

William Henry Yaldwyn 1801–1866

Sussex Squire, Australian squatter,

Member Legislative Council of Queensland

Vice-President, 1839 Mechanics' Institution Committee



*William Henry Yaldwyn, Qld
M.L.C.,
[in Randell, *Yaldwyn of the
Golden Spurs*]*

This article gives a brief résumé of William Henry Yaldwyn's extraordinary life as he moved many times between England and various parts of Australia. It focuses on his activities in early Melbourne at the time of his election as a Vice-President of the first Melbourne Mechanics' Institution Committee in 1839, and on his associations with other members of the Committee.

Yaldwyn's life is dealt with in detail elsewhere, including J.O. Randell, *Yaldwyn of the Golden Spurs: the life of William Henry Yaldwyn 1801-1866, Sussex Squire -Australian squatter - member of Legislative Council of Queensland*, Mast Gully Press, Melbourne, 1980.

Early days - the young squire

Yaldwyn's home, Blackdown in West Sussex had been in the family for at least 15 generations; William Henry Yaldwyn, born on 6 September 1801, was the 13th Yaldwyn who was Squire of Blackdown.¹

William's father, Richard Yaldwyn, formed an association with Martha Searle, the daughter of one of his Blackdown estate tenants; they had a son, followed by three daughters, all illegitimate. Richard and Martha then married and had six more children, including William Henry. Richard died in 1807, aged 45, and Blackdown was inherited by William when he came of age in 1822, as the first son, being illegitimate, was unable to inherit the estate.

William's father had made large bequests to all his children and it fell to William to pay these legacies, placing a heavy burden on the estate. This situation was not helped by William's lifestyle.

As a young man he "was fond of outdoor pursuits and had little taste for reading, study or the keeping of accounts. ... The young squire kept a gamekeeper so that he could enjoy the sport to the full ... [and] was fond of riding high-bred, well-turned out animals around his

¹ Randell, 1980, p. 69.

property. His son, Willie, said of him, ‘As a young squire of the country, he had learned to live expensively, he kept an excellent pack of harriers at Blackdown and was a prominent figure in the field with the foxhounds, both in the Weald and on the South Downs. He had a taste for the turf and contrived, I opine, to lose considerable sums in this pursuit’. He is said to have been a member of ... a famous gambling institution of the time, but also thought to have belonged to Boodle’s, then a club much favoured by young country gentlemen. The inexorable process of withdrawing money from the Blackdown estate went on”²

Marriage

William Yaldwyn and Henrietta Mary née Bowles were married on 22 July 1830 at Cuckfield, Sussex, England. Henrietta was the daughter of Henry Bowles of Mill Hall, Cuckfield.



*Henrietta Mary Yaldwyn, née Bowles [b. 1805] with her daughter Henrietta (Dally), soon after their return to England from Australia in 1841.
[in Randell, J.O. Yaldwyn of the Golden Spurs]*

The Yaldwyns had three children. When they arrived in Sydney on 23 October 1836, Henrietta was about three years old, and William six months; a second son was born in Australia in September 1837. Henrietta’s younger sister, Caroline Bowles, in her early 20s, accompanied them. Yaldwyn had chartered a ship, the *William Glen Anderson*, and as a speculation loaded it with wheat and rum for sale at Sydney, and took some paying passengers. The passage was longer than average, the cargo had been damaged by sea water and shoals of rats, and another vessel had landed in Sydney before theirs and sold their cargo, reducing the demand for Yaldwyn’s goods.³

² *ibid.* p. 13.

³ *ibid.* p. 26.

“Torn between Australia and his home country”

Yaldwyn had moved his family members to Australia “in the attempt to retrieve their fortunes”.

This project was financed by borrowing £7,800 from the trustees of William and Henrietta’s joint marriage settlement and secured by mortgages over land in the Blackdown estate, leaving £1,833 in the trust fund.⁴

Yaldwyn’s story from this time on is extraordinary in its adventures, hardships, and achievements. "For the rest of his life, William Henry Yaldwyn was torn between Australia and his home country in West Sussex. This conflict was never resolved."⁵

Soon after arriving in Sydney in late 1836, aged 35, Yaldwyn purchased a station in Yass, New South Wales; before the end of the year he had also purchased a property on the Campaspe River, in the Port Phillip District. In October 1837, he ‘overlanded’ with a flock of 1800 sheep from Yass to his Campaspe property, keeping a journal as he travelled.⁶ He returned to Yass in early December 1837 and moved his family to the Campaspe property in August 1838, which involved an horrific sea voyage, a landing without food at Port Melbourne beach, and a rough journey overland to Melbourne through the scrub. When they finally reached Melbourne 50 days after leaving Sydney, “the only house we could get to rent was one unfinished brick house, the first brick house built in Melbourne. It had no windows, doors or balusters so we had to put up blankets ...”.⁷

