

GRAPEVINE CUTTINGS (January 2003)

By Rob Upson

LACHLAN MACLACHLAN

'Bendigo Mac' is **not** a High Street hamburger. It was the nickname given to Lachlan Maclachlan the Bendigo Police Magistrate appointed in 1853 to help restore law and order to the rather unruly life on the goldfields that, at the time, was seething with discontent mainly due to the unfair gold licence system.

Joseph Panton was the Police Commissioner on the Bendigo goldfields and between them they formed quite a successful team making sure that disturbances didn't develop into anything major like Eureka at Ballarat.

Lachlan Maclachlan was born in 1808 in Argyleshire, Scotland, the eldest son of Neil and Mary Maclachlan.* He was privately educated by a tutor and matriculated in 1823. He read Law at Edinburgh University and then followed family tradition by attending the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst before returning to Edinburgh to complete his legal articles. He worked in Edinburgh for a while before sailing for New Zealand, via Melbourne and Hobart, at the end of 1840. At Cornwallis settlement on the west coast of the north island of New Zealand he managed a Company whose purpose was to buy land from the Maoris and then sell it to immigrants from England. When he left for Melbourne in 1852, his wife, Isabella refused to go with him. Apparently the 10-month voyage from England had been such a harrowing experience that she vowed never to sail again. They were subsequently divorced.

On arrival at Melbourne he presented his credentials to Governor LaTrobe and in December 1852 was sworn in as a Magistrate. The following February he was appointed the Police Magistrate at Castlemaine. From 1851 to 1855 Castlemaine was the administrative centre for the northern goldfields that included Bendigo. However, Maclachlan did not stay there very long as he was soon transferred to Bendigo. Chief Detective Simon O'Neil, who had spent some time in the Tasmanian Force, ably supported him. O'Neil was able to recognise a number of old convicts from Tasmania who had come to the goldfields, some of them in Police uniform. They were quickly dispensed with and Bendigo was soon rid of some of its worst characters.

A Police Camp had been erected on Camp Hill and the first courts were held in a tent. This was to be replaced by a wooden framed structure in an area between what is now the Senior Secondary College and the Gaol. This in turn was replaced by a stone building on a cliff overlooking the Bendigo Creek and then by a more elegant structure on the same site in 1859. This then was Bendigo's Supreme Court and is still there now, as part of the aforementioned college. A Court of Petty Sessions was built in View Street on the site of the present Trades Hall building.

An Act of Parliament in 1882 excised land from Rosalind Park to be the site for the new Law Courts and Post Office. Major Watson designed both buildings and a condition was that they should be equally imposing from all sides. The Law Courts building combined a series of Courts and Public Offices and the Governor, Lord Hopetoun, laid the foundation stone. It was officially opened by the Minister of Works, J.W.Taverner, on the 10th February 1896.

Lachlan Maclachlan never presided in these new courts as he retired from public life in 1871. However, I am getting a bit ahead of myself. Back in 1857, while attending a function at Government House in Melbourne, Maclachlan met the widow of a soldier who had been killed at the Battle of Balaclava in 1856 (Crimean War). They were married in 1858 and moved into a house at 80 Barkly Place designed for them by Vahland and Getzschmann. The home was named "Strathlachlan" but in later years was renamed "Lauriston".

The Maclachlans had one son and seven daughters. Lachlan was a devoted family man and as he had a heavy workload, working from the Bench at both Bendigo and Eaglehawk, he had little time left for social activities. However, he was concerned about the lack of welfare support and his interest in the community was not just confined to the law. He was on the Board of Management of the Bendigo Hospital when it was established in 1853. He was a foundation member of the Sandhurst Club and the Caledonian Society, a foundation director of the Bank of Victoria and was associated with the Bendigo Jockey Club.

The Bendigo Advertiser (7 Aug.1871) reported in part - *On the 31st May 1871, Mr Maclachlan sat on the bench for the last time. ... Nearly every member of the legal profession was present and the court was crowded. ...That he had kept the Town in order for so many years was a credit to him, especially in the earliest years when there was so much vice and sly grog, coupled with some of the worst types of convicts from Tasmania. ...Mr Maclachlan was received with loud and continuous applause and evidently deeply affected at the warmth of feeling shown towards him.*

The Maclachlan family then moved to Bay Street, Brighton but after about a year settled into a larger brick house in Glenferrie Road, Hawthorn. After nine years there they moved to Burlington Terrace, East Melbourne. Lachlan Maclachlan died on the 6th August 1885, aged 76 years, and was buried in the Kew General Cemetery. His wife, Edith Mary died ten years later.

“Bendigo Mac” did not write the Law, but tried to execute it under very trying circumstances. He was given an official job to do and he did it without fear or favour, and for one who had an initial dislike of the Law, he applied himself well. He certainly left his mark on an infant Colony and Sandhurst in particular. So writes Marjorie Petterson # in the conclusion to her biography of Lachlan Maclachlan, her great grandfather.

* The Maclachlans derive their name from Lachlan Mor, a great chief who lived by Loch Fyne in the 13th century.

Reference ‘The Sovereign of Sandhurst’ by Marjorie Petterson, (1986)
