
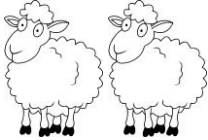


**Footprints on the Landscape:  
The Willis Family, Wanstead and the Plenty River 1837 – 1851**

The Willis brothers were early squatters, then settlers on the Plenty River. Their story is a cameo of colonisation in Victoria and the development of our wool industry. These notes were originally prepared for a 2018 Parks Victoria / Melbourne Water community walk.

Date	Event	Details
<b>1823</b>	Willis family and 100 Spanish merino sheep arrive in Van Diemen's Land - establish Wanstead Park in Central Tasmania.	<p><b>WANSTEAD PARK Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania)</b> Richard Willis b. 1777 Kirkswald Cumberland, shoemaker London. Married Anne Harper b. 1780 St.Kitts. They 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>
<b>1837</b>	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) worked as a clerk in Hobart. Edward (1816 - 1895) managed 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>
<b>9 April 1837</b>	<p>James Louis Willis commences his diary on departure from Georgetown Tasmania.</p> 	<p><b>James Willis Diary – A Pioneer Squatters Life 1837</b> James Louis Willis commences his diary which details their journey from Tasmania, and squatting on the Plenty River at Lower Plenty with their sheep.</p> <p>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 and episodes of '<i>tyrannical, brutal conduct</i>' toward his wife and children. These family dynamics provide a sad context of why two educated 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 Diary entry on 9 April 1837 describes sailing from Georgetown, on the ship <i>Siren</i>. It goes on to detail their journey to Lower Plenty, their labours in establishing their sheep run, their daily survival activities in living off the land and the challenges of camp life. It describes the landscape and weather and includes details of their exploration of the Plenty River, trips into Melbourne town with associated events and visits to neighbours.</p> <p>It also reveals the hopes and aspirations of a lonely young man, driven away from family and friends and his concern for his mother and siblings, due to the unpredictable behaviour of his father.</p> <p>Early in the diary James identifies himself as best suited to be a 'quill driver', as he doesn't own any of the sheep. Later life he successfully holds senior administrative positions in Victoria.</p>
<b>13 April 1837</b>	Arrival - Port Phillip District	<p><b>Key Diary Entries</b></p> <p>The Willis Brothers arrive at Gellibrand Point (Williamstown) and their shepherds carry the sheep ashore.</p>
<b>16 - 22 April 1837</b>	James & Edward journey to Lower Plenty – cross the Plenty River and establish their sheep run, naming it Wanstead.	<p><b>WANSTEAD Plenty River at Lower Plenty</b></p> <p>The brother's journey with their sheep, shepherds, wagon and horses along northern side of the Yarra River, cross the Plenty River, and establish a camp on land bounded on the South and East by Yarra and west by Plenty River and squat there until July. The location is identified by Robert Hoddle in his field survey notes 28 July 1837.</p> <p>They name their sheep run Wanstead, built stock yards, dig a ford to move their sheep and equipment across the Plenty River, and work as '<i>common labourers</i>'. They are in dread of losing their sheep to attack by the '<i>wild dogs of the country</i>', and at night are '<i>regaled by their hideous howls and the squeaking of flying squirrels.</i>'</p>
<b>May - July 1837</b>	Settling into life on the Plenty River.	<p>Entries detail the daily activities of his '<i>monotonous life</i>', local bird life, letter writing to family, visits to Melbourne, visitors and visits to neighbours and exploration of the area. Uncle Arthur returns to Tasmania, finding squatter life too hard with the onset of winter.</p>
<b>15 July 1837</b>	Exploring up the Plenty River	<p><b>James &amp; Edward (Ned) explore the Plenty River</b></p> <p>In mid July they travel upstream and:</p> <p><i>when we had traversed the course of our creek the 'Plenty' (or Edward's Rivulet, as we call it) for some five or six miles, we came upon a tract of most excellent grazing land, which Master Ned (Edward) thought so much superior to his own run ....that Ned determined in his own mind to move to this desirable spot forthwith. We therefore rode to the top of a high hill, from which we enjoyed a view of the surrounding country for twenty miles or more in every direction.</i></p> <p>(James Willis Diary, Saturday 15 July 1837)</p>

