

Balcombe Family
and
“The Briars” Park,
Mt Martha,
Victoria

A fascinating story —
England,
St Helena,
Napoleon,
Australia in the 1800's

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The “Briars Park”, Mt Martha, one of the earliest farms in the Mornington Peninsula area, was settled by Alexander Balcombe in 1846 and farmed by Balcombe descendants until 1976. The then owners, great-great grandsons, the a’Beckett brothers, donated the Balcombe Homestead with surrounding garden to the National Trust and Shire in memory of their mother, and sold the farm to the Shire. The Mornington Peninsula Shire has developed this farm area as a Park to be enjoyed by the community.

The Balcombe Homestead houses part of the unique Napoleonic Collection, based on personal memorabilia given by Napoleon to the Balcombe family during his exile to St Helena. It was greatly enhanced by Balcombe descendant Dame Mabel Brookes, and includes a copy of Napoleon’s death mask. Many visitors are confused by this collection, commenting that they didn’t know Napoleon had come to Australia - he didn’t, of course, but his presence has, through his friendship with the Balcombe family when he lived with them for a time at the original “Briars” on St Helena when exiled there in 1815. The overall story of the Balcombe family is even more fascinating.

The Balcombe Family.

Alexander Beatson Balcombe was born on St Helena, the youngest of six children of William Balcombe and wife, Jane. William had married widow, Jane (nee Green) Byng in London in 1799; daughter Jane was born in London, in 1800, and Elizabeth Lucia (Betsy) in 1802. Four more children were born on St Helena: Mary, 1806, died 1807 during a measles epidemic; William, 1808; Thomas Tyrwhitt, 1810 (named after patron Sir Thomas Tyrwhitt); and Alexander Beatson, 1811 (named after a Governor of St Helena).

William Balcombe Senior, according to family legends handed down through the generations, and as written in Dame Mabel's books, was rumoured to be an illegitimate son of the then Prince of Wales, later George IV. This rumour followed the family everywhere and apparently was never discounted — it certainly gave William “prestige”. However recent research shows William's baptism recorded on 28 Dec. 1777 at Rottingdean, near Brighton, England, with parents Stephen Balcombe and Mary Vandyke. The Prince was then only 14 or 15 years old and Windsor Archives only list two recognised illegitimate sons, neither a Balcombe.

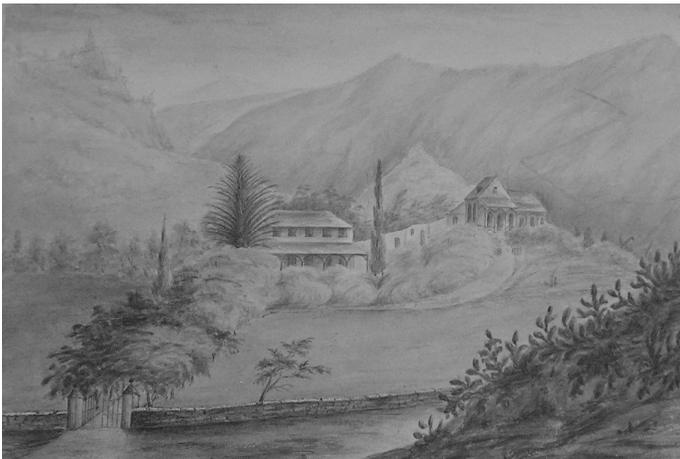


The more likely story, noted also by Dame Mabel, is a reference that Governor Lowe, in a letter, referred to Sir Thomas Tyrwhitt as a protector and friend of William following William's father being drowned off Brighton when his boat was run down by the Prince of Wales' yacht. Sir Thomas was Private Secretary to the Prince for many years and this could account for him becoming a patron for the young son, William. Sir Thomas became an MP for the Plymouth area and Usher of the Black Rod.

William Balcombe

Research shows that William's mother remarried in Dec. 1788, so his father must have died when William was only about 10 years old and brother, Stephen, 8. Patronage at this young age could account for the rumour of illegitimate sons. William's mother in her will in 1818 left her estate to her son, "William in St Helena."

