

## A talk by Margaret and Ian McKellar to the Ringwood Historical Society on 24 September 2005

### Introduction

This story of Reaghill will be in two parts. I will give some of the background of the area and then Ian will talk about the family who lived there for many years.

Richard Carter has also spent much time in researching the land records and in writing a report, I will be using some of his information. The copies before you are mostly from a family photo album, they have been augmented by some current views of the same locations taken earlier this year.

Reaghill was part of a 60 acre block which was taken up in 1900 by Mr Wallace Bruce, a builder, of Windsor. This block extended north and east from the corner of Bedford and Canterbury Roads and took in the present Vista Avenue, Vista Court, Homebush Court, Rawson Court and Wombolano Park. Bruce built the house on the top of the hill in 1908-09, living on the site while he did so he may have also built Walker's house. When the house was completed in 1909 he sub-divided the land and sold 35 acres on the western and northern sides to Dora Staniforth Davies and the rest to Frank Leslie Walker in 1914. This was the first sub division. Incidentally we found that Wallace Bruce died at St Kilda in 1916.

In 1945 Dora died at South Yarra and her elder son, Geoffrey, inherited the Avoca Street house and both her parcels of land in Ringwood.

Ten years later he began on the next subdivision, first selling the blocks fronting Bedford Road to help pay for the further sub-division costs – surveys, fencing and internal roads. Richard has observed that the later blocks had a covenant attached which stated that only one dwelling could be built on each block for a period of 15 years from the date of its sale. Since the expiry of that time limit, about 1972, further sub-divisions have been taking place, the most recent only last year.

As previously mentioned Frank Walker bought his land in 1914 and in 1954 he gave 12 acres to Ringwood to 'the Mayor, Councilors and Burgesses' as a park for the enjoyment of the citizens. He wished it to remain in its natural state, which has caused many problems, as weeds and exotic plants have spread into the park from adjoining properties.

With the subdivision of Reaghill there were various sized blocks some of which were of one or two acres as Geoff wished to retain the natural environment. Many of the blocks were bought by young marrieds who either built their own homes or did much of the work themselves. It was a wonderful way to get to know the neighbours as we all mucked in and helped each other with the many and varied jobs associated with new houses. Our children have reminded us that horses were grazed on the fenced but otherwise unused blocks in Homebush Court.

Vista Avenue, Vista Court and Homebush Court came into being about 1956. The name Vista reminded the Davies of the wonderful distant views of the Dandenongs and the Yarra Valley they saw from their hilltop home, now no more. On another occasion Geoff told me that he had lived in Homebush in Sydney when he worked at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in the nearby suburb of Camperdown, and that Homebush was originally the name of the country residence of the NSW Governor. The suburb of Homebush, now known to us because of the 2000 Olympic Games, was previously the site of the Sydney livestock saleyards and abattoirs - I think ours is much to be preferred.

Richard says that there are now only four of the larger blocks which are not subdivided. When we came to Homebush Court in 1958 there was only one house already built in the street - there are now sixteen, I wonder what Wallace Bruce and Dora Davies would think about that?

### The Davies Family

We will now focus on the house and then the Davies family, Dora was my maternal grandfather's sister and wife of Seymour George Pilkington Davies a banker with E S and A Bank. I only ever met her once. We have assembled two series of images and captions from a photo album that she prepared for her son, Geoffrey in August 1928. A CD with both of these has been deposited with the Ringwood Historical Society. A few hard uncaptioned copies of the pictures only are available tonight. In order to explain the illustrations more adequately I will also be bringing in the names of other early Ringwood families.

The name Reaghill is probably of Irish origin as the Davies family had emigrated from County Galway in 1863, Seymour was only three years old at the time. Then in 1907 Seymour and Dora had made a six months long visit to England and Ireland. This nostalgic visit would have been fresh in their minds in 1909 when they bought the land and hilltop house from Mr Bruce and wished to give it a name. I am told that in the Irish Gaelic language "Reagh" means "Royal", hence Royal Hill - it seems logical anyway.

The place at Ringwood was bought as a country retreat for the Davies family as they lived in bank owned premises in Glenferrie. Probably for this reason the purchase was registered in Dora's name. When they were there they lived in and later renovated the weatherboard house at the highest point on the property, it stands to this day – little changed but very well maintained by its current owner. Their plans were changed drastically in February 1914 when, at the age of 53, Seymour was obliged to retire from the bank due to ill health he was then manager of its Melbourne office. This meant that they had to leave the splendid bank owned house in Glenferrie so Dora and Seymour moved into Reaghill for about two years. Their children Geoffrey John and Dora were then 17, 13 and 11 years old respectively and probably boarded at their schools (Trinity and Tintern) during this period.

After WWI they bought another home in Avoca Street, South Yarra, no doubt a more central and suitable location for their children who were then finishing their secondary education and embarking on medical courses at Melbourne University. The house at Avoca Street is also pictured in the family album.