The family reached their Campaspe station in about September 1838 to live in a rough wooden hut with earth floors, so different from Sussex and the Blackdown estate. About a year later, in 1839 - not long before the establishment of the Mechanics' Institution, Yaldwyn left the station in the care of a manager and brought his family to live in Melbourne as Henrietta had been unable to adjust to the hardships and isolation of station life. Yaldwyn commissioned Robert Russell [1839 Mechanics’ Institution Committee member] to build a ‘commodious brick house’ for the family in Russell Street East, and was no doubt soon busy settling into the Melbourne scene.⁸ He sold the Campaspe property, but still had some assigned convicts with him in Melbourne, employed about the house, looking after the horses and milking the cows.⁹

Yaldwyn bought land in the Melbourne area at Government auction sales, including 25 acres near Brunswick, a block in Collins Street, 60 acres in Prahran and 640 acres at Kal

⁴ Ibid. p. 21.

⁵ Ibid. p. 69.

⁶ Randell, 1980, p. 34.

⁷ Ibid. p. 40-44.

⁸ Finn, 1888, p. 636.

⁹ Randell, p. 57.

Kallo, 20 miles from Melbourne. Land values fell over the next two or three years and he does not appear to have kept any of this land for very long.¹⁰ Yaldwyn retained his Russell Street house and rented it out to the Stevenson family for use as a girls' school¹¹ when the family returned to England in 1841.¹²

The attempt made by William Yaldwyn to recoup his fortunes in Australia had been a failure. ... all his Australian undertakings were, at best, break-even situations. ... While no actual figures exist relating to William Yaldwyn's period in Australia, the mortgage arrangements in England showed clearly that, in 1841, he brought back a great deal less money than the £7,800 he had borrowed five years before to finance the venture ... the persistent fascination that Australia had for William Yaldwyn, [was] an allure sufficiently strong to draw him back four more times before he died in Sydney in 1866.¹³

But Henrietta did not leave England again.

Yaldwyn's increasingly dire financial situation forced him to sell his beloved *Blackdown* in 1843 and move the family to Blackheath, near London, where he leased a house. Leaving *Blackdown*, which had been in the family for centuries must have been a bitter pill to swallow, but Yaldwyn had himself to blame for his financial difficulties. He had made some poor financial decisions in Australia, committing to expensive establishment costs for his various properties and selling them in a depressed market where others who held on through the depression of the 1840s survived.

Without his country estate, but still, in his early forties and endowed with energy and initiative, Yaldwyn now needed a project! In 1844 he applied for permission to bring to Port Phillip twenty-one 'Pentonville Exiles' - or 'Pentonvillains' as they were called in Australia - men newly released from Pentonville and Parkhurst prisons. They arrived on the *Royal George* in Port Phillip on 16 November 1844. Yaldwyn was charged with finding them employment for one year from the date of their landing. The interesting story of the Pentonville Exiles is covered in detail in Martin Sullivan's book, *Men and women of Australia*.¹⁴

Yaldwyn, took his sister-in-law, Caroline Bowles, with him on this voyage to Australia. Caroline, who was to marry James Simpson [a rather stern police magistrate, elected President of the Mechanics' Institution from 1840] in February 1845, probably had an

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 55.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 72.

¹² Ibid. p. 61: On the return journey to England Yaldwyn took with him three emus (one jumped overboard and was drowned), two flying squirrels, a laughing Jackass, two or three parrots and an opossum.

¹³ Ibid. p. 65.

¹⁴ Sullivan, 1985, p. 148-151.

understanding with Simpson from her previous visit to Melbourne. The *Port Phillip Patriot* had, in 1840, reported that:

a party consisting of Captain and Mrs Lonsdale, Mr and Mrs Yaldwyn, Miss Bowles and Mr Simpson attended at the beach on Saturday last, on a piscatorial excursion. Mr Leardet ... was present, with his fishing gear, and a copious supply of the finny tribe were taken. Mr Leardet succeeded in capturing a gallon of shrimps in the net, the handiwork of Miss Bowles.¹⁵

This association was kept secret, possibly at Simpson's request - he was 23 years older than Caroline, the secrecy leading to lively rumours circulating in England at the time of the voyage to Australia about a relationship between Yaldwyn and his sister-in-law.

