

Cemetery Conversations



THE NEWSLETTER OF THE FRIENDS OF ST. KILDA CEMETERY INC.

SIR GEORGE STEPHEN (1794-1879)—ABOLITIONIST

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The year 2007 marks the bicentenary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. A key force in the campaign to end slavery was a group called the Clapham Sect which included the British politician William Wilberforce and his brother-in-law, James Stephen. However, while the trading of slaves to Britain was outlawed in 1807, it took another twenty six years before a British Act of Parliament in 1833 abolished the institution of slavery throughout Britain and its dominions. One of the leading lights in the abolition of slavery, Sir George Stephen, is buried in St Kilda Cemetery.

George Stephen was born at St Christopher, West Indies, in 1794, the son of James Stephen and his first wife Anne (Anna) née Stent. James Stephen had been instrumental in drafting the 1807 *Slave Trade Abolition Act*. George Stephen was originally to join the medical department of the army but, according to his obituary in *The Argus*, the defeat of Napoleon at Leipzig in 1813 meant that hundreds of young men on the medical staff of the army had to look for alternative employment. George was then sent by his father to Cambridge with the view to becoming a physician but, two years later, began studying law.

George Stephen married Henrietta Ravenscroft, the daughter of a clergyman, in 1821 and the couple were to have seven children.

From 1823, George Stephen continued the anti-slavery crusading of his father. His role was explained in his obituary in *The Argus* of 21 June 1879:

"During 1823 facts were brought to light concerning slavery in Mauritius which justified [Sir Fowell] Buxton in demanding an inquiry and the House of Commons acceded to the motion. Sir George Stephen was appointed to the conduct this inquiry, and immediately entered on the work. The 56th Regiment, which was stationed in Mauritius, had returned to England, and from the evidence given by the men sufficient was elicited to satisfy the Government of the truth of the charges. Commissioners were dispatched to the Mauritius to prosecute the inquiry there, and in the meantime Sir George Stephen examined all the witnesses that could be discovered in England. The Mauritius inquiry lasted for sometime and eventually terminated in the emancipation of every slave who could establish the date of his arrival to be subsequent to the surrender of the colony...

Concerned about the slow progress of the movement for the emancipation of slaves, he wished to organise a national agitation on the subject. He prepared an anti-slavery creed,

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Sir George Stephen (1794-1879)

(La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria, mp012951)



Grave of Sir George Stephen at the St. Kilda General Cemetery (CofE "C" 291E).

Also interred at this location are Lady Stephen and their children George Milner Elmslie Stephen and Henrietta Sibella Priscilla Stephen



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laying down the principle that to 'uphold slavery was a crime before God, and that every Christian was called upon to aid in its suppression'. It was considered too radical in its character to be considered expedient in the temper of the public, and would tend to alienate much of the Parliamentary support on which they relied. He received help, however from an unexpected quarter. He was invited by Mr Cropper of Liverpool, to dine with him and some friends, and to give a further explanation of the scheme. The company comprised about 20 Quakers, to whom he again explained his proposals. Mr Cropper asked him what he intended to do. "I shall go to the end", he replied, "and do my best to carry it through if I can raise £1,000". "All right", was immediately exclaimed by everyone around the table, and was followed by a subscription of £500 from Cropper, and £250 from Joseph Sturge. Such was the commencement of the Agency Committee, and thus supported Sir George Stephen was enabled to carry out his plan, which proved successful beyond his hopes. Popular excitement was aroused, and when the Bill dealing with the subject of slavery was brought before Parliament, an anti-slavery petition with 187,000 signatures, obtained in less than 10 days was presented. Warned by the exhibitions of public feeling, the West Indian party

changed their policy and offered to withdraw their opposition to the measure on payment of £20,000,000 to the planters and their mortgagees. The views of Sir George Stephen as the representative of the Agency party, were asked, and he was given to understand that his answer would determine the fate of the Bill, as except on those terms a majority was hopeless. He felt himself to be in an embarrassing position, for, according to the views he had circulated, the proposal amounted to the purchase of negro liberty, and therefore to an absolute abandonment of principle, but under stress of circumstances he decided to accept the compromise on condition that the Bill should contain an absolute prohibition of all slavery in the British Dominions for ever. This was conceded, the Bill passed, and received the Royal Assent."

These actions ultimately led to George Stephen's knighthood in February 1838.

