**A Squatters Life on the Plenty River at ‘Wanstead’**

**The 1837 Diary of James Louis Willis**

Author and historian Graeme Davidson commented that ‘*history is written in the elusive space between what we can find and what we can imagine*. He added that knowing our history is important because *‘it tells us who we are, gives us an imaginative and sympathetic insight into the lives of others and encourages a critical attitude to questions of social and political change’.* (Davidson, 2000)

Davidson’s words succinctly capture the importance of the James Willis Diary. Through his diary we join the Willis brothers in their journey as early European ‘squatter’ pioneers on the Lower River Plenty.

**The Diary**

The Diary is written by an educated young man, James Louis Willis, the forth son of Richard and Anne Willis of Wanstead Park, Van Diemen’s Land. Born in 1813, James has been working as a clerk for more than seven years.

The Diary forms Chapter 8 of the Historical Records of Victoria, Volume 6. I first came across the Diary over ten years ago, with the help of a volunteer at Heidelberg Historical Society. Back then I was researching the area around the Old Lower Plenty Rd Bridge, in response to a development proposal on land between the Lower Plenty Hotel and the Heidelberg Golf Club.

The Diary provided a great primary reference for my planning objection on heritage grounds. It presented as a short but significant record of the exploits of the Willis brothers and the many challenges they faced in their attempt to establish a sheep station on the Plenty River. It is set against the backdrop of early Melbourne town and the European colonisation of Victoria. In the intervening years I have come to appreciate its value and with each reading find something I have missed or overlooked.

**Departing Van Diemen’s Land**

The Diary starts on Sunday 9 April 1837, with brothers Edwards and James, aged 20 and 23 years and their Uncle Arthur embarking from Van Diemen’s Land with 659 sheep bound for the new frontier of Port Phillip.

James states the sheep are jointly owned by his brothers Edward, Charles and William. They were from stock bred on their father’s Wanstead Park Estate in Van Diemen’s Land, of Spanish Merino pedigree, presented to King George of England by the King of Spain in 1809. In 1824 their father Richard Willis purchased some lambs and young ewes from the flock and along with his family, brought them to Tasmania. (Willis, 1883)

However rather than being a judicious endeavour to expand family fortunes, the Diary reveals a troubled Willis family and sons driven away from home by a harsh father, for an apparently contrived offence.

In a lengthy 18 April entry James reflects that (brother) Edward

*... had lately had the management of his father's estates in Van Diemen's Land, yielding some thousands annually, which the proprietor (Richard Willis) contrived to get rid of and then upbraided his sons Edward and William with bad management and having ruined him.*

Later entries talk about his father’s inconsistent and brutal conduct toward his children, interspersed with some apparent good behaviour and that the brothers are feeling

*... convinced that the man must be labouring under some unhappy delusion of the brain respecting his family.*

He worries about the impact of their father’s behaviour on his mother *(dear Mama)* and his concern

*... some fearful crisis is at hand. Some impending calamity awaits our family. I dread to conjecture when my father’s unnatural conduct will have an end – he has driven all his sons from his roof and by heaping indignities and unjust reproaches upon his wife seems either to wish her to follow them, or seek rest in another world, being resolved that in this she shall find none.*

Indeed it appears Richard Willis’s treatment of his family was consistent with his behaviour toward neighbours and business associates. His biographer noted that he quarrelled with most of his neighbours and that his arrogance and assumptions of importance did not endear him to his fellow colonists. However he remained on good terms with Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur, who appointed him magistrate, then to the Legislative Council, before he returned to England in 1839. (Eldershaw, 1967)

These family dynamics provide context of why two young men and their Uncle have embarked on this venture, not as brazen speculators seeking land and wealth, which characterised many of Victoria’s early European inhabitants (Boyce, J. 2013)

As Thomas Walker commented in his Journal, after meeting Edwards Willis and visiting their camp on 3 June, that it

*... afforded us a specimen of a certain class of Port Phillip Squatters. The class I mean consists of off-shoots (sons) of Van Diemen’s Land settlers, who are sent over here with a few sheep to do for themselves, there being no room for them in Van Diemen’s Land. In addition to these, there are a good many Squatters who are mere agents for capitalists in Van Diemen’s Land; and there are also a few families. (Walker, 1838)*

**Arrival in Port Phillip**

On returning to the Diary we read that the Willis party arrive at Gellibrand Point (Williamstown) on 13 April 1837. Their shepherd’s Joe Fletcher and Joe Stockly carry the sheep ashore. After experiencing the discomfort of sleeping rough, Uncle Arthur decides to stay in Melbourne, while awaiting his return journey to Van Diemen’s Land.

By various means the rest of the party and their sheep make their way along the northern side of the Yarra River to the Plenty River, arriving on 18 April 1837.