As you are probably more interested in the Ringwood area I will try to concentrate on that aspect. The map I have copied is dated about 1915 and its scale was one inch to one mile. The small black rectangles on it would be individual houses, the one circled is Reaghill, there are only six others between Dublin Road and the railway crossing.

Looking first at the historical views – we have two of Bedford Road in 1909 – one from Dublin Road looking south east towards Canterbury Road; another is described as being from Mrs John Blood's House. Her house was one of those on the south side\*, nearer the railway crossing. There were four Blood families in Bedford Road about that time, the heads were: – Edward, Elizabeth, Emma and William. Mrs John Blood was formerly Elizabeth Bonser, they had five children, the third daughter, Mabel, would be Bill Wilkins' mother or grandmother.

The other picture, showing a road running east across a slope to the north with a largish building on the left and a smaller one almost hidden in the trees on the right, has not been identified but it is not Bedford Road. It may be along part of the Reaghill drive way. Does anyone here have any suggestions?

The next sequence were all taken within the sixty-acre property. The waterholes were used to collect water to irrigate crops and for animals, they are shown as large blue circles, marked 'WH', on the map. Walkers' was on the east of the hill and Blood's is just to its north. The former was still there until the 1960s, the home of many frogs.

Then we come to the house itself and the views from the hilltop. It was approached by a long gravel drive which wound up from the gate in Bedford Road around the south and east sides of the hill. Some relics of the formation are still extant and we have included an inset showing one of these. In the same view we can see the residence of Herman Gerlach at the corner of Bedford and Canterbury Roads. He was an orchardist, growing fruit on land adjoining the Pump property

that can also be seen at the top of the hill in Canterbury Road. Incidentally Hermann Gerlach was married to Annie Blood. Their family is described at the end of the "Human Story" document. Perhaps Alvena Crescent, the street that was put through in the 1950s was named after the middle Gerlach daughter?

Other pictures show the row of pine trees planted along Bedford Road perhaps as a windbreak for the orchards on the lower slopes of Reaghill.

There was a small cottage near the Bedford Road gate perhaps a converted apple storeroom. John Whittaker (Jack) Wood and his wife, Mary, were living there in the late 1940s and 1950s. He used to grow tomatoes and kept a cow. The McRaes who bought land on Gerlachs orchard in 1948 and built their home on it fondly remembered him for his ready assistance to the new arrivals.

Coming now to the "Human Story". There is a certain amount of duplication here as we look at the Davies from a slightly different aspect. We find some pictures of the bank owned building in Burwood Road, Glenferrie. It is still there, now a part of the adjacent Catholic Church.

Back at Reaghill Dora busied herself with putting many small paths through the bush, one she named "the Grand Circle" which almost followed the boundaries. A more sedate one was the "Afternoon Tea" walk. Her grand daughter recalls the joy she had, as a child, exploring these paths.

In 1926-27 the Davies added a sunroom on the eastern side, before and after pictures of this episode are included. You will also see an ornate Chinese vase and plate too. It was a gift from the Chinese community in Palmerstone (Darwin) when Seymour was acting manager of the English Scottish and Australian Bank there in 1888-89 – he obviously endeared himself to them.

Seymour Davies died in 1935 aged 75 and Dora probably spent more time at Avoca Street while still maintaining a strong interest in Reaghill. A local resident, Stan Blood looked after it for her. He grew apples and pears on the lower slopes.

In 1941 her son, Geoffrey, joined the Army and was promptly sent to Singapore. Later that year the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and simultaneously invaded Malaya. Geoffrey became a prisoner of war when Singapore fell in February 1942 and was drafted to the notorious Burma-Siam railway. When his mother died in February 1945 he was still listed as missing but was safely recovered from his Japanese captors and returned to Australia in October. During his internment in the jungle he developed his skills in finding and using bush plants as remedies for tropical diseases. He was credited for saving many lives of his fellow prisoners.

On his return and discharge from the Army he found himself the owner of his mother's properties and decided to live at Reaghill. He continued his botanical interests by establishing an excellent small garden around the house. However he found the rest of the property too much to look after – the orchards had not been functioning for some years – so he began the next round of sub-dividing as previously described.

There is much more we could talk about Reaghill, this has been a summary of the documents and photographs now held by the Society, Thank you for your attention.

\*John Blood was the son of Robert Blood and Jamima Rowstone born about 1850. He married Elizabeth Bonsor on 20 July 1885 – his second marriage - and they had five children John, Florence Emily, Mabel, Edward John and Roy Thomas. He died in his home in Bedford Road on 11 February 1915 after an illness lasting "16 years and seven days" and is buried at Box Hill. The four room weatherboard house was on four acres, one rood and 35 perches being Crown allotments 16,17,18 31, 49 and 50 of section C of the Township in the Parish of Ringwood. This was probably the one opposite the Bedford Road shops. His widow, Elizabeth, was left the house but must have given it to her daughter Florence, then Mrs John Knox some time before her death there on 8 June 1927.