About 1847 he decided to become a barrister and on 6 June 1849 was called to the Bar at Gray's Inn. Interestingly, his eldest son, James Wilberforce Stephen had been called to the Bar six months earlier. In the next few years Sir George built up an insolvency practice in Liverpool and Manchester but when this business declined, he accepted a proposal from his son James Wilberforce that their families should migrate to Victoria (one son, William Raven-

croft Stephen, had settled and married in the colony in 1852). In 1855, Sir George and Lady Stephen together with James Wilberforce Stephen and his wife Katherine Rose née Vernon arrived in Victoria.

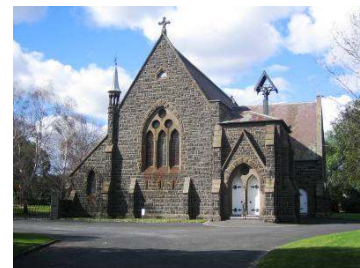
Shortly after their arrival, on 9 August 1855 Sir George and his son were both admitted to the Victorian Bar. They shared legal chambers for the rest of their professional lives. Sir George lived at "Helenslea" on Glen Eira Road, Caulfield. The house still stands and forms part of Shelford Girls' Grammar. Sir George gave the first parcel of land and paid for the construction of the first St Mary's Church in Glen Eira Road (where he was also a parishioner and taught Sunday School).

Sir George was eventually made a Queen's Counsel in 1871. He was also busy outside the law and was first president of the Melbourne Chess Club (1866) as well as being active in the Church of England. He also made unsuccessful attempts to enter the Victorian Parliament.

Sir George died at Caulfield on 20 June 1879, predeceased by his wife in 1869 and survived by six of his seven children .

Sir George's wife, Lady Henrietta (Harriet) Stephen (1797-1869), was the eldest daughter of William Ravenscroft of County Antrim, Ireland, and his second wife. Her uncle was the anti-slavery cam-

"Sir George gave the first parcel of land and paid for the construction of the first St Mary's Church in Glen Eira Road"



St Mary's Church of England, Glen Eira Road. Sir George donated the land and paid for its construction

paigner William Wilberforce. In her own right, Henrietta was both a painter and art collector and some of her works were loaned to the 1869 Melbourne Public Library Exhibition. She died on 18 August 1869.

(Source: *The Argus* 21 June 1879; Biographical notes compiled by the late Helen Eggleston; A. Thomson Zainu'ddin, "Stephen, Sir George (1794 - 1879)", *Australian Dictionary of Biography, Online Edition 2006* www.adb.online.anu.edu.au)



LIEUTENANT JAMES MALLETT BENNETT (1894-1922)

The Australian Dictionary of Biography has an entry on James Mallett Bennett (1894-1922), airman and mechanic, which includes the following extract:

“Early in 1922 the Smith brothers [Ross and Keith] decided to attempt a round-the-world flight; Bennett and Shiers were again chosen as mechanics. The crew planned to take off from England on 25 April, but on 13 April Ross Smith and Bennett were killed during a test flight at Weybridge, when their Vickers Viking Amphibian crashed. The pioneer aviators were mourned as national heroes and their bodies were brought back to Australia. Bennett was buried in St Kilda cemetery on 19 June 1922...”

There is an interesting letter in the Health Department file on St. Kilda Cemetery from the then Secretary of the Trust, Miss E M Thomas. Dated 29 May 1922, the letter reads:

“Sir,
The remains of Lieutenant Bennett will reach these shores about 11th June, and will be accorded a State Funeral. The question of the place of interment has exercised the minds of the local bodies, who are all keenly desirous of according Lieutenant Bennett’s memory the highest honour. The decision has now been arrived at, and concurred in by Lieutenant Bennett’s father, that, as his distinguished son was born and brought up in St. Kilda, there could be no more fitting site chosen for his resting place than the St. Kilda Cemetery.

The announcement that recently appeared in the press (presumably authorised by the Commonwealth authorities) that, after the State Memorial Service at the Federal Government House, the remains would be conveyed to the St. Kilda Cemetery, was evidently issued in the assumption that the Bennett family already held ground in that

Cemetery, but such is not the case. The Trustees of the Cemetery are, therefore [sic], now applying to the Public Health Commission to secure an Order-in-Council permitting them to make a free grant to the family of a site 8’ x 8’ at the north end of the central oval in the main drive of the Cemetery, which would provide, in future years, for the interment also of Lieutenant Bennett’s relatives. In view of the shortness of time now allowed to complete the arrangement the Commission’s ready acquiescence in this request and its early application for the necessary Order-in-Council will be regarded as a favour”.

