

Riches from the Earth

by Stephen Colliccoat

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If you could travel back in time to speak to one ancestor, who would you choose?

Without hesitation, I would choose my great grandfather, John Marriott of Castlemaine, father of my Dad's mother.

I admire John because, unlike most men who Thoreau once memorably described as 'leading lives of quiet desperation', he was born with a fire in his belly. A visionary, self starter and hard as well as patient worker, he lived for 65 years, 43 of which were spent in Castlemaine where he was largely instrumental in introducing and developing a successful vegetable and fruit growing industry in the area, giving strong support to the fledgling apple orchards that were to make Harcourt famous. While prosperous, he was also generous to his family, yet this was also a man who was to suffer some serious setbacks, one of which is thought to have contributed to his death.

Born at 'The Cottage', Sandy Lane, Eccles, Lancashire, England in 1832, John was one of the six children of orchardists, Sarah and Tom Marriott. He travelled to Melbourne on the 'Queen of the East' (or 'Queen of the Seas') in 1854. He was 22 and was later to describe his occupation on his marriage register as 'miner' suggesting that, like so many young men of the time his motivation to leave England was primarily to make a quick and easy fortune during the frenetic gold rush in the new colony. Three years after arrival in Victoria, John married Jane Stowe, daughter of an English bookbinder in the Parsonage (School House) of the Castlemaine Church of England. Jane would have been 31 years old at the time of her marriage in 1857, while her husband was 25. It is thought that Jane first arrived in Melbourne in 1852, but confusion exists with a person of the same name arriving in 1856, although that Jane, an unmarried mother gave birth to twins on board ship, one of which died on the voyage. Like many Victorian families, the newly married couple encountered early tragedy with their first two children dying within a year of birth, both children being buried in the Marriott family plot with John and Jane at the Castlemaine cemetery at Campbells Creek. Three other children survived: Martha, Alice (my grandmother) and Alfred.

It seems that John and Jane always had their principal residence and business at Campbells Creek, though John was later to extensively speculate in property investment. We know that he owned 'Winnan House' at 38 Main Street, Campbells Creek which he rented for a time to his son in law (and my grandfather), John Colliccoat while Marriott sold produce from and probably lived in the nearby two storey building now known as 'The Digger's Store' at 61 Main Street, Campbells Creek. This building has been described by a 2004 Heritage Study as 'probably the most substantial building to have been erected in Campbells Creek in the 19th century.' In 1876, John rebuilt and extended the original building that had been largely destroyed by fire.

History doesn't record how successful John was as a miner, but unless he was one of the approximately 5 per cent of young diggers of the time who prospered from their claim, it's most likely that he would have at best only scratched out a frugal living. Marriott would have quickly observed however that fresh fruit and vegetables were always in demand on the Goldfields. Most produce would be expensive but in poor condition after a long haul from Melbourne. Few westerners however would have anything like the skill of early Chinese market gardeners. John Marriott however was an exception. His family had for generations acquired and developed skills in this demanding area. Even at the time of her death at 81, John's mother still operated the family market garden that her husband established many years before. Three challenges were evident: fertile land with an abundance of water, sufficient capital to purchase and develop raw land into an orchard or vegetable garden and hard, but skilled work to make the dream a reality. We don't know

if John accessed capital through loans from his family, but rates records show he was soon buying, renting or selling blocks of land in the newly opened up town of Castlemaine. At the very least, he probably brought across root stock for his own orchard from the family business in England and it seems clear that he visited his parents at least once after establishing himself in Australia. Without charting his bewildering list of acquisitions in the town, we can see he frequently assisted one of his daughters, Alice as her landlord and helping set up blacksmith premises for John Colliccoat, who Alice married on September 15, 1886 at the Wesleyan Church at Campbells Creek. Alice is my grandmother on my father's side of the family and is the subject of a companion essay, 'In Search of Alice' that I wrote recently.

In his book 'Campbells Creek', the late Castlemaine historian, Ray Bradfield described John as 'an early orchardist who developed a fine nursery', He continued. 'It is said that many of the later Harcourt orchards had their beginnings at Marriotts. He was the proud possessor of a gold medal won at an early exhibition in the Old Country, for an exhibition of fruit grown in his orchard.' A article in the 'Mount Alexander Mail' on November 14, 1883 described the 10 acres John had under cultivation near the Standard Brewery in Campbells Creek. This holding which had been trenched to a depth of 14 feet had suffered considerable damage in recent heavy rain, destroying the crops of rhubarb, strawberries and gooseberries. Debris of about two feet thick smothered the crops, while in other parts of the garden the water still lay on the ground to a depth of around a foot. The writer thought the destruction of the gooseberries particularly sad as they had recently been awarded first prize in various local agricultural shows. The heavy rain however, he opined was likely to help the already heavily laden cherry, apple and plum trees. About 12 tons of plums had been sent from the garden to New Zealand. Any modern reader used to the miserably limited variety of fruit offered these days by supermarkets or fruit shops will sigh to hear of the different varieties then available. Plums included River's Favourite, Orleans, Goliath. Green-gage, Diamond, Golden Drop, Magnum Bonum and Damsons. Apples included winter Majelin, Williams' Bon Chretien, Gansel's Borgomot, Napoleon, Louise Bonne, Josephine D'malines, Van Alons and Zepherin Gregoire. Other crops included cherries, cucumbers, almonds, pears and more. The writer noted that John Marriott had commenced with a garden of a quarter acre but had over 12 years expanded his holding to ten acres, the gardens described as 'the best and most carefully attended that be seen in any country neighbourhood'. The site of the orchard was at the south west corner of Main Road and Princess Street, Campbells Creek. John Marriott had an able assistant Sam Sutton who greatly assisted John for over a decade and worked for John's widow for three years until he fell ill in the Marriott garden and died shortly after. Sutton was described in the 'Harcourt News' of November, 2018 as being 'Harcourt's Pioneer Horticulturist' and saviour for the little town that was dying at the end of the 1850's because the soil was not gold bearing.

John encountered many challenges as he built his business, not all of them the result of weather. In December, 1878 for example his horse and cart were stolen one evening from outside the Market Building. The thief, John Fraser was quickly arrested following a pursuit by a trooper, When the case came to trial the following February, the jury suggested the miscreant be shown leniency because he was drunk at the time and didn't know what he was doing. This admittedly weak defence of diminished responsibility was rejected by the judge who handed down a sentence of 15 months imprisonment with hard labour.

On Wednesday, October 14, 1885 the 'Mount Alexander Mail' reported the following 'Item of Interest', 'Among the orchards that have been greatly injured by the frost of last Sunday night was that of Mr. Marriott of Campbells Creek. The leaves on the vines are black, as if burned by a fire and the damage thus occasioned may not be overcome in the one year. Cherries, apples, peaches have been destroyed and even gooseberries have been laid waste. This is a heavy loss for Mr. Marriott, who was in Melbourne arranging for the disposal of his fruit for the season, and on his return found all hope for it coming to maturity gone.' As an aside, it was such frosts that caused the

once prolific orchards of Campbells Creek to be abandoned in favour of Harcourt, an advantage that was strengthened by the development of irrigation linked to the Coliban water system.

By 1887, John announced that as a result of ill health, he wished to retire and offered his house and orchard for sale. Unfortunately, he was still the owner in January, 1889 when a massive flood partially destroyed both orchard and nursery, leaving his house 'little better than a wreck'. Much of the damage was caused by the fact that Forest Creek had become choked by soil from gold sluicing.

The same year, John and Mary looking forward to a well earned holiday, booked a passage on the steam ship, 'Cheviot' travelling from Melbourne to Newcastle. What promised to be a peaceful and rejuvenating break from hard work was to prove a nightmare.

On October 19, 1887 at around 8pm the boat entering open sea beyond the Heads of Port Phillip Bay, encountered rough weather and the ship's propeller became disabled.

The boat drifted onto a sandbank and, caught on rocks, was mercilessly pounded by waves. The seas and wind increased in ferocity and a plan to launch a lifeboat from Queenscliff had to be abandoned. A crew member was sent to lead the steerage passengers to the temporary safety of the First Class saloon, He never returned and half the ship suddenly broke away and sank, drowning 35 passengers and crew. Twenty four survived. On October 22 of the same year, John Marriott who appeared at an inquiry that investigated and cleared the conduct of the 'Cheviot's' captain wrote a detailed first hand account in the 'Mount Alexander Mail' of the tragedy The site where bodies and wreckage washed up was renamed Cheviot Bay and was the place where Australian Prime Minister, Harold Holt disappeared while scuba diving in 1967. Divers can still explore the wreck of the steam ship today.



The wreck of the 'Cheviot'.

John Marriott died on Wednesday, March 25, 1891. A description of his burial shows that John was a popular and well respected citizen. He was buried in the Castlemaine Cemetery at Campbells Creek on the following Saturday morning. Despite the rain and the fact that many friends were absent holiday making, a large crowd was present. Members of the Forrester's and Oddfellows Lodges were present with old members of both Lodges acting as pall bearers who walked on either side of the hearse from Marriott's house to the cemetery. They were followed by two mourning coaches containing friends of the deceased. The lid of the coffin which was described as being of

splendid workmanship was covered with wreaths and crosses of choice flowers. The burial service was read in an impressive manner by the Rev. Mr. Jackson, the funeral arrangements being well conducted by Mr. T. Odgers. One newspaper speculated that John's death may have been caused by the long term effects of the tension caused by the 'Cheviot' shipwreck four years before. This may have been so, but the fact that John's only surviving son, Alfred John Marriott was to die 12 years later at the age of 36 leaving a widow and five young children, may suggest there was an underlying genetic weakness in male members of the family. Alfred was also a resident of Campbells Creek, dying at his home named 'Bostonville' and is interred at the Castlemaine Cemetery. Jane Marriott survived John by six years, dying on August 2, 1897. The family tombstone shows the couple were buried with the two children, Martha and Ruben who died in the early days of the Marriott's marriage.

When Jane died, a portfolio of eight lots were auctioned. They included 'Winnan House' rented to John and Alice Colliccoat since their marriage 11 years previously, and the family home now known as 'The Digger's Store'. They also included an impressive portfolio of other houses and blocks of land, all detailed in the 'Mount Alexander Mail' of Saturday, October 9, 1897. A conservative estimate at the time of his death put the total value of his estate at an impressive six thousand pounds, but probably much more was realised at the auction, equal shares of the proceeds of the estate going to each of the children. In his busy and successful life, John Marriott proved that a fortune could be drawn from the soil of Castlemaine not just by unearthing gold, but by growing crops of top quality fruit and vegetables. He was loved and respected not only by his family, but also the wider community.

Above: The Marriott home. Below: The house rented to Alice and John Colliccoat.

