

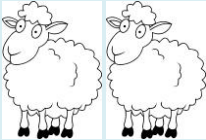


Footprints on the Landscape - The Willis Family, Wanstead and the Plenty River 1837 - 1851

Date	Event	Details
1823	Willis family and 100 Spanish merino sheep arrive in Tasmania - establish Wanstead Park 	<p>WANSTEAD PARK Tasmania Richard Willis b. 1777 Kirkswald Cumberland, shoemaker London. Married Anne Harper b. 1780 St.Kitts. Migrated to Van Diemen's Land with 11 children.</p> <p>Arrived Hobart Town on ship 'Courier' 2 December 1823. Brought out 100 sheep of Spanish Merino pedigree, bred from stock given to King George of England by the King of Spain in 1809. Granted 3000 acres near Campbell Town. Named his estate 'Wanstead' after a village in Essex. Completed building grand house of Pise (rammed earth) in 1828.</p>
1837	James, Edward & uncle Arthur and 659 sheep set sail for Port Phillip	<p>Richard Willis is harsh and authoritarian toward his family and quarrelsome with neighbours and business associates, but remained on good terms with Lieutenant-Governor Sir George Arthur who appointed him a MLC.</p> <p>His son James Louis (1814 - 1873) works as a clerk in Hobart. Edward (1816 - 1895) manages the Wanstead farm. These two brothers and their Uncle Arthur leave Van Diemen's Land with 659 sheep and sail for Port Phillip on 9 April 1837. The sheep were bred from their fathers Wanstead stock and are jointly owned by Willis brothers Edward, Charles and William.</p>
9 April 1837	James Louis Willis commences his diary on departure from Georgetown Tasmania. 	<p>James Louis Willis commences his diary which details their journey from Tasmania, and squatting on the Plenty River at Lower Plenty with their sheep. The Diary forms Chapter 8 of the Historical Records of Victoria, Volume 6. It is the earliest know primary record of European settlement in Lower Plenty, presenting a short but significant record of the exploits of the Willis brothers and the many challenges they faced. It is set against the backdrop of early Melbourne town and European colonisation of Victoria.</p> <p>The Diary also reveals a troubled Willis family and sons driven from home by a unforgiving father, for an apparently contrived offence. These family dynamics provide sad 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.</p> <p>The first entry describes sailing from Georgetown on the ship 'Siren'. The Diary goes on to describe their journey to Lower Plenty and their daily survival activities - hunting, fishing and preparing meals, as well as neighbours, the landscape and weather. It also reveals the hopes and aspirations of a lonely young man, away from family and friends and his concerns for his mother and siblings back in Tasmania.</p>

<p>13 April 1837</p>	<p>Arrival - Port Phillip</p>	<p>The Willis Brothers arrive at Gellibrand Point (Williamstown) and their shepherds carry the sheep ashore.</p>
<p>18 April 1837</p>	<p>James & Edward 'squat' at Lower Plenty – named Wanstead</p>	<p>Dairy Entry: WANSTEAD Plenty River at Lower Plenty The brother's journey with their sheep, shepherds, wagon and horses along northern side of the Yarra River, cross the Plenty River, set up camp on land bounded on the South and East by Yarra and west by Plenty River. They name their sheep station 'Wanstead', build yards and a camp site and 'squat' there from May to August.</p>
<p>30 Aug 1837</p>	<p>Final diary entry by James - new site upstream on the Plenty River.</p> 	<p>Final Diary Entry: New Camp site - Plenty River near Greensborough The Diary ends on 30 August, with a lengthy entry after a gap of 6 weeks. James has returned to Camp after recovering from illness in Melbourne Town. Edward has moved to a new site upstream on the Plenty River.</p> <p>James describes their <i>"snug turf hut eleven feet by thirteen, with a thatched roof and neatly whitewashed inside located on a high hill, from which we enjoyed a view of the surrounding country for twenty miles and more in every direction..."</i></p> <p>In this final entry James is looking forward to moving to Geelong to be in charge of a mercantile firm named Willis, Garrett & Co and anticipating the arrival of his brother William, while also reflecting on his life as a 'banished person.'</p> <p>After being drawn into the lives of two young men via his diary, further research revealed how their lives played out and their contribution to Victoria.</p>
<p>24th March 1839</p>	<p>Edward quits his Lower Plenty camp as land sales imminent</p>	<p>Land sales on the west bank of lower Plenty River in 1838 and on east bank in 1840 bring an end to the brief squatting era on the Lower Plenty. Edward Willis, in a letter dated 24th March 1839 states he was leaving the Plenty River 'having notice to quit due to the imminent land sales'.</p>
<p>Feb 1839</p>	<p>Willis parents return to England</p>	<p>Richard & Anne Willis return England, leaving 5 sons in colonies. They had 18 children in total, with 10 alive in 1836. Richard died at Southsea in 1855.</p>
<p>Late 1839 - 1843</p>	<p>Edward goes back to VDL Wanstead, marries, then returns to Victoria</p>	<p>Edward goes back to Van Diemen's Land in 1839. He marries Catherine Swanston, 12 September 1840, daughter of Captain Charles Swanston a leading member of the Port Phillip Association. Edwards is listed in 1842 and 1843 census as Person in Charge of Wanstead, with Richard Willis as Proprietor.</p> <p>Edwards returns to Victoria in 1843 and in partnership with Capt Swanston becomes a respected merino breeder in the Western District at Koolomurt, a prosperous trader, philanthropist and resident of Geelong.</p>

1840	James & William lease or buy 400 acres & hut in Mernda	Portion 19, Parish of Morang, This land was acquired by Arthur Sergeantson in February 1840. He erected the Carome Mill in the southern part of Portion 19 in 1841. The northern part of the property was leased or sold to James Willis and younger brother William. They named it Wanstead and likely moved their sheep there as William (b. 1817) was a part owner of the sheep and Edward was in VDL.
1840	Establish Bridge Inn Hotel, name property Wanstead	WANSTEAD – Bridge Inn Rd Plenty River Mernda Payne, (1975) states 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 licensee, to supplement their income from 'Wanstead' their pastoral lease. (Note: Lewis is a transcribing error of James's middle name 'Louis' from the 1841 Census.)
1841	1841 Census – James Louis & William Willis own Wanstead	WANDSTEAD - 1841 Census Return Number 66 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.
April 20 1841	Licensee Bridge Inn - James Louis Willis	Bridge Inn Hotel Publicans Licences April 20 1841 - New Licences in the Country: RIVER PLENTY James Louis Willis - "Bridge Inn"
April 1851	James & William sell Wanstead to Moses Thomas	In 1851 James & William Willis sold their Mernda Wanstead pastoral holding with 400 acres and the Bridge Inn to Moses Thomas. It was renamed Marsh Farm, then Mayfield.
1850 - 1873	James Willis's career	James Louis Willis was elected Geelong's First Treasurer 1850 - 1851 and resided at Hearne Hill, Geelong. He was then appointed Clerk of Petty Sessions in Kyneton - Woodend and Commissioner of the Supreme Court of Melbourne in 1871. He died at his home - Avoca Cottage, Punt Road, South Yarra on 28 April 1873 aged 58 years, survived by his three daughters.
10 Oct 1883	Edward Willis - fine wool breeder and Geelong merchant. Confirms Koolomurt merinos are bred from stock brought to VDL by his father in 1823	WANSTEAD SHEEP At some stage after Edward returned to Victoria the Lower Plenty - Mernda Wanstead sheep were relocated to Koolomurt, possibly by brother William. This is confirmed by an article written by Edward Willis in the Camperdown Chronicle 10 October 1883. He talks about his noted flocks and a ram which has recently won champion prize at the Coleraine show.



Koolomurt sheep 2018



Edward 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 Cavana Paular, one of the finest in point of pile, and esteemed 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, and imported them 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 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 are of this pure breed."*

This article confirms the contribution to the development of Victoria's merino wool industry by the Tasmanian Willis brothers, from humble beginnings on the Plenty River, to large flocks at Koolomurt in the Western District.

In 1894 Edward returned to England and lived on his property, Seven Oaks, in Kent. He died at Goring near Reading on 9 August 1895, predeceased by his wife and survived by two sons and three daughters. Other than Edwards reference to William as deceased in the above article, his activities after Mernda are unknown. Koolomurt operates in 2021 as a sheep and beef farm.

1927

Reflection on the Plenty River by Walter Thomas



Childhood memories of the **Plenty River by Walter Thomas**, son of Moses Thomas, who bought the Wanstead - Bridge Inn property from James and William Willis in 1851.

" After a rest we travelled to the property my late father had purchased, and on which there was a wattle and daub house that was doing duty as The Bridge Inn, although there was no bridge near the place. We arrived about 4p.m. 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)