Book Launch: *Robert Whatmough* by Jacinta Crealy*:* 24th June 2017

Thank you everyone for coming along today. I love the fact that this man, Robert Whatmough, inspires so many of his descendants to keep his story alive. I hope I have done him justice. The physical book is a tribute to Deborah Squires, a local publisher in Bairnsdale and a valued mentor.

Thanks to Greensborough Historical Society for hosting this book launch today. It’s a shame Noel Withers is not here, as he has been such a great supporter of this project from its outset. It was Noel who introduced me to my cousin, Steve Whatmough, who is the holder of so much information about the Whatmough family. Steve and I have had countless emails and a few mad meetings, swapping notes and charts and articles. This book is as much about Steve’s research as anyone’s.

I am also very grateful to other contributors to the book, namely Dieter Retz, Faye Fort, Joan Bardrick, Alexander Romanov-Hughes and Linley Hooper.

My family have been brilliant, my husband Ian and son Dan, who tolerated my obsessive research and writing, and they’re still with me. Thanks, Ellen Reeves, my niece, for excellent editing, and to all my family here today, supportive as always.

Here’s a little bit of background about Robert Whatmough, my great-great-great grandfather and how he filled the pages of this book.

Slide 2: Finding a passion

Most people find things to enjoy in life. Not everyone finds a passion: something that jumps into your mind upon waking; that thing that you look forward to at the end of your working week; that thing that keeps you up late at night because an exciting sense of discovery suspends time. 🞿 My passion started with a 14-day free trial with Ancestry in 2008. I thought that was all I’d need! But of course I was hooked.

Over the years, I have found not one, not two, but five convicts in the family. 🞿 For a while there, I thought Dad’s side of the family was the only contributor to our criminal genes.

🞿 But then I found one on Mum’s side called Joseph Rycroft and a colourful character he was…that’s another story…

Slide 3: Orphaned

🞿 Joseph Rycroft’s grand-daughter was my grandmother, Ruby Wilson. She was a much loved grandma, and the story was often told about how she and her two older siblings were orphaned, all under the age of four. 🞿 Their parents, Robert Wilson and Violet Rycroft, died in 1903 within months of each other, Violet of a bowel hernia and Robert of typhoid fever. 🞿 The three little Wilson children, Walter, Dorothy and 1-year-old Ruby were each taken into a family home.

Slide 4: Joseph and Sarah

🞿 Ruby was taken in by Grandma Wilson, who we know in this story as Sarah Whatmough, wife of Joseph Wilson. Sarah and Joseph had eight children, but tragically Joseph died suddenly in 1887 of a heart condition. Sarah was pregnant with Charles at the time: he was born 6 months later, and Sarah began the hard task of raising eight children, ranging in age from newborn to 20 years old.

Slide 5: Grandma Wilson

🞿 Sarah was an expert in the school of hard knocks. When she took in baby Ruby in 1903, she was 57 years old and had already been a widow for sixteen years. Survival was her forte.

🞿 Here is a snippet from the *Robert Whatmough* book about Sarah:

She was an incredibly hard worker, chopping wood and carrying water from the creek to the house in buckets using a shoulder yoke. By night, she created beautiful items of fine beadwork, such as ladies collars, boxes and picture frames, which were the fashion of the day. Her greatest joy was her acclaimed garden, full of all sorts of flowers and noted for her sensational snapdragons. The knowledge Sarah learned from her father allowed her to earn a modest income as she kept a small orchard and vineyard, and sold fruit to the Alphington Jam Factory. She and her sons also chopped wood to sell in Heidelberg. *Robert Whatmough,* p. 102

That’s where my curiosity began, with an elder called Grandma Wilson whose story was passed down by oral family history. How amazing that her story was still so strong many decades after her death.

Well and truly bitten by the family history bug, I wanted to know where Sarah Whatmough came from.