Georgiana McCrae's journal entry of 19 November 1844 commented that:

The boys went to town to see Mr Yaldwyn's collection of birds brought from England. Strange, it appears to me, that a man past forty-six years of age, with a fine old property, "Blackrock" [sic], Sussex, held by his ancestors for seven hundred years, should sell his paternal acres and transplant his family to Australia! Mrs Yaldwyn and the children remain for the present in England; Mrs Y's sister, Miss Bowles, has come out with Mr Yaldwyn; and Mark Nicholson tells me we shall soon have her for our neighbour at 'The Grange'.¹⁶

In late February 1845 Yaldwyn left for London, having presumably stayed to support Caroline in her marriage to James Simpson on 12 February; two years later, in August 1847, the family moved to Kent where Yaldwyn became a Magistrate for the County. He was a highly respected Chairman of the bench at Tonbridge until he retired in 1852.¹⁷

Once more on the move after the discovery of gold in Victoria, Yaldwyn and his son Willie left for Australia with a party of men he had recruited, arriving on 9 December 1852. They headed for the Ovens goldfields where Yaldwyn was unsuccessful at the diggings. He returned to England, but not before he saw his recruited workers settled.¹⁸

Yaldwyn's wife, Henrietta, died suddenly on 4 August 1855, aged 50. One can only feel for Henrietta whose married life would have been far from her expectations as a young bride. With two young children in tow she would have been dismayed by conditions on their long voyage to Australia and life in the outback Yass property, the nightmare journey from Sydney to Melbourne in 1838, and the primitive housing conditions on their first arrival in Melbourne.¹⁹ She was unable to cope with the privations and hardships of the Campaspe

¹⁵ Randell., p. 59.

¹⁶ McCrae, 1966, p. 159.

¹⁷ Randell., p. 82.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 90.

¹⁹ Ibid. p.42.

station life and would have found it difficult to share her husband's enthusiasm for the potential of the pioneering squatter's life. Back in England she suffered great anxiety when William returned to Australia with the Pentonville men in 1844, probably well aware that she might never again see her younger sister Caroline who accompanied William, and again in 1852 when her husband and son Willie returned to Australia to seek their fortunes on the goldfields.

Ironically, Henrietta's death resulted in an improvement in Yaldwyn's finances, due to annuity arrangements. Now aged 55, Yaldwyn decided to return once more to Australia with a son and daughter, leaving one son to sit military entrance exams. He wasted no time in acquiring two pastoral properties in what was then northern New South Wales, now Queensland, and soon became a leader in the activities of the district. He was "stouter but had lost little of his energy and none of his genial good nature. He set to work with characteristic vigour and arranged for the erection of his homestead and buildings."²⁰

Turning his interests and energy to politics, Yaldwyn became one of the first Queensland Legislative Councillors elected for a five-year term following the separation of Queensland from New South Wales in 1859. He was heavily involved in political, social, and sporting circles, and helped to organise the North Australian Turf Club at Ipswich.

Early in 1863, having sold one of his Queensland stations, Yaldwyn sailed for England, apparently better off than he had ever been in his life, but the property sale fell through and Yaldwyn, now in his sixties and a disappointed man, once again returned to Australia to try and sort out the problems at first hand.²¹

On 28 September 1866, Yaldwyn died in Sydney. He was buried at Randwick.

Yaldwyn's involvement in the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution

Yaldwyn would have gravitated towards the influential group involved with the establishment of the Mechanics' Institution. As a property-owner, albeit mortgaged and not in a healthy situation financially, Yaldwyn was part of a powerful minority in pre-gold rush Melbourne; he had the credentials - breeding, property, business and sporting connections. Although he was in fact financially stressed, the community - apparently ignorant of his true financial situation, regarded him as 'one of our most wealthy settlers ...'²²

²⁰ Randell, p. 98.

²¹ Ibid. p.116-118.

²² *Port Phillip Gazette* 2 February 1839.

Melbourne Mechanics Institution – 1st Committee of Management 1839
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Melbourne Athenaeum Inc. history website: <http://www.mahistory.org.au>

Sullivan discusses the growth of a capitalist society in the Port Phillip district throughout the decade from the late 1830s, where the "concentration of ownership of the means of production" was in the hands of "squatters such as W.H. Yaldwyn, merchants like Skene Craig, contractors, such as George Beaver and Patrick Mayne, and men such as ... James Simpson".²³ [all members of the 1839 Mechanics' Institution Committee]. The power of this capitalist group would wane as the 1840s progressed and the gold-rush arrived, with those who had been 'outside' society steadily acquiring wealth and social status.