William was said to be a rather florid, jovial man, and a Naval Captain who defied a Superior Office over the flogging of a sailor, but was spared being cashiered through the intervention of the Prince Regent. However recent information from East India Co (EIC) records shows his initial career was only for a short time with the Navy as a young midshipman, and then an officer with the EIC Maritime Service on the trade route from England to Bengal, calling in at various ports. This included St Helena, then operated by the EIC under Charter. William rose to 2nd Mate in the EIC Maritime but was dismissed for insubordination in Jan 1804. He then went to St Helena around 1805 as a trader and his wife and daughters followed. They lived in the hills above the Capital, Jamestown, in "The Briars" homestead which had a lovely garden, including Briar roses, and a separate Pavilion used for distinguished visitors. William was appointed Superintendent of Public Sales for the East India Co. in 1807.



Original watercolour by Betsy Balcombe of 'The Briars', St Helena c. 1816

Balcombe connection with Napoleon.



Following Napoleon's defeat by Wellington at Waterloo in 1815, the British Government refused his request for exile in England and decided to exile him to the remote island of St Helena. Wellington, who had stayed at The Briars Pavilion in the past, considered that this would be a "pleasant gaol without walls". St Helena only received three days notice of the news of Waterloo and the exile before Napoleon, and entourage of some 30 Generals and staff, arrived on 16 October 1815. The Governor was not prepared to give up his residence, "Plantation House", so "Longwood," a Vice-Governor's summer residence on a remote, windy, high plain, reputedly unbearable in winter, was

selected. Napoleon was taken there on the 17th and was horrified as it was in very poor condition, having been used for some time as a stable, and over run with rats - the officials agreed it would need significant renovation. When returning to Jamestown, Napoleon saw the pleasant "Briars" with family sitting on the lawns, and the party stopped there. Napoleon asked if he could stay in the Pavilion until "Longwood" was made ready and Mr Balcombe readily agreed.

Napoleon, with some staff, lived there from 17th October to the 10th December, 1815. He occupied the room William had built for a ball room, with a marquee pitched on a small lawn in front and connected with the house by a covered way. It was divided into two compartments, the inner one forming Napoleon's bedroom, and an external compartment with a small campaign tent bed with green silk hangings, on which General Gourgaud slept.

(Recent photograph of the Pavilion at 'The Briars', St Helena)



During the time Napoleon was living with the Balcombe family, he was able to relax from being the Emperor for the first and only time. The Balcombes treated him as one of the family, and he took part in games with the children and enjoyed a boisterous relationship with the precocious 13-year-old daughter, Betsy, who was uninhibited with him and spoke French. Napoleon paid Betsy much attention, which some have interpreted as a “love affair” and he obviously remained the key figure in Betsy’s subsequent life. In 1844 Betsy, as Mrs Abell, in need of funds, published her *Recollections of Napoleon*, with a 2nd Edition in 1845.

William was appointed Purveyor for supplies to “Longwood”, and he and the family, especially Betsy, continued to have regular contact with Napoleon. The friendly association ended abruptly in March 1818. William was alerted by his patron, Sir Thomas Tyrwhitt, that he could be charged by the over-zealous Governor Lowe on suspicion of aiding Napoleon with correspondence and negotiating money bills (which apparently he had been doing). He applied for six months leave on the grounds of Mrs Balcombe’s illness — apparently she suffered from hepatitis — and the family returned to Devon in England. Although never charged with any offence, the Colonial Secretary and Governor Lowe would not allow William to return to St Helena and he lost his Trading business with large financial loss. He remained in England with a dwindling income, acute gout and fear of punishment until there was reconciliation with Governor Lowe in 1823.

While in Devon, Betsy, who had been quite a centre of attention with the young officers on St Helena, had grown into an attractive, lively young woman, and was apparently swept off her feet when aged 20 by a handsome man-about-town, Edward Abell. They were married in May, 1822 at Exminster, Devon (not May, 1821 in London as has been stated

in publications). Unfortunately Edward turned out to be a scoundrel who had hoped to profit from the marriage and he abandoned Betsy soon after their daughter, Bessie (Jane Elizabeth Balcombe Abell) was born.