*Being much fatigued with yesterday's exertion, we did not break up our encampment until eleven this morning and proceeded without any considerable difficulty about five miles ...* then *... on foot to Woods about a mile off, where we procured the assistance of old Tom the shepherd, who conducted us to a creek about two miles off running in a northerly direction. We pursued its course for three miles and found it to be a permanent stream.*

*We crossed it and came to our present one (encampment), which although rather thickly timbered we have every reason to be satisfied with. It is bounded in the South and East by the Yarra. The stream I have alluded to forms its western boundary which we call Edward's Rivulet, but I perceive the surveyors have on their charts dignified it by the name of the 'River Plenty'.*

**Wanstead on the Lower Plenty**

They name the station *Wanstead* after their family home in Van Diemen’s Land and commence the business of building yards and a camp site. Across the months of May to mid July, James records details of their daily activities as squatters, as well as his inner feelings, hopes and frustrations.

On 15 July James writes about their exploration further up the Plenty River and that when they had

*... traversed the course of the Plenty some five or six miles we came upon a tract of most excellent grazing land, which Master Ned thought so much superior to his own run ... that he must return home, ... Ned being determined in his own mind to move to this desirable spot forthwith and without delay.*

*We therefore rode to the top of a high hill, from which we enjoyed a view of the surrounding country for twenty miles and more in every direction, and had a pleasant ride to Wood’s where we spent the evening.*

James goes on to mention rounding up their horses at Wood’s the next day, then walking into Melbourne town in *something more than two hours*.

**The Final Entry**

The Diary abruptly finishes on August 30 1837 after a lengthy entry. This follows a gap of six weeks in his entries, as James has been in Melbourne town recovering from an acute illness and presumably didn’t have his diary with him or was not up to writing.

He describes being

*... seized with violent and agonising pains in my testicles. I was obliged to keep to my bed, where for three days and three nights I lay in torture, neither able to eat, drink or sleep and at night keeping poor Ned awake with my groans. On the fourth day the doctor arrived, and finding that I was suffering from inflammation caused by cold, he ordered me to be immediately removed to town before he would venture to bleed me.*

He goes on to say

*When I returned home about a week ago, I found that Ned had removed his sheep and headquarters to a far more desirable spot about seven miles higher up the 'Plenty' and for the first time we found ourselves in a snug turf hut eleven feet by thirteen, with a thatched roof and neatly whitewashed inside.*

He mentions their brother William ... *whose arrival we are expecting* ... as well as Edwards' interior decorating and furniture building skills

*... A rude contrivance bearing some faint resemblance to a sofa stands in the corner near the chimney; it answers the double purpose of sofa by day and my bed at night.*

One can speculate that Edwards has realised, following James’s illness that it is time to stop sleeping on the cold ground.

In the last few lines of his final entry James talks about his likely move to Geelong, in a month, to be in charge of a mercantile store. He finishes by referring to himself as a *banished friend* in reflecting on receiving a letter from a friend from Tasmania.

And there his Diary ends, leaving us unclear where Edwards’ new headquarters were and what happens to the Willis brothers.

**Heritage Victoria**

I used the Diary, along with details from Marilyn McBriar’s 1895 Heidelberg Conservation Study to support the successful Heritage Victoria Inventory nomination of the original site Willis site - Edward Willis Hut and Sheep Run (H7922-0264). Jeremy Smith, Principal Archaeologist with Heritage Victoria visited the site and among other things noted the lay of the land and elevated outlook favoured by early settlers. He was familiar with the areas broader history having led the archaeological excavation process and dig at Viewbank Homestead 1996-1999.

The Heritage Victoria listing gave further weight to the environmental significance of the Plenty River wildlife corridor but alas after several hearings, an amended sub-division proposal was approved by VCAT, overturning Banyule Councils refusal to grant a permit.

And in the ironic spirit of developer marketing the site has been named Edward Willis Court, with blocks of land selling for $600 - 700,000 in 2015 and now in various stages of construction.

Not one to dwell on defeat and with a desire to share the story, I used the Diary to assist in developing the Lower Plenty – Yallambie Heritage Walk. This walk forms a figure of eight around the Old Lower Plenty River Bridge. It also covers other early European settlement sites to the north and south of the bridge, as well as Indigenous history, merged with the natural history of the Plenty River.

But let me say the Diary wasn’t an easy read. Dissecting and interpreting the geography and names of people, which is interspersed with descriptions of the weather, living conditions, meals, dogs, daily activities, hunting and eating wildlife, alongside personal reflections and cynical references to a tyrannical father, was quite a task. (The Diary is now converted to Word format, thanks to Peter Van Eeken and is much easier to read.)

**Indigenous Inhabitants**

Of note is that James makes little reference to Indigenous people in the Plenty River area. This may be due to the time of the year but more likely an indication of the extent of the impact of European settlement on Indigenous people near Melbourne. This is just two years after the ‘signing’ of the ‘treaty’ (drafted by Joseph Gellibrand) between John Batman and Kulin representatives in June 1835.

A passing reference on 4 May states that

*... all kinds of wild animals, save the wild dogs being scarce owing to the enormous appetite of the natives****.*** *Opossums are rarely seen.*

However while visiting Melbourne on 2 - 3 May James mentions the murder of Joseph Gellibrand and Hesse

*.... it seems by a tribe of blacks who have never before seen a white man whilst the unfortunate gentlemen were in the act of quenching their thirst at a lake about 60 miles to the westward of Geelong.*

and of William Buckley acting as interpreter

*From 11 o'clock to five Fawkner’s room was converted into a Court House. Captain Lonsdale, (the whole inhabitants of the town being his listeners, took examinations against an Aboriginal man brought up from Geelong, having a coat supposed to have belonged to Mr Hesse. Buckley acted as interpreter, but the black was too cautious in his replies to enable them to draw from him how he acquired the coat, indeed strong suspicions were entertained of his being concerned in the murder. He had the very aspect of an atrocious villain.*

**180 Years Ago**

Through his observations and reflections, the Diary provides a wealth of information on the circumstances, daily endeavours and aspirations of these reluctant squatters. To my knowledge, it is the earliest account of European occupation of the Lower Plenty region, while also providing glimpses of life in and around early Melbourne town.

**Yallambie Wordpress**

It was therefore a pleasure to assist in further scrutiny of the Diary that has resulted in the June 2017 article on the Yallambie Wordpress site. This article links the Willis Diary with earlier postings, expands on the Willis family saga and highlights several detailed entries, while providing an insightful and at times witty anaylsis of their activities.

It also tells us that land sales on the west bank of the lower Plenty in 1838 and on the east bank in 1840 brought an end to the brief squatting era on the Plenty, with Edward Willis, in a letter dated 24th March 1839 stating that he was leaving the Plenty River ‘having notice to quit due to the imminent land sales’.

**That Elusive Space**

The Diary draws you into lives that are on the surface a stark contrast to the lives of young men in 2017, but as you read on many contemporary parallels emerge, through the sincere expressions of a young man seeking a secure place in the world.

A key question remains unanswered, being exactly where on the Plenty River did Edward Willis relocate to while James was ill? I have speculated it may have been in the vicinity of Flintoff Hill near present day Civic Drive. This is mainly because I cannot think of another location up the Plenty River within a five to seven mile range of their first camp that fits the description by James of  *... a high hill, from which we enjoyed a view of the surrounding country for twenty miles and more in every direction...*

Hopefully someone out there can provide this information. Further research has helped answer other questions on what became of the Willis brothers.

**Edward Willis and Koolomurt**

Edward returned to Van Diemen’s Land, after receiving the notice to quit their Plenty River squat in 1839, his father having departed for England also in 1839. Edward married Catherine Swanston, daughter of Captain Charles Swanston, in 1840. He returned to Victoria in 1844 and in partnership with Swanston became a respected merino breeder in the Western District at Koolomurt and a prosperous trader and community minded resident of Geelong. His home at 242 Ryrie St, Geelong, was built in 1847 and demolished following vandalism and arson in the 1990’s. He returned to England in 1894 and died in 1895. (Hone, 1976)

**James Willis and Mernda**

It’s unclear if James ever made it to Geelong, as he had anticipated in his final diary entry. It seems that while Edward headed south, James and William headed north, along with the sheep, to their pastoral holding in Mernda.

There are references to a James and Lewis Willis in Bridge Inn Rd, Mernda in 1840, with the Bridge Inn Hotel on the Plenty River and a 400 acre pastoral holding named Wanstead, which they sold in 1851. (H7922-0374)

*When the Willis brothers James and Lewis took up ‘Wanstead’ on the Plenty River in 1840* *they* *lost little time in converting to an inn a wattle and daub house which stood beside the stream ... by 1841 it bore the title of The Bridge Inn, with James and Lewis Willis as licencees, to supplement their income from ‘Wanstead’ their pastoral lease.* (Payne, 1975)

While the name ‘Lewis’ initially confused my research, it is clearly a transcribing error of James’s middle name ‘Louis’ from the 1841 Census.

Indeed the Census entry is a little misleading, but Return Number 66 clearly shows

***Surname****: WILLIS* ***First Name****: William and James Louis*

***Owner’s Surname****: WILLIS* ***Owner’s First Names****: William and James Louis*

***Residence****: Wanstead, River Plenty, County Burke, District Port Phillip*

This is consistent with James’s last diary entry anticipating William’s arrival in Port Phillip. William was part owner of the sheep and they have again named their property Wanstead, after their family home in Van Diemen’s Land.

Further evidence of James moving to Mernda and establishing the Bridge Inn Hotel is provided by the record of Publicans Licences April 20 1841.The entries include

***New Licences in the Country***

***RIVER PLENTY*** *James Louis Willis - "Bridge Inn"*

The July 2017 archaeological excavation of the Bridge Inn site in Mernda is revealing yet another chapter of the James Willis’s story. Jeremy Smith from Heritage Victoria was on-site with others from the project team, at the public open day on Saturday 8 July 2017. It was a great opportunity to share the Lower Plenty Willis – Wanstead connection.

On reflection I can’t help wondering why they sold up in 1851 and if they took all their sheep to Koolomurt in the Western District. Did perhaps the lure of gold draw James into a new venture?

However as Yallambie Wordpress wisely notes, James at some stage married and had a family and hopefully fulfilled his aspirations, so sincerely expressed in his Diary. We can thank James Willis and his descendents for writing and preserving his Dairy, giving us an imaginative and sympathetic insight into their world back in 1837.

Researching history is dynamic and often like a jigsaw with little pieces of the puzzle appearing and helping fill that elusive space. A chance article came to my notice in NLA Trove recently – by Edward Willis in the Camperdown Chronicle of 10 October 1883. He talks about his noted flocks and a ram which has recently taken out the champion prize at the Coleraine show.

He writes

*These flocks are of the purest Spanish merino blood from time immemorial. They were formerly the joint property of Messrs. Edward and William Willis and Mr. C. L. Swanston. In 1809, the King of Spain presented to his late Majesty, George the Third, 2000 merino sheep; they were of the Cavana (flock) Paular, one of the finest in point of pile, and esteemed also, above all others for beauty of carcase.*

*In 1824, my father, the late Richard Willis, M.L.C. of Wanstead Park, purchased from his late Majesty, George the Third, 50 young ewes and three lambs, selected from the above, described as Cavana Paulars and imported them in the same year out to Tasmania, where they were bred separately with great care as to selection.*

*In 1837, my father presented my late brother (William) and myself with a fine selection of five hundred (500) young ewes and rams from his pure flocks. These sheep I imported into Victoria (then known as Port Phillip) in the month of April of that year.*

Edward discusses his selective breeding program at Koolomurt, to increase the density of their wool and that

*... the whole stock of Koolomurt breeding ewes, consisting of eight or ten thousand (according to seasons for grass) are of this pure breed. Having many families of my own stud to select from, I now find no difficulty in keeping the flocks up to a high standard by judicious selections from the Koolomurt blood.*

A part of me says move over John Macarthur and give our Plenty River squatters some credit in helping establish Australia’s fine wool industry. Another part laments that Edward does not mention his older brother James, who by this time is also deceased.

And so we leave the story of our Plenty River squatters. I hope this article has provided insight into the lives of those who came before us into the Plenty Valley, in the early days of European colonisation of Victoria.

The Plenty River has driven much of my historical research and I conclude with a wonderful account of the Plenty River, by Walter Thomas, whose father Moses bought the Wanstead Bridge Inn property from James and William Willis in April 1851.

*The river Plenty then was a beautiful stream of water, clear as crystal, fish swimming about and with a strong flow of water - very different from the present depleted stream. I, whilst recognising the requirements of Melbourne for an ample supply of water, cannot in my mind help contrasting the lovely Plenty river, with its clear, pellucid waters, its banks fringed with beautiful ti-tree and dogwood, and its present bare banks and small flow of very often very dirty water. What has been Melbourne's gain has certainly detracted somewhat from one of God's own beautiful nature spot. (Thomas, W. 1927)*

A copy of the James Willis Diary is available at <https://victoriancollections.net.au/items/4f72bdf097f83e0308606771>.

The Yallambie Wordpress article can be accessed at <https://yallambie.wordpress.com/2017/06/>

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**July 2017**

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Premier of Victoria, Media Release, *Original Inn and Artefacts Uncovered*, 30 June 2017

Edward Willis, *Koolomurt Stud Flocks*, Camperdown Chronicle, 10 October 1882

Walter Thomas, *Reminiscences*, Advertiser Hurstbridge, 11 November 1927



Wanstead Park Campbell Town Tasmania



Edward Willis house 242 Ryrie St Geelong, built 1847, demolished 1990’s

Other photos

The Plenty River at Lower Plenty 2017

Willis site Lower Plenty 2017 (Wanstead #2)

Mernda dig of Bridge Inn Hotel (Wanstead #3)