<p><b>30 Aug 1837</b></p>	<p>Final diary entry by James Willis – a new on the Plenty River.</p> 	<p><b>Final Diary Entry: New Camp site - Plenty River, Janefield</b></p> <p>The Diary ends on 30 August, with a lengthy entry after a gap of 6 weeks. James has returned to the Plenty River after recovering from serious illness in Melbourne Town. Edward has moved camp to a new site upstream on the Plenty River.</p> <p><i>I thank God that I am at length quite restored to health.....When I returned home about a week ago, I found 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. Ned has a respectable bedstead in one corner built of wattle sticks, one in the opposite corner is being made for (brother) William, whose arrival we are expecting....in the corner near the chimney is a (rough) sofa by day and my bed by night. (James Willis Diary, Thursday 30 August 1837)</i></p> <p>The location is identified by Robert Hoddle in his survey notes 4 August 1837, on west side of Plenty River, south of current day Tanunda Wetlands.</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 &amp; Co while also reflecting on his family and life as a 'banished person.'</p> <p>After being drawn into the lives of two young men this last entry leaves a desire to know what happened to the brothers Willis. Further research has revealed how their lives played out and their considerable contribution to Victoria's development.</p>
<p><b>24th March 1839</b></p>	<p>Edward quits his camp as land sales imminent</p>	<p>Land sales commence on the west side of the Plenty River in 1838 and bring an end to the brief squatting era in 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><b>Feb 1839</b></p>	<p>Willis parents return to England</p>	<p>Richard &amp; Anne Willis return England, leaving their 5 sons in the colonies. They had 18 children, with 10 alive in 1836. Richard Willis died at Southsea in 1855.</p>
<p><b>Late 1839 - 1843</b></p>	<p>Edward returns to Van Diemen's Land Wanstead, marries, then returns to Victoria</p>	<p>Edward returns 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 the 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>

<b>1840</b>	James & William lease or buy 400 acres & hut in Mernda	<p><b>Portion 19, Parish of Morang</b></p> <p>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 was leased or sold to James Willis and his younger brother William in 1840. They again named it Wanstead and likely moved their sheep there from Janefield as William (b. 1817) was a part owner of the sheep and Edward was in Van Diemen's Land.</p>
<b>1840</b>	Establish Bridge Inn Hotel, name the property Wanstead	<p><b>WANSTEAD – Bridge Inn Plenty River Mernda</b></p> <p><i>JW Payne, (1975) states that 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, along with omission of William, from the 1841 Census.)</i></p>
<b>1841</b>	1841 Census – James Louis & William Willis own Wanstead	<p><b>WANDSTEAD - 1841 Census Return Number 66</b></p> <p>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.</p>
<b>April 20 1841</b>	Licensee Bridge Inn - James Louis Willis	<p><b>Bridge Inn Hotel River Plenty Mernda</b></p> <p>Publicans Licences April 20 1841 - New Licences in the Country: RIVER PLENTY James Louis Willis - "Bridge Inn"</p>
<b>April 1851</b>	James & William sell Mernda Wanstead to Moses Thomas	<p><b>Mernda Wanstead sold</b></p> <p>In 1851 James &amp; 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.</p>
<b>1850 - 1873</b>	James Willis's career	<p>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.</p>
<b>10 Oct 1883</b>	Edward Willis confirms Koolomurt merinos are bred from stock brought to Van Diemen's Land by his father in 1823	<p><b>WANSTEAD SHEEP</b></p> <p>At some stage after Edward returned to Victoria the Lower Plenty - Janefield - Mernda Wanstead sheep were relocated to Koolomurt, possibly by William Willis. The relocation is confirmed in 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.</p>



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 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 currently operates as a sheep and beef farm. Further research is needed to establish the fate of the Willis sheep.

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 4pm 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)*