Mrs Abell
(*Betsy Balcombe*)



Off to NSW.

Following William's reconciliation with Sir Hudson Lowe, he was appointed the first Colonial Treasurer of New South Wales in recompense for his financial losses, and with his family, including Betsy and baby Bessie, arrived in Sydney in April, 1824. (Elder daughter Jane died on the five-month voyage). The family settled into a large residence in O'Connell St, Sydney with six allocated servants at the residence, including a coachman and footman (and later 22 more when William acquired properties). They were quickly involved in society and activities in Sydney. William was elected a JP and to positions on many organisations such as the Turf Club, and Treasurer for the Trustees of the Church and School Lands. Betsy, very lively and precocious, was well known as "the beautiful Mrs Abell" and was appointed to a Committee under the Governor's wife which arranged schooling for girl orphans, as young as 7 years, to train as servants.

William, as with other Government officials, obtained land grants in NSW of 2560 acres in Bungonia, south of Goulburn, and purchased 4000 acres by the Molonglo River south of Bungendore near present day Queanbeyan. Both properties were managed by his young son, William, with assigned labourers (mostly ex convicts). The 1828 census lists 500 cattle and 900 sheep plus horses on the properties. Son William was then only 20 years old.

William Snr. had been sent to Sydney with no clear instructions on how he was to operate as Treasurer, and had to take over the many and

divided controls for revenue, fees etc and payments. He had no office, operating from home, and often kept the Treasury monies in his bedroom. Not surprisingly he had problems as Treasurer, and was also rather loose in arranging loans for friends and himself. He was admonished when he nearly lost Treasury monies when the Bank of NSW got into financial difficulties.

Death of William, 1829, & consequences.

Unfortunately William died prematurely at Sydney in March 1829, age 51 years, after a long illness with gout and finally dysentery, too soon to consolidate his properties and finances. The funeral notice in the *Sydney Gazette* included the comment: *“The character of Mr Balcombe in this Colony was sufficiently known. Perhaps no gentleman, holding a public situation, has ever kept clear of parties and politics and there are few, we feel assured, whose memory will be more generally respected.”*

William left his affairs in disorder and the family without means of support. A downturn in the market of timber and wool to England, as well as a severe drought in NSW, severely reduced land and stock values. This had left many land holders who had overcommitted in the good times, including William, with problems in meeting annual payments on their properties and loans. Creditors took most of the livestock, and Widow Jane had to sell the properties to try and meet the debts.

Mrs Balcombe, in ill health and with no income, petitioned the Governor for a pension and he initially awarded an interim small pension while recommending a permanent pension to the Colonial Secretary but, after the usual six months or so each way for



correspondence, word came that this was refused and the interim pension ceased. Not to be outdone, Jane sailed to London in 1831, with Betsy and her young daughter, Bessie, to directly petition the Colonial Secretary, referring to the great losses and financial ruin William suffered because he was prohibited from returning to St Helena. While recognising the losses, the Colonial Office only awarded money grants to cover their passages to England and back to Sydney, but included a recommendation to the NSW Governor to consider government posts for the three young sons. The Governor advised this was not practicable as son William was content to be on the land, Alexander had been dismissed from the Commissariat for negligence, but Thomas, under consideration to be dismissed by the Surveyor General, would be retained as a Survey draftsman.

While they were in London in 1832, Betsy had contact with Joseph Bonaparte, recently arrived there after exile in 1816 to America. Bessie remembered sitting on Joseph's knee as a young girl while he and Betsy reminisced about Napoleon, and Joseph giving Betsy a cameo ring, said to be from Egypt, from his finger.

On their return voyage to Sydney in 1833, 17-year-old Edward Eyre was a fellow first-class passenger and much enamoured of Betsy, then about 31. His autobiography includes many references to her, including a note that "*Mrs Abell was in the prime of life, regular and pretty in features, commanding in form a good figure - stylish in her dress and having a strange mixture of high polish and dash in her manner which was very captivating. She had beautiful hair, a rich nut brown shot with gold in unