sydney. His third son, **Sir Matthew Henry Stephen (1828-1920)**, was a barrister, QC and Judge of the NSW Supreme Court. His seventh son, **Septimus Alfred Stephen (1842-1901)** was a lawyer, grazier and member of the NSW Parliament. A grandson, **Edward Milner Stephen (1870-1939)**, also practiced law and in 1929 became a judge of the NSW Supreme Court.

George Milner Stephen (18/11/1812 - 16/1/1894). Son of John Stephen (above), he arrived in Sydney with his father in 1824. In 1829 he went to Hobart and became a clerk in the Supreme Court in 1830. He moved to South Australia becoming a member of the upper house. He went to England to study law returning to South Australia and finally to Victoria in 1851, where he practiced law and invested in mining. In 1859, he was elected to the Victorian Parliament as the member for Collingwood. His later life was spent between Victoria and NSW. He became interested in spiritualism and was to become a prominent faith healer. He is buried in the Melbourne General Cemetery.

Sidney James Stephen (c1821 - /1/1875). Son of Sidney Stephen (above). His obituary in *The Argus* (29/1/1875) states that he was a native of Jamaica but was brought to Australia by his parents as an infant. Early in life he was a judge's associate to his father. He was admitted to the solicitor's role in Victoria in September 1851 and held various positions from clerk of courts at Geelong to Clerk/ Registrar of the Victorian

Grave of Francis Stephen at the St.. Kilda General Cemetery— CofE "B" 17

"A great many of Sir George Stephen's extended family are people of note. They even include the writer Virginia Woolf …"

(Continued from page 3)

County Court. He died aged 53 leaving a wife (Emma Harriet *née* Gregory) and three young children. He is buried with his wife in the Church of England Compartment "B" Grave 0369).

Francis (Frank) John Sidney Stephen (21/10/1823 - 10/5/1895). Son of Sidney Stephen (above). Born at St. Kitts, West Indies he was educated at Kings College, Sydney and after a brief period in Tasmania, arrived in Melbourne at the age of 22. He married Frances (Fanny) Morgan on 5 September 1848 at the Church of England, Petersham NSW. His monument records that he was "first solicitor of the Corporation of Melbourne [i.e. the Melbourne City Council], which position he held for 45 years". The monument also records that he was the second son of the late Sidney Stephen "Chief Justice of New Zealand". Francis Stephen built the stately home *Burreel* in Caulfield (near the corner of Kooyong and Glenhuntly Road) in 1865. One daughter, Gertrude Frances Stephen married John Madden (later Sir John, who was Chief Justice of Victoria from 1893 to 1918). Francis and his wife are buried in the Church of England Compartment "B" Grave 17 in the St. Kilda General Cemetery.

Sir James Stephen (3/1/1789 - 14/9/1859). Brother of Sir George Stephen, public servant, was born on 3 January 1789 at Lambeth, London, the third son of James Stephen. He studied law and was called to the Bar in London in 1811. He began his long career as a Civil Servant in 1813. It is suggested that he sought a position in the Colonial Office to help pursue his interest in the abolition of slavery. This led to later criticism that Stephen should have confined himself to the law rather than policy. Stephen occupied the highest position in the Colonial Office until ill-health forced his retirement in 1847. Although he never travelled to Australia, his impact on the development of the colonies was significant. His son **Leslie Stephen (1832-1904)** was the father of **Virginia Woolf**.

(Source: The Argus 12 May 1895; Biographical notes compiled by the late Helen Eggleston; A. Thomson Zainu'ddin, "Stephen, James Wilberforce (1822 - 1881)", Australian Dictionary of Biography, Online Edition 2006 www.adb.online.anu.edu.au; C. H. Currey, "Stephen, John (1771 - 1833)", Australian Dictionary of Biography, Online Edition 2006 www.adb.online.anu.edu.au; "Stephen, Sidney", from An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand, edited by A. H. McLintock, originally published in 1966 Te Ara - The Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 18/9/2007 www.TeAra.govt.nz/1966/S/StephenSidney/en; Martha Rutledge, "Stephen, Sir Alfred (1802 - 1894)", Australian Dictionary of Biography, Online Edition 2006 www.adb.online.anu.edu.au; "Stephen, George Milner (1812 - 1894)", Australian Dictionary of Biography, Online Edition 2006 www.adb.online.anu.edu.au; J. E. Egerton, "Stephen, Sir James (1789 - 1859)", Australian Dictionary of Biography 2006 www.adb.online.anu.edu.au)

'Burreel' - the former home of Francis Sidney Stephen near the corner of Kooyong and Glenhuntly Roads

"GOD'S ACRE" - LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Sir—In a letter signed 'Pro Bono Publico', the writer has not put before the public the whole matter re the St. Kilda Cemetery. Of course, his complaint of excessive charges are perfectly correct. Take one small item – "opening of graves". The charge is £1, the cost averages from 3s 6d to 4s. Then there is the label business, for which the management charges 5s for the loan to owner of the grave—cost, about 1s 6d; and if the owner puts up a headstone, etc., it—the label—is taken away and loaned out to someone else for another 5s, and so on.

Now, I come to another portion, and that is, the apperance of the cemetery. To any practical man it is in a most unsatisfactory state; in fact there is not any cemetery around Melbourne so poorly kept. After passing in from the main entrance, what will you find? Nothing but a mass of debris from beginning to end, and hardly a good path in the whole cemetery if tested after a fall of rain. Why is all the money spent on the nursery, building hot-houses, fernery, glass houses, waggons, coach hourses, and manufacturing all kinds of material instead of asphalting the paths etc? - I am , etc., 'WATCHFUL' ".

(Source: The Herald 25 Nov 1895 p3)