In spite of initial criticism, that the office-bearers proposed for the 1839 Mechanics' Institution Committee represented the 'gentlemen' rather than the 'mechanics' class, the initial list of eight vice-presidents and eight other office-bearers elected on 12 November 1838 were overwhelmingly of the commercial and religious leaders of society, while the thirty-two ordinary committee members had a fair sprinkling of those outside 'society'.

Like a number of others elected to the 1839 Committee, Yaldwyn appeared not to attend any early meetings following his election. He was present at the first Annual General Meeting in June 1840, and chaired the meeting after Captain William Lonsdale, the President, vacated the chair. This implies his high standing and respect among the committee and it is likely that there would have been a good turn out for the meeting although the annual report stated that it was necessary to "... draw a veil over the unpleasant past ..." of the first year of the Institution.²⁴

At the time of the establishment of the Institution Yaldwyn would have been busy settling his family into Melbourne and managing the sale of his Campaspe property. But his lack of attendance at meetings was probably not due to lack of time – as will be seen, he was very busy with business, community, and sporting activities. He was not re-elected to the Committee for 1841, and returned to England that year following his deteriorating financial situation in Australia.

Yaldwyn would have been driven by the social and business advantages of nominating for the Committee in 1839. Yet he was able to contribute to the Mechanics Institution, if not his presence at meetings, the ability to draw on the traditional obligations of his 'class' to the mechanics in the Melbourne community. Along with his need to resurrect his family finances in Australia was an ongoing willingness to support initiatives for care of those 'outside society'.

²³ Sullivan, p. 56.

²⁴ Melbourne Mechanics' Institution Minutes *Annual General Meeting* 1 June 1840. Athenaeum Archives.

Yaldwyn's associations with other members of the 1839 Committee

[] denotes fellow 1839 Committee members

In November 1838 Yaldwyn was appointed a member of the Melbourne Club. [Lonsdale, Smythe]²⁵ His appointment to the exclusive club confirms recognition of his 'gentleman' status, which is also reflected in his membership of an April 1839 committee of welcome to Lady Franklin, wife of the Governor of Van Diemen's Land. [Lonsdale, Simpson, Forbes, Clow]²⁶

He was appointed as a director to the Provisional Managerial Board of The Melbourne and Port Phillip Bank in June 1839. [Welsh, Wills]. The Bank was re-named The Port Phillip Bank in December but Yaldwyn appeared not to stand for re-election in that role.²⁷

On 1 July 1839 the Melbourne Fire and Marine Insurance Company started business, offering 1,000 shares at £50 each. "Squatters who were directors included ... William Yaldwyn [Gardiner, Simpson, Smythe, Thomson]. [Other directors were Rucker; founding directors were D.C.McArthur and Clow; Craig and Highett were auditors. Other 1839 committee members who were shareholders included Welsh and Wills]. Yaldwyn, in spite of his uncertain financial situation managed to buy 40 shares, a large commitment, though shareholders were required at the time to pay only a £2.10 per share.²⁸

Finn remarked "*Anno Domini* 1840 might be well termed the year of projects in Melbourne, social, commercial, intellectual, or even spiritual ..." and Yaldwyn seemed to be in the thick of it. A Port Phillip College was proposed in August 1840 "To place the means of education in the higher walks of literature within the reach of the youth of the Province ..." Yaldwyn, in spite of not being known for his intellectual pursuits, was appointed to a Provisional Committee to retain office until £2000 had been raised. [Smyth, Brewster, Porter]. The endeavour did not succeed.²⁹

In January 1840 when funds were being raised for a Presbyterian Church in Melbourne "Yaldwyn presented a valuable allotment of land at cost price, and was given a piece of plate in recognition of his liberality." [Clow, Wilkie, McArthur, D.C.]³⁰

A Separation Association to Petition for the Separation of Port Phillip District from New South Wales was established in May 1840. Yaldwyn was appointed to a "London

²⁵ Finn, p. 417.

²⁶ de Serville, pp. 211 & 212.

²⁷ Finn, p. 324.

²⁸ Sullivan, p. 63.

²⁹ Finn, p. 630-632.

³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 160.

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Committee” to promote the views with the British Parliament and public. [Gisborne, Clow] Very little was achieved in Yaldwyn’s time on the Committee.³¹

Yaldwyn was appointed as a director of the Melbourne branch of the Bank of Australasia in Collins Street, in 1840. [McArthur, D.C., Porter]³²

In December, 1840, he was elected to the Committee of the Immigration Association established to introduce immigration to the Port Phillip District, independently of that to New South Wales in general. [La Trobe, Lonsdale, Simpson, Welsh, Thomson, F.McCrae, Graham]³³

Reflecting his status in society Yaldwyn was appointed a magistrate for the Port Phillip District for 1841. [La Trobe, Lonsdale, Brewster, F.McCrae, Rankin, Simpson, T.Wills]³⁴

With whom would Yaldwyn have mixed socially? It is likely he would have found congenial company at the Melbourne Club, which was established by ‘gentlemen’ squatters to provide a base when visiting Melbourne from their stations.