The request was approved by the Health Commission on 30 May followed by the Governor-in-Council on 6 June.

(Source: Clark, Rex, “Bennett, James Mallett (1894 - 1922)”, Australian Dictionary of Biography, Online Edition 2006 www.adb.online.anu.edu.au; Department of Health file on St. Kilda General Cemetery, Part 1917-1938)



Geoff Austin, Secretary of the Friends speaking at the grave of Lieut. James Bennett in March 2005

“The question of the place of interment has exercised the minds of the local bodies, who are all keenly desirous of according Lieutenant Bennett’s memory the highest honour”

DESCRIPTION OF THE LAND RESERVED

From the Department of Health File on St. Kilda General Cemetery:

“Description of the land appropriated as site for a General Cemetery in the parish of Prahran near St Kilda

Bourke 20a Twenty acres parish of Prahran near St Kilda Commencing at a point 3 chains south of the South West corner of portion 63 in the parish of Prahran. Bounded on the north by a road 3 chains wide bearing east 10 chains 92 links, on the East by a road 1 chain

wide bearing south 18 chains 32 links on the south by a road 1 chain wide bearing west 10 chains 92 links and on the west by a road 1 chain wide bearing north 18 chains 32 links.”

1 chain is equal to:
22 yards
66 feet
20.1168 metres

(Source: Department of Health file on St. Kilda General Cemetery, Part I up to 1916)



OUR NEW LOGO...

With the assistance of Grant Cook of Afrenasia, the Friends now have a new logo. Our logo is derived from the female figure that forms part of the impressive Robb monument, located to the left upon entering the Cemetery from Dandenong Road.

An inscription on the pedestal of the monument refers to Doleen Maude La Barte, the only daughter of W J and E M Robb who was murdered by her husband, Major Thomas Butler La Barte on 17 December 1920 at their home at Moss Vale, New South Wales.

The Argus newspaper of 20 December 1920 told the tragic story:

“Details of the shooting of the wife of Major Thomas Butler La Barte, the shooting of Constable Frederick William Mitchell and the arrest of Major La Barte near Mossvale on Friday night give a story of grim tragedy. Major La Barte is the son of the Rev. T. La Barte, formerly of Brighton. Major La Barte,

who was educated at the Brighton Grammar School, is 34 years of age. He served with distinction in France in the Royal Field Artillery, gaining the M.C. Mrs La Barte was well known in Melbourne. She was the only daughter of Mr. W. J. Robb, and was 27 years of age.

Major La Barte was in Mossvale on Friday, and, according to the police account, was drinking heavily. Not long after his return home at about 6 o'clock, the cook at the house was summonsed by her mistress's bell. When the cook got to Mrs. La Barte's bedroom she saw Major La Barte holding his wife by the wrist. Mrs. La Barte cried out "Oh, he's shooting me!" Two reports from a revolver followed, and Mrs. La Barte sank down, shot in the head and chest. The neighbours telephoned to the police station at Mossvale, about two miles distant.

Constable Mitchell left for La Barte's on a motor-cycle, and was followed by Sergeant Mackie, Mounted-constable Finch and Constable Eadie.

Constable Mitchell entered the house at the front, when shots were heard, and Mitchell fell. He must have died instantly.

When darkness came on, Constable Eadie, who had an electric torch, climbed through the window of the maid's room, while the other constables fired at the adjoining windows. Eadie walked into the living room, and found Major La Barte crouched beside the table, with a gun in one hand. With a leap Eadie reached La Barte, gripped him by the neck, and warded off the gun. While they were struggling other constables rushed in. La Barte was disarmed, and taken into custody.

After reaching the police station, Major La Barte spoke of having pains in his head, but said nothing further. The funeral of Constable Mitchell was largely attended. He left a young widow, but no children.”

(Source: The Argus 20 Dec 1920)



The new logo designed by Afrenasia (www.afrenasia.com)



Female figure on the impressive Robb monument at the St. Kilda General Cemetery

...AND WEBSITE!

Coinciding with the launch of the new logo, the Friends engaged Taskforce—Working Edge to re-design our website—www.foskc.org. And the result is spectacular. The new website combines

the old vicnet address with the previous site containing biographies from “Nation Builders: Great Lives and Stories from St Kilda General Cemetery” commissioned for the Centenary of Federation celebrations.

