

PLOD ESSAY

Thoughts on the Origins of the Street Names in the Old Part of North Wonthaggi

The 'suburbs' of North Wonthaggi, Edgartown, Dudley and Hicksborough were not part of the State Model Town project of 1909/1910. They were private subdivisions, outside the boundaries of the proposed State Model Town. They were established by wealthy investors and local landowners to circumvent the part of the Wonthaggi Act, which stipulated that land in the State Town would be leasehold. This was an attempt to avoid the corrupt land speculation as had occurred in other coal fields, such as Korumburra. The Murray/Watt government made it clear from early in 1909 when the State Mine project was being planned that land in the town would, at least initially, remain in State hands. There would be no freehold, only leasehold. Speculators and developers, foremost among them all, Mr W. H. Edgar, MLC, Minister without portfolio in the Murray/Watt government, Collins Street estate agent and auctioneer, bought hundreds of acres outside the boundary of what would become the Borough of Wonthaggi in 1911. They subdivided the land into house blocks and began selling them for quite exorbitant prices for the times.¹ By the beginning of 1910, as the State Coal Mine and Canvas Town were being established, house blocks were being sold in the freehold areas. Sales were well underway in July 1909, shortly after the Coal Mines Regulations Bill had been introduced to Parliament. The incredible extent of the freehold areas, compared to the area reserved for the State town, can be seen in the 1910 map in our archive, an invaluable part of the documents and artefacts of which the Wonthaggi and District Historical Society is the custodian. Demand was high since Wonthaggi, the propaganda assured prospective buyers, would soon become the Newcastle of the south.

In the early years of Wonthaggi's history the boundaries of the 'suburb' of North Wonthaggi were rather ill-defined. However, for most of its history, North Wonthaggi included the area to the north of what is now White Road stretching from James Street to what is now Korumburra Road. The commercial, cultural and social centre of this suburb was in Parkes Street and Kingston Road, which were in the township of Edgartown, named after W.H. Edgar, the founder. In Edgartown, North Wonthaggi had had its own shopping centre with a substantial general store with post and telegraph office, butchers, bakers, dairies, an Anglican Church, a community hall where church services were also held and later tennis courts.

¹ Among the first blocks sold at auction in Collins Street in August 1909, the price ranged from £40 to £70, which, according to the Measuring Worth website for measuring relative worth over time, corresponds to circa \$38,000 and \$66,000, in today's income value. The buyers were basically buying blocks of land with four boundary pegs. Provision of any services was not included in the price.

The North Wonthaggi Progress Association was very active in fighting for electricity and water to be supplied to the area. By the end of 1912 most residents of the Borough of Wonthaggi had both water and electricity connections. Water was only connected to North Wonthaggi from 1928 on, and electricity beginning in 1930. The Shire of Phillip Island and Woolamai and then the Shire of Bass were often the target of the North Wonthaggi community, which felt neglected as far as the building and maintenance of roads and other infrastructure were concerned.

Originally, Hicksborough was a small settlement along what is now called the Lower Powlett Road and Dudley was a settlement in the area where the Holden and Toyota garages and saleyards are now situated. Hicksborough and Dudley together had a state school, a general store and post office, churches, stores and a wine café. Beginning in 1928, the seams of coal under Hicksborough and Dudley began to be mined. For safety reasons, due to the real possibility of subsidence, the State Coal Mine decided that the houses and shops in Dudley and Hicksborough be relocated to the White Road area in the Borough of Wonthaggi, most of which was still crown land, and that the owners be compensated for the relocation. The primary school was relocated to where the Adult Education Centre and the TAFE are now situated and the houses and hall along White Road. The Hicksborough General Store and Post Office relocated to where the Hicksborough Store and Café still stands. The Methodist Church was relocated to where the Salvation Army is now situated. In time this part of North Wonthaggi became known as Hicksborough. Officially, the whole area north of White Road, including Hicksborough, was considered to be North Wonthaggi. In 1949, the Victorian Municipal Registry entry concerning North Wonthaggi (including the Hicksborough area) stated that as well as stores, school, post office and churches Wonthaggi North had ice, fibrous plaster and concrete brick and tile factories. About 1,000 people lived in North Wonthaggi.