Captain and Mrs Lonsdale were very friendly with the Yaldwyns, particularly after the Yaldwyns moved from the Campaspe River to Melbourne. On 28 January 1840, following the arrival of the new Superintendent, Charles Joseph La Trobe, “Captain Lonsdale was presented with an address by the residents of Melbourne. About £350 was collected for the purchase of a silver service, which was selected in London by W.H.Yaldwyn on behalf of the subscribers ... ”³⁵ Full descriptions and photographs of the silver and inscriptions are included in J.M. Wilkins’s biography of Captain William Lonsdale.³⁶

In 1840, Yaldwyn stood bond for Lonsdale when he was made Colonial Sub-Treasurer.

It was necessary for senior government officers to supply bonds from men of standing as a guarantee or security of their integrity and William Yaldwyn was one of the two men who gave bonds for Lonsdale. The total bond was £4000, of which Yaldwyn put up £2000 and the other £2000 was paid by Capt Foster Fyans, Commissioner of Crown Lands for the Portland District. Lonsdale acknowledged this in writing ‘I hereby bind myself to pay for the said William Henry Young with any sum which may be demanded of him by the

³¹ Ibid. p. 907.

³² Ibid. p. 321-322.

³³ Ibid. p. 492-493.

³⁴ de Serville, p. 211.

³⁵ Boys,, p.104.

³⁶ Wilkins, p. 128-129.

Government on account of the said Bond, or defalcation on my part in the performance of the conditions thereof.³⁷

Yaldwyn was active on the sporting scene soon after his arrival in Melbourne. Horses and racing - to say nothing of betting in his early days, were in Yaldwyn's blood. It was no wonder that in late 1839 he was nominated as a steward [Gisborne] for the race meetings to be held in March 1840 for the first time at Flemington, Melbourne. Yaldwyn's horses *Blacklegs* and *Snowball* were starters. Finn gives an entertaining account of the meetings, which were well attended, with racegoers travelling to Flemington by foot, boat, dog-cart and bullock drays.³⁸

By the time Yaldwyn brought his family to Melbourne cricket had been underway since 1838 with the Melbourne Cricket Club already in existence. [McArthur, D.C. and D.G., Russell, Highett, Smythe] Yaldwyn was a low-order batsman, in 1840, for the 'Married' men against the 'Bachelors', scoring eight not out and five 'caught out' in his two innings.³⁹

Yaldwyn was also nominated as a steward for regattas which were held in Hobson's Bay in January 1841. The fact that Yaldwyn was nominated as steward for the racing and sailing events suggests his popularity and standing among his peers.⁴⁰

The genial Yaldwyn was held in high regard by his contemporaries

Robert Russell, who had known Yaldwyn in Melbourne at the time of the establishment of the Mechanics' Institution, remarked that he was "of genial disposition good-natured and hearty in his manner".⁴¹

As a man, William Yaldwyn was invariably kind, generous, straightforward and completely honest in his every action. From his arrival in 1836 until his death in 1866, he was liked, respected and trusted by all sections of the people with whom he came in contact in the Australian Colonies. ... He was not what is termed a good businessman and achieved only moderate financial success in his Australian career.⁴²

Later in life he was regarded as "a typical old English gentleman, of the old school, bubbling over with jollity and beaming kindness at all times. In build too, he was a perfect Mr Pickwick ... He was a great sport and the members of the North Australian Club, Ipswich, presented him with a pair of gold spurs."⁴³

³⁷ Randell, p. 58.

³⁸ Finn, p.716-720.

³⁹ Ibid. p. 737.

⁴⁰ Finn, p. 742.

⁴¹ Randell, p. 96.

⁴² Randell, Introduction p. xiii.

⁴³ Randell, J.O., op. cit., p. 112 quoting Wm Edward Parry-Okenden, in newspaper articles of the early 1860s.

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It was said of Yaldwyn, “ ... There was nothing in the least ‘Australian’ in his appearance, yet it is such as he who have helped to ‘make’ Australia.”⁴⁴ Yaldwyn represented the energy, enthusiasm, and good intentions of those who established the Mechanics’ Institution and other important commercial and social organisations of early Melbourne.

Anne Marsden, August 2011

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⁴⁴ Randell, J.O., op. cit., p. 114 quoting Nehemiah Bartley, in *opals and Agates* Gordon and Gotch, Brisbane 1892.