

The story of 150 years of the Wilford Family in Australia

Kindly prepared and contributed by Barrie Wilford, Burrill Lake, NSW, Australia. January, 2009.

In February, 2007 a family reunion was held in Milton, New South Wales to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the Wilford family to Australia. Although the gathering was not a large one (around 50 people), relatives arrived from all over Australia, some travelling several thousand kilometres for the two-day event.

Two grandsons of John Wilford, founder of John Wilford and Sons, linen manufacturers of Brompton by Northallerton, commenced their four month journey to Australia in 1856. They departed on the sailing ship "Tiptrees" on 20th September, 1856 from Liverpool. Their father, Aaron Wilford, who operated a grocery shop on Church View, Brompton, had died in 1848.

My great grandfather, William Henry Wilford



William Henry Wilford (my great grandfather) and Charles, his older brother(both listed in the register as linen-makers), arrived in Melbourne early in January, 1857, then travelled on board the steam ship "Governor General" to Sydney, where they disembarked on 20th January, 1857.

There has been some speculation in the family about why they came to the Australia. Family legend has it that they came to promote Wilford linen goods, and decided to stay. There is some support for this version of events, as they travelled as "cabin passengers". During this period of time assisted migrants generally travelled as "steerage passengers". Perhaps they were anxious to migrate

and were prepared to pay their own way, travelling in greater comfort. The steerage passengers on sailing ships travelling to Australia at that time travelled in the holds, in which temporary double or triple tiers of bunks were fitted, each passenger being allocated 18" of bed space, separated by a low board and a light curtain. Imagine what it would be like travelling through the tropics! This accommodation was removed for the return journey, when the hold would be filled with wool. (1)

Their reasons for either migrating, or for merely deciding to stay in Australia (climate aside) are not difficult to understand. The North Yorkshire linen industry was in a depressed state, with high unemployment and low wages. Markets were shrinking and cholera outbreaks were frequent. On the other hand the state of NSW which had also suffered an economic downturn in the

1840s, was by the 1850s enjoying a period of time when the settled areas were expanding rapidly, and rural industries, especially wool-growing were quite profitable. The recession of the 1840s had wiped out the fortunes of some of the big unscrupulous entrepreneurs who had exercised political leverage in the state almost from the commencement of the colony, offering ordinary settlers opportunities previously unheard of. Then discovery of gold in 1851 created strong demand for food products, with correspondingly high prices as the population rapidly expanded.

William and Charles Wilford quickly purchased a property at the small settlement of Kiama, about 150 kilometres south of Sydney (2). They named this property "Brompton Grange". On this rich volcanic soil they set about breeding cattle for market. The cattle brand, with letters "WK" (Wilford Kiama) was registered in the name of Charles Wilford of "Brumpton" (sic), and is now a valued possession of my younger brother. Brompton Grange on the other hand no longer exists as a property, having been long ago swallowed up by a huge rock quarry and later by a network of bypass roadways.



My great grandmother, Catherine Newell Wilford

Soon William fell in love with a young local woman, Catherine Newell Hindmarsh. Her father, Michael Hindmarsh, orphaned at an early age, had arrived from England as a young man, almost penniless, but rich in farming skills and determination. Her mother, Cecilia Hindmarsh was one of three orphaned daughters of William Rutter who arrived in NSW in 1807 to develop salt works on the Parramatta River, beside the site of the 2000 Olympic Games. Catherine Hindmarsh's grandmother, Charlotte Rutter was born Charlotte Robinson from Northallerton. The Hindmarshes were living at the Gerringong, just a few kilometres south of Kiama, having been fortunate in the late

1820s to have received a grant of virgin land which contained valuable stands of *Toona ciliata*, otherwise known as Australian Red Cedar. The timber from this tree was (and still is) highly prized and with the profits, the family was able to clear and convert this rainforest property to farmland and live in some comfort for a pioneering family.

William Henry Wilford and Catherine Newell Hindmarsh were married in 1859, and by the next year their first child was born.

The Wilford brothers' cattle breeding enterprise soon expanded, and by 1863 they were raising cattle on a large property, "Comberton Grange" at Currumbene Creek, further south. They were very likely also rearing cattle on some land granted to various members of the Hindmarsh family in the same district.

It is not clear when William and Charles Wilford's married sister Pamela and her husband, John Steele Rablah arrived in Australia. This couple had been married in London prior to leaving England. J.S Rablah was a tanner by trade. Some records suggest that he worked in the Shoalhaven area, and later at Cobbitty near Sydney. The couple are also believed to have lived on a property near Kiama. Although I have met some members of the family many years ago, it seems that contact was essentially lost between the families a long time ago.



John Steele Rablah and his wife Pamela (nee Wilford) who migrated to Australia about the same time as my ancestor William Henry Wilford.

By 1870 William purchased "Loch Leven", a property south of the settlement of Milton in the Ulladulla District about 240km south of Sydney. It has a frontage to the north

shore of Burrill Lake, which is in fact an estuarine lake, usually open to the sea. The property was already cleared and fenced, and was composed of rich, dark Monzonite soil, if a little stony. Although Red Cedar grew in the district, there is no reference to any of it remaining on the property. It would have been removed any years earlier.



My great grandfather, his wife Catherine Newell Wilford (nee Hindmarsh) and their family outside their home on their property "Loch Leven", Milton, NSW

About this time the Kiama property was sold, and for some reason Charles Wilford decided to return to Brompton by Northallerton to work as a grocer. A family legend has it that Catherine Newell Wilford refused to do Charles' laundry and put his dirty clothes aside for him to wash by himself. While the story suggests an admirable independent streak in my great grandmother, I doubt that it is the reason for Charles' departure.

William Henry Wilford became an enthusiastic and skilful dairy-farmer and a keen breeder of milking shorthorn (Australian Illawarra Shorthorn) cattle. He and his four sons exhibited cattle at Milton Agricultural Show and the Royal Sydney Show for many years, and won many prizes. They sold stud bulls to buyers in every part of Australia.

They drained the swampland, built floodgates to exclude the salt water, and grew lucerne crops successfully on the flats. The milk produced was set in flat dishes for the cream to rise, after which it was skimmed off and churned into butter. Power for the churn was by a special one-horse treadle machine, as William considered it was better than the turntable type of horse-works, because the horse could not stop as its weight was turning the track. If you wanted to increase the speed or power, all you had to do was raise the front end. The butter produced was sent by coastal steamship to Sydney every week as road transport was inadequate at the time. Dray-loads of pigs were also loaded onto the steamships at Ulladulla Harbour. Later, he purchased an additional farm of about 65 acres on the west side of the property, called "Riverview" as it fronted a large creek flowing into the lake. The original house on Riverview was a slab one, so he had the present stone and brick homestead built. Slab houses were usually built as temporary dwellings during pioneering days in Australia. A frame was first constructed from gum tree (Eucalyptus) logs. Then other logs were split into slabs using steel wedges and a maul to infill the walls. Rails and posts to fence the properties were prepared in similar fashion. Some of these split timber fences and dwellings survived well into the 1950s, before the weather and dry rot took their toll.

In 1891 he won first prize for the best-managed farm over 100 acres in the South Coast District. He had problems with feral bulls which roamed the bushland between Burrill and Ulladulla, and came onto the property at night. These bulls had to be shot as they destroyed fences and interfered with breeding plans. On one occasion one charged him while rounding up cattle on horseback. He had to gallop to get out of reach. Every time the bull tried to gore the horse, it could only get close enough to lift the horse's tail. Eventually the dogs came to his rescue.

On January 19th 1893 "Bangalore" (175 acres) was purchased from his brother-in-law by marriage, W.W. Ewin, who had also married a Hindmarsh daughter. With this purchase, William had in effect secured a property for each of his sons.

He served as a magistrate on the bench of the local court, and was a member of the local school board when Ulladulla Public School was being established.

Wm Henry Wilford was the first secretary of the Milton Congregational Church during its formation and construction, in 1872. It was regular practice for either Wm Henry Wilford or Catherine Newell Wilford to read a portion of the Bible to their family, after the evening meal.

William Henry and Catherine Newell Wilford had seven children:

George, b. 1860, m. Lucy Miller of "Narrawallee", Milton, d.7/4/1906, aged 46 yrs.

Cecilia, b. 1862, married Alexander Warden, of "Sunny Vale", Milton

William, b. 1863, died when he was 2 years old.

Benjamin, b. 1866, died 1901 in a fire at Nowra aged 36 years, unmarried.

John A. b. 1867, m. Isabella C. Otton of "Numerella", Bega, d. 5/12/1932 aged 65.

Walter, b. 1870, married Frances Turnbull of Milton, d. 23/7/1937, aged 67 yrs.

Hannah Priscilla, b. 1872, did not marry, d.16/8/1938, aged 66 years.

I will not attempt to provide full details of each branch of this large family. Family trees have been forwarded to Mary Wilford-Nowe for her Wilford Family Database for those who have a special interest in genealogy.

The sons of William Henry and Catherine took up sidelines to farming to earn extra personal income when they were young. George did a considerable amount of bacon curing and sent bacon to Sydney by boat. Ben shot wild ducks on the lagoon nearby, dressed them and sent them by boat to the Hotel Arcadia, Sydney. He built up quite a trade, receiving 2/6 each and shot up to a thousand ducks per year. He made a special copper duck boat to paddle out for the ducks. John Arthur and Walter slaughtered cattle and sold the meat by the quarter. They delivered meat around the district in a horse and cart. When they married they all settled down to dairy farming.

Catherine was a true woman of the bush. She had a good sense of humour, and liked to remind William that her government "marriage grant" helped him set up his farming enterprises. When currawongs (a kind of native bird) raided her persimmon tree she would shoot them with her shotgun. She was interested in raising poultry, keeping an extensive collection of different breeds of fowls and pheasants. Her technique for feeding pheasants was to hang a leg of a dead calf on the fence. The pheasants would collect the maggots as they fell to the ground.

William Henry Wilford and his son Benjamin met an unfortunate death on 11th April, 1901. They were travelling home from the Sydney Agricultural Show when they decided to stay overnight at the Prince of Wales Hotel at Nowra, a town about 70 km from their home. The older son George decided to continue on home by coach the same day. During the night a fire broke out in the hotel while they were sleeping, and both Wm Henry and Ben were incinerated.

John Arthur Wilford (my paternal grandfather), died before I was born. He was only 5'6" tall and wore size 5 shoes. Despite his small stature, he was a man of great energy. He ran his dairy farm on "Bangalore", as well as continuing the butchery business he operated with his younger brother, Walter. The two brothers extended their landholdings around the Ulladulla District and leased additional land further south at a place called Bawley Point. Later the brothers built a large butcher's shop in Milton which they ran until the 1920s, before leasing out the premises.



John Arthur Wilford and his wife Isabella (nee Otton), older daughter Catherine Mary and son John William Wilford. The cat has not been identified.

In 1896 he married Isabella Constance Otton, who came from Bega, a town further south on the NSW coast. She was a descendant of three convicts who were transported to NSW earlier in the 19th Century. Isabella's maternal great grandfather,

James Jauncey was a veteran of the Battle of Corunna, who was wrongly apprehended with two friends at an agricultural fair in Herefordshire and convicted of conspiring to steal a display of wheat which they were examining. His son John aged sixteen, and nursing a justifiable sense of grievance, deliberately arranged with a property owner to fake a "crime" in order to receive a conviction so that he could come to Australia to join his father. Unfortunately he didn't succeed on his first attempt and received a flogging for his efforts! He succeeded on his second attempt. He later became one of the Bega District's leading citizens, a successful farmer on a large holding which he worked hard to buy and develop, and served as a parish councillor for 28 years. His memoirs, written as an old man make fascinating reading. (3) Isabella's paternal grandfather, John Otton (I) had been "handpicked" because of his expertise with horses by the accomplices of some wealthy Shoalhaven entrepreneurs. He was foolish enough to fall for their entrapment plan and was convicted of theft and transported for life. The accomplices later suffered pangs of conscience and paid the fares of all his family so they could come to Australia.

Isabella was a tall woman at 5'11" for her time, and not surprisingly loved horse-riding. She was a deacon of the Milton Congregational Church for many years and despite having to travel by horse drawn vehicle, she seldom missed

a church service. She also loved to sing Irish folksongs taught to her by her Irish Catholic grandmother, Mary Jauncey (nee Carew). She died in 1945.

John Arthur Wilford cleared the remaining bush (forest) on "Bangalore", ploughed the property, and enlarged the house, built farm buildings and a substantial stone bridge across a creek. The stones used for the bridge were Monzonite "floaters" (loose, rounded rocks which have resisted weathering processes), some weighing several tons, and all collected from the same paddock with the aid of bullocks. While clearing the land he would set the alarm clock to get up at midnight to get up and keep the logs in the paddocks burning. He also found time to serve on the Ulladulla Municipal Council for over twenty years, on the local agricultural show committee, to play cornet with the Salvation Army Band and was chairman of the Ulladulla Refrigerating Butter Company Ltd. He was a keen cattle breeder and showed cattle in the Royal Easter Show in Sydney, the animals having to be transported to Sydney by coastal steamer.

John Arthur Wilford and Isabella Constance Wilford had three children:

Catherine Mary ("Kitty") Wilford b. 1897

John William ("Jack") Wilford b. 1902

Constance Newell ("Connie") Wilford b. 1904

My Aunts Kitty and Connie never married. This was not unusual in Australia at the time. The great loss of life caused by the First World War left a huge deficit of marriageable males.

My father (John William Wilford) commenced his working life on "Bangalore", later purchasing his sisters' shares in the property to become the sole owner. When he married, my aunts moved into the town of Milton.

As boy John kept a glider possum for a pet. His father had flicked it off a tree with a stock whip and took it home to him. Unfortunately it chose the chimney as a means of entry when returning home and was always covered with soot. It slept in my grandmother's clothes peg bag or in his bed. It never learned not to sit on the top of doors, leading to some difficulties when doors were closed.

He liked to tell a story about a boy who bullied him on the way to school. Tiring of the harassment one day he took a branch from a giant stinging tree, holding it carefully in his handkerchief, as he walked through the rainforest and hid behind some scrub. When his tormentor appeared from behind the bushes he brushed the branch across his bare neck. The boy ran away screaming in agony, and probably felt the effect for some weeks. The bullying ceased immediately.

He was a very practical man, and enjoyed making things, always aiming for perfection. He loved woodwork and built himself a wooden boat as a boy of fourteen years which survived regular fishing trips on Burrill Lake for nearly fifty years. He bought the first outboard motor to be used on the lake and used it to deliver milk to a camping ground at the entrance of the lake during the

summer holiday season. After collecting the boat from World War II impoundment he restored it and built an outboard motor himself from salvaged parts.(4) An interest in radios led to a couple of radios being built in his youth, and an interest in motor cars led to an automotive mechanics course and the purchase of an American "Erskine" car in 1926.



My Father, John William Wilford and his younger sister Constance. At play in the 1920s!

John William Wilford married Ethel Naomi Mottram from Nowra, a town about 70km to the north. Most of my mother's ancestors were free settlers, but her paternal great grandfather was convicted in Wales and transported to Tasmania for horse theft in the 1830s, spending time in the notorious penal settlement of Port Arthur. He was only a mere youth at the time and was forced to leave his lovely young wife behind on the other side of the world without the option of ever returning home. For a similar crime today, one would expect a warning and suspended sentence. As a reward for his boyish sense of injustice and perceived insolence he was flogged unmercifully, and placed in chain gangs on several occasions. On his

release, his wife migrated to join him, and they operated a hotel in Sydney before going to the Californian goldfields. On their return to Australia he went alone to the Victorian goldfields and was never heard of again. Their son, (my mother's grandfather), fearing that he would be placed in an orphan school when his mother died, stowed away on a ship. The thirteen year old was discovered, and dropped off in tears on a wharf at Greenwell Point. Taken in by a local doctor/farmer, Henry James Mottram worked hard, later buying a farm of his own and becoming a respected citizen. The "criminal class" described by the wealthy English landholders of the 18th and early 19th Centuries was once again proven to be a great fiction. (5)

My parents found life quite difficult during the Depression and World War II years. My father kept bees, grew his own vegetables and fruit and kept a fish trap or two in the creek. My mother raised fowls (called "chooks" in this country) and ducks, so we ate so many eggs and chooks that I have avoided both ever since. Milk prices were low until whole milk from this district was needed to supply the Sydney market, leading to a short return to prosperity.



John William Wilford and Ethel Naomi Wilford (nee Mottram) c. 1970.

My parents were great supporters of the Milton Agricultural and Horticultural Society and my father became a Life Member of the Show Committee. My mother was renowned as an excellent cook and cake decorator. They were dedicated members of the Milton Congregational Church, my father being Secretary for many years. He was also a founding member of the Milton-Ulladulla and District Historical Society, and also of the local National Parks Association. Being an excellent shot with a rifle he won many competitions in the Milton Rifle Club and on a wider level, later writing the history of the club.

Jack and Naomi had three sons:
Alfred John Wilford m. Heather Watt
Barrie Gordon Wilford m. Helen Wetherly
Ian Dale Wilford m. Margaret Edwards



Left: ALFRED – BARRIE – DALE (1949)

Right: *Alfred Wilford, Dale Wilford, Barrie Wilford c. 2006.*



My mother was tragically killed in a motor accident in 1971 and my father died after a long illness in 1976.

My brother Alfred became a high school teacher and served in NSW State Education Department in a number of schools, including Kiama High School. He and Heather have one daughter, who works as a scientist in the Australian and New Zealand food standards authority in Canberra. Alfred and Heather are

retired and have spent much of their retirement in charity work. Alfred, having taught Industrial Arts for most of his teaching career, now repairs antique clocks for collectors and writes articles for an English horological magazine on his techniques.

My younger brother Dale has continued dairy farming on "Bangalore", needing to purchase additional neighbouring land over the years and adopt new technology as profit margins have declined. As he plans to "retire" shortly he is changing over to beef production. He and Margaret have four daughters and a son. One became a teacher. Another daughter has married a farmer and they operate a large dairy farm on irrigated land in the Murray Valley. Their third daughter is a nurse who is currently on a working holiday in Canada, while the youngest daughter is a university student. Their son is a builder who works in the iron ore mining boom towns in Western Australia.

Helen and I are both retired teachers. Helen trained in what we in NSW call "infants" teaching (children aged 5-7 yrs), and transferred to special education to assist children with learning difficulties. I trained as a "primary" teacher (ages 8-12) and later become a school principal (headmaster), serving in country and city schools prior to my retirement.



Barrie and Helen Wilford and family c. 2003.

We now live on the southern shore of Burrill Lake where we are cooled by the north-easterly sea breezes through the summer. I spend part of my time as a crew member, trainer and radio operator of our local division of the Royal Volunteer Coastal Patrol at Ulladulla. This is a similar

to your RNLI. I am Secretary of the Ulladulla Men's Shed Committee and am involved in the local historical society and a number of other organisations, which keep me quite busy. We have two married daughters. One is an architect and the other is a pre-school teacher. We also have four granddaughters.

Our family is a good example of the changing Australian ethnic composition. You will note that early Wilford generations had their origins in the British Isles. Alfred's daughter is married to a man with Finnish parents. Dale's daughters have married men of Dutch, German and Polish ancestry, respectively. My younger daughter is married to a man of Italian, German and Swedish and possibly Australian Aboriginal ancestry. My older daughter is the exception, because her husband's ancestors came from the British Isles and Ireland. I

suppose this is the reason why Australians are now classified as foreigners when they arrive at British airports.

Most of the Wilford properties in the Ulladulla District are in the hands of William Henry Wilford's descendants, including parts of "Riverview" which was sold off in sections many years ago. Dairying has become uneconomic, and beef cattle now graze the paddocks.

Having told my story family's story, including my convict heritage, I would be interested to hear of the current British view of the transportation period and of convict descendants. While on a visit to the UK in 1987, I was asked if I had convict ancestors on several occasions. When admitting that I had, the conversation usually came to an abrupt end. Perhaps views have changed. While not being able to choose my ancestors, I am proud of them all, free and captive, not because of what they may have done, but because of what they all became in their new home.

Several Australian Wilford family members have had brief visits to Brompton by Northallerton over the years. I personally feel a real affinity for the little town and it was disappointing to hear that the mill was destroyed by fire several years ago and that the chimney was demolished. I thank all those who have struggled to preserve the Brompton heritage and record its history.

.....

(1) Conditions on convict ships were far worse, many people dying from disease en route.

(2) The will of John Wilford, founder of the linen mill could suggest that Aaron Wilford may have retained an interest in the firm as well as taking up the grocery business. If not, it is difficult to see how the two brothers could travel as cabin passengers and then purchase a property on arrival in Australia. There is a copy of the will in the NYCRO. A copy of Aaron's will may help to throw more light on the matter.

(3) This document can be seen found through Google. Try "SMA + John Jauncey."

(4) When a Japanese invasion was expected during World War II, all boat owners in the Ulladulla District were required to take their vessels to a central location to be ready for easy destruction as part of a "burnt earth" plan in order to delay the invasion. Cattle were also to be shot on command from military officials. Fortunately neither of these orders were issued.

(5) The convict records of Henry Jackson Mottram, and thousands of his fellow convicts are now available in digitised form on the Tasmanian Archives website. They make interesting but depressing reading.