There was a definite community spirit in 'Old' North Wonthaggi, born out of its different history, its long struggle to obtain reticulated electricity and water, street lighting, decent roads and lanes, and the fact that there was a sort of natural barrier of tea-tree bushland, swamp and vacant land between the two communities. For over half a century many North Wonthaggians very rarely ventured further south than Graham Street, perhaps Baillieu Street, and vice versa. Both communities made use of the Recreation Reserve, the railway station, the theatres, clubs and hotels, doctors and pharmacies and other essential services, But they returned home to their part of Wonthaggi, where they belonged, where they had their basic social and family connections. Attempts to join North Wonthaggi to the Borough of Wonthaggi were made from the 1920s on but succeeded only in 1977.

I am not aware of any documents which explain the origins of the names of the roads and streets in the old part of the North Wonthaggi area. There is nobody alive who remembers the origins of the names for me to consult. I grew up in North Wonthaggi, knew all the streets very well. For a small fee we

could graze our cows on the nature strips and in the many empty blocks near our home in White Road. It was my job to go and find them every afternoon and bring them back for milking. I got to know a lot of the old timers who lived there. With some I stopped to chat and swap comics. Perhaps they knew, but it would never have entered my mind to ask, which I now regret. For the last twenty years, ever since I have been researching Wonthaggi's history, I have often wondered who or what these familiar streets were named after and I have dedicated much time trying to find out. Unable to find any direct documentary evidence, I have resorted to hypothesising on what the names suggest to me and then searching for what lawyers call circumstantial evidence to support my conclusions. The cluster of names, some of which I recognized as important historical figures, pointed me in the direction my search for evidence should take. The conclusions I have drawn are the result of research on the Internet, especially on the NLA Trove website, much reflection and deliberation.

The names of the streets of 'Old North Wonthaggi' are in what I have established to be two distinct clusters, which I have named, the 'War Heroes Cluster' and the 'Australian Nationalists Cluster'. The remaining two were more difficult to define. For the sake of this paper I have called them the 'Transition into Edgartown Cluster', and the 'Other Side of Wentworth Road Cluster'.

War Heroes Cluster

Gordon Street : This street was most likely named after Charles George Gordon (1833-1885), the British general who became famous for his exploits in the Crimean War (1853-1856) and later for his service in China, which earned him the nickname 'Chinese Gordon'. He became Governor General of the Sudan, where he asserted his authority over the indigenous population and earned the nickname of 'Gordon of Khartoum'. He was killed defending the British Empire.²

Nelson Street : Almost certainly named after Admiral Horatio Lord Nelson (1758-1805), the famous admiral of the Napoleonic wars, who was victorious in the Battle of Trafalgar. He is still celebrated as the greatest sea warrior in British history.

Griffiths Street : It is unlikely that the street was named after the Mr A Griffiths, the first chemist and manager of the Wonthaggi Miners Friendly Societies' Dispensary, who served the institution for many years, since the Dispensary was only established in 1922. In keeping with the rest of the subdivision, the street was most probably named after Lieutenant General Charles Griffiths (1763-1829), the distinguished British soldier who served

² The western end of what is now Gordon Street, from Fuller Road to James Street, Edith Dowson remembers, was once called Edison Street, most probably named after the great American inventor and entrepreneur Thomas Edison (1847-1931). Despite being hearing impaired, the young Edison was one of the telegraph operators who played an important part in the Union campaigns during the American Civil War.

with distinction in India, in the French Revolutionary Wars and then in the Napoleonic wars.

Wallace Street : Almost certainly named after Sir William Wallace (1270-1305), the Scottish warrior who became one of the main leaders during the First Scottish War of Independence. The legendary hero of many successful battles was eventually captured by the British and suffered a horrible, humiliating death. Spurred on by Wallace's example and martyrdom, the Scots, eventually gained their independence. The movie 'Braveheart' is loosely based on his life. The street may have been originally named Abbott Street, after John Abbot, who sold the land to be subdivided and then bought house blocks there. I have found no evidence as to when the name was changed, but by the 1920s Abbot Street had become Wallace Street.