Slide 6: Robert and Mary

🞿 Thanks to the Ancestry website, it wasn’t hard to find Sarah’s parents: Robert Whatmough and Mary Hill, and even some great pictures of them. It wasn’t enough. I had to know more. And so began a journey back through time…And here is what I found. 🞿

Slide 7: The Weavers

Robert Whatmough was born in 1815 in Rochdale, Lancashire, in northern England.

🞿 Lancashire had been traditionally famous for its textiles, and Robert’s family had a lengthy pedigree of weavers over many generations. However, Robert was born into an angry world, where industrialisation had pushed weavers into textile factories with dreadful conditions and wages well below the poverty line. 🞿 Robert would have been one of many children to enter the factory at age 9, the legal age for children to begin work.

Slide 8: The Riots

🞿 People demonstrated and rioted, demanding enough money to put food on the table. It was during Robert’s earliest years that the term Luddite became a household word, an expression used for those who opposed technological progress, and popularly believed to have been inspired by Ned Ludd, a youth who destroyed some stocking frames in 1779. Mills were burnt, equipment was damaged, 🞿 and the government response was to send in the militia. It was not unusual for demonstrators to be killed by the militia, or killed in the frightened crush of people trying to escape the soldiers.

Slide 9: Chartism

🞿 Rioting, now a nationwide practice, was having no impact on factory owners or the government. So a canny group of radicals prepared a political charter in 1836 to present to Parliament, which became known as the People’s Charter. 🞿 The requests seem reasonable by today’s standards, but in fact this was the beginning of a long, bitter campaign between the government and Chartist radicals. The Charter was used to empower and unite people across the country. When soldiers shot into crowds to disperse them, this merely ignited the demonstrators into larger, more vocal meetings. In 1839, the government resorted to convicting radicals of treason and sentencing them to death or transportation. 🞿

Oral family history tells us that Robert was a Chartist. At the height of the arrests in 1839, Robert married local neighbour, Mary Hill, and in 1840, baby Jemima was born. Robert was at a turning point: to stay and fight, or to find another way for his new family.

Slide 10: A New Identity

🞿 What we know about Robert in 1840 is that he was a closet horticulturalist. He had been collecting all sorts of botanical and horticultural articles, carefully transcribing information into a kind of journal, which has been called *The Botany Book*, with articles dating as early as 1832.

🞿 When an opportunity arose for farmers to get free berths to Australia on the ship *Georgiana,* Robert signed up. Did he have farming experience? We still don’t know. We can only surmise that Robert’s dream involved horticulture and here was the opportunity he’d been waiting for. The day after Robert’s 25th birthday on 27th September 1840, Robert, Mary and Jemima set sail for Australia.

Slide 11: The Voyage

🞿 Anyone studying ship’s voyages will tell you that getting hold of the exact ship’s diary for the voyage of your ancestor is a rare and fantastic thing. If they are available, it is usually because someone has spent a lot of money to get a diary copy, and usually painstakingly transcribed it. How lucky we are that Linley Hooper, a descendant of the *Georgiana’s* ship’s surgeon, did just that, and then generously sent me a copy of the diary. The ship’s surgeon was Richard Ryther Steer Bowker, and his journal is rich, emotional and detailed. Thanks to Richard we know that this journey had:

Romances

Really bad food

Threats of mutiny

Frightening storms

Lots of infant deaths

A crazy Reverend and a volatile Captain

And finally, a three-day quarantine upon arrival in Port Phillip Bay because there had been disease on the ship.

Slide 12: Arrival

🞿 🞿 Dr. Bowker’s diary was so expressive and interesting, it was easy to imagine the trials and tribulations that would have been experienced by Robert and Mary. Crew and passengers alike could hardly wait to leave the troubled ship. At last Robert, Mary and little Jemima arrived in Melbourne, a town only 6 years old.

Slide 13: Melbourne in 1841

It seems I have met a lot of you already. Many people here will remember this 🞿 [*Godbers Wilson: 150 Years of Settlement and Growth, Family Gathering, March, 1988*]. I was there with my Mum, my aunties and my grandma, Ruby Mills, who was interviewed and had her story included in this booklet.

The next part of Robert Whatmough’s story was inspired by Alan Partington’s story, also contained in this booklet*.* Thanks to Alan’s efforts to capture history, we know that Robert got two jobs when he arrived in Melbourne. 🞿 He was a lamplighter…

Slide 14: First Gardening Job

🞿 …and most importantly, Robert got his first gardening job. He worked on the garden of John Batman, who had died in 1839. The garden was on the site of today’s Southern Cross station. 🞿 Robert built a bark hut on the edge of Batman’s garden, and it was here that Robert and Mary’s second child, Robert Emmett, was born in the summer of 1842. No hospitals, no nurses, hardly any doctors available, and water collected in buckets. Women acted as midwives for each other and babies were usually born at home.

Slide 15: A Town of Character

🞿 Learning about Melbourne as a young town was fascinating. The writer most quoted in this book about Melbourne’s early years was Edmund Finn, who wrote under the pen name, Garryowen. He described the washing strung up between trees as the “fluttering and flapping of the white drapery”; the “flickering, sputtering glare” of oil and tallow candles; the unruliness of the population with their “nocturnal outrages”, and the act of Major St. John, “brave as a lion”, in dispersing a town riot. 🞿 This is a downloadable resource for those who are interested.

This was the world that Robert and his family had landed in. I wonder what they expected. Perhaps leaving Melbourne was not just about opportunity, but about getting away from this wild little town.

Slide 16: River Plenty

🞿 When John Batman’s estate was disbanded, the Flintoff brothers purchased some of Batman’s trees and transplanted them in Greensborough at Brancepeth Park at Point Lookout. The Flintoffs offered Robert the job of tending the orchard, and in 1842, the family moved from the wildness of Melbourne to the wilderness of the Plenty River, where only a few families were settled. This place would be the making of Robert, but in those early days it was very tough.

Slide 17: Memorial

Robert and Mary had another eight children here between 1844 and 1856, 🞿 but only two of those eight children survived: daughters Sarah (Grandma Wilson) and Rosalie. All but one child died in infancy, causes unknown as death certificates were not required in those early days. 🞿 There was no cemetery, so Robert buried his children on the property, and planted jonquils to mark their place. Amazingly, those jonquils still bloom today. We will look forward to visiting that site tomorrow, marked by a plaque placed there by some of Robert’s descendants who are here today.

I am now going to skip over a few key events to be discovered within the book, before I move on to Robert’s success as a horticulturalist.

Slide 18: Robert and Cock Robin

* Robert and his pony

Slide 19: 1851

* Black Thursday, when a quarter of Victoria burnt
* The gold rush

Slide 20: Arrival of the Partingtons

* This is the family of Robert’s sister Ellen

Slide 21: Fraud in the Greensborough Road Board

* Robert was a committee member on this board from 1859 until its spectacular demise in 1875

Slide 22: Willis Vale

🞿 Just when I thought the book was finished, I rang Faye Fort who helped me fill in some gaps. Faye said, “Then of course, there was the murder.” I nearly jumped out of my skin. The story is frightful, and I won’t tell that story today, although it is in the book. What I can say is that if this murder had not occurred, 🞿 the Whatmough and Partington families would not have enjoyed living in Willis Vale, which was a family home for many generations.

Slide 23: Horticultural Society of Victoria

I will now go back to 1849, when the Horticultural Society of Victoria was founded. Initially it was named Victoria Horticultural Society. Today, it’s called the Royal Horticultural Society of Victoria. 🞿 Two notable committee members were Baron von Mueller, government botanist, and founder and director of the Royal Botanic Gardens in Melbourne; 🞿 and Sir Redmond Barry, colonial judge and powerful supporter of important Victorian institutions in education, health and horticulture.