Vicars Avenue: Almost certainly named after Captain Hedley Shafto Johnstone Vicars (1826-1855), the British army officer and evangelical, who distinguished himself with his bravery and dedication to duty during the Crimean War, especially at the Siege of Sebastopol. He was killed in Crimea. Lord Raglan made a special mention of his gallantry in his despatches. Captain Vicars was immortalised in a book written by Catherine Marsh 'The Memorials of Captain Hedley Vicars, Christian Soldier', published first in 1863. The book was widely read, translated into French, Italian and English and is still available.

Fuller Road: Possibly named after John Wallace Fuller (1827-1891), a Major General in the American Civil War 1861-1865. He fought in many of the critical battles of the war, including the campaigns in South and North Carolina.

Morey Street: Many Moreys served in the American Civil War, on both sides. The most probable candidate for the honour of having a street named after him is, in my opinion, Captain Charles Carrol Morey (1840 – 1865), who was killed in the final days of the war. He was among the first volunteers to answer President Lincoln's call. His many letters and photographs of fellow soldiers document many of the important battles of the war from the ordinary soldier's perspective. It might also have been named after Frank Morey (1840-1890), who served from 1861 until 1865, reaching the rank of Colonel. After the war he served in the state legislature of Louisiana, where he was prominent in the struggle to give black people effective civic rights. He later served in the United States House of Representatives.

James Street: Although not consistent with the rest of this cluster in that this street was not named after a war hero, it is consistent with the two previously named streets in that the name James is part of the story of the American Civil War. The Army of the James was an independent Union Command during the American Civil War (1861-1865). It was established in 1864 and made up of units from the Department of Virginia and North

Carolina. It served along the James River during the final operations of the war. It had quite a large number of African Americans in its ranks.

White Road: Originally called Government Road, it was the boundary between the Borough of Wonthaggi on the southern side and the Shire of Phillip Island and Woolamai (1929 Shire of Bass) on the other side. The first mention of White Road on the Trove newspapers website was in 1928. In keeping with the other streets in this part of the town, after much research, I have concluded that the road may have been named after Sir Cyril Brudenell White, 1876-1940, the highly decorated Australian soldier, who fought in both the Boer War and World War 1. Brudenell White is credited with being the mastermind behind 'The Silent Ruse', the successful evacuation of Gallipoli. He then served with distinction on the Western Front. After the war General Brudenell White was Chief of the General Staff from 1920 until 1923. After his retirement from the army he became Chairman of the newly constituted Commonwealth Public Service and supervised the transfer of government offices from Melbourne to Canberra. In 1928, Brudenell White retired to his property in Western Victoria. He was recalled to service in 1939, but he was tragically killed when his plane crashed near Canberra in 1940.

After four years away from Parliament, Mr Edgar was elected member for East Yarra (MLC) in 1917 and served until 1948. He was Chairman of Committee from 1922 until 1943. Mr Edgar and Mr Brudenell White knew each other and moved in the same church circles. They were both members of the Sunday Observance Council and were speakers together at public meetings. Mr Edgar was a councillor in the Shire of Phillip Island and Woolamai from 1919-1925. His son Bingley Haslam Edgar served as a councillor of the same shire in 1927 and 1928. Bingley was a Sergeant in the transports corps in the AIF in World War 1. His WW1 records show that as well as his address in Elwood he also had an address in Cowes. It seems to me inconceivable that Mr Edgar and his son would not have been in some way involved in the process to split the Shire of Woolamai into the Shire of Phillip Island and the Shire of Bass, which became law in January 1929. The splitting of the shire would have entailed the determining of boundaries and the opportunity to name and rename roads. I can imagine that both Mr Edgar and his son would have lobbied hard to have the road that leads to Wonthaggi named in honour of their friend and fellow Christian, General Sir Cyril Brudenell White, who has often been called 'the forgotten hero of Gallipoli'.

(To be continued)

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