Robert was a member of this Society from 1850 and became a committee member in 1859, a role he maintained until 1870. Robert became a very successful and respected horticulturalist, and earned his place on this committee of passionate horticulturalists and gardeners.

Slide 24: Experimental Garden (1)

🞿 The Horticultural Society relied on government funding and the small profits made from exhibitions. It had its ups and downs, but never faltered in its directions. One of its most difficult challenges and greatest achievements was the building of the Experimental Garden in Richmond, today known as the Burnley Gardens. The Society was granted land in 1860, but it would take until 1866 for the development of the gardens to take an uphill turn.

Slide 25: Experimental Garden (2)

🞿 In December 1863, the Yarra River flooded, washing away a year of work. Again in 1864, months of repair were washed away by another flood. Further, a generous donation of plants from England were neglected on the voyage over, and most of those plants had died.

🞿 Robert and other growers put their hands up, donating as many varieties as they could to get the garden on track.

🞿 We can enjoy the lovely Burnley Gardens today because of the determination of the Horticultural Society of Victoria.

Slide 26: Horticultural shows

🞿 The activity most closely associated with the Horticultural Society were the exhibitions, commonly called the “flower shows”. These shows would run over a weekend and attract a couple of thousand people. Robert was a regular exhibitor and prize winner. 🞿x4 When Steve Whatmough and I searched Robert’s name on the Trove website, there were so many hits, and most of them were lists of exhibition prizes, which included Robert over and over. These are all listed in an appendix.

Slide 27: The great exhibitions (1)

🞿 As early as 1854, the Horticultural Society became involved in the great exhibitions that were popular in many parts of the world at that time. The first exhibition building in Victoria was built on the corner of William and Little Lonsdale Streets. The exhibition ran for 30 days and attracted 40,000 people. The best exhibits were then shipped to the Paris Exhibition in 1855.

In 1861, the next exhibition in Melbourne had an attendance of over 67,000 people, 🞿 and the best exhibits were shipped to the London Exhibition in 1862.

Slide 28: The great exhibitions (2)

Robert’s first contribution to these exhibitions was in 1861, when the horticulturalists contracted a clever artisan to produce wax models of their fruits. 🞿 The fruit model displays were impressive, earning prizes and travelling to the Dublin Exhibition in 1865.

🞿 In 1866, Melbourne hosted the Intercolonial Exhibition, and the Public Library on Swanston Street was extended for the cause. This was a mammoth event, with an attendance of over 260,000 people. The Horticultural Society held their “fruit and flower shows” as part of the exhibition, with Robert and his colleagues listed as the Managing Committee. The wax fruit models were then shipped to Paris for exhibition in 1867.

The wax models were getting a bit worn by the time of the Victorian Exhibition of 1872 and the subsequent exhibition in London in 1873. No prize was awarded, and the horticulturalists decided to take action.

Slide 29: Robert’s Wax models

🞿 When the Victorian Intercolonial Exhibition of 1875 rolled around, Thomas McMillan sculpted over 300 new wax fruit models. Forty of those models were of Robert’s fruits. 🞿x6 They were so well made that they still exist today, displayed by Museums Victoria. Steve Whatmough tells me they are currently at Scienceworks at Spotswood.

Slide 30: Batman Tree

🞿 We can’t talk about Robert Whatmough without talking about the Batman tree. This tree has become a thing of legend, and thankfully protected today by its National Heritage status. This tree is believed to be the last of the trees purchased by the Flintoffs in 1841 and transplanted in Greensborough. Robert tended this tree for many years, and grafted several apple varieties on this tree. Over time in the 20th century, the orchards were removed to make way for other industry, but miraculously this single tree was retained. I hope you enjoy the story of the Batman Tree in the book.

Slide 31: The Whatmough family

I now come to my final slide with some great photos of the Whatmough family, an amazing pioneering family.

Thanks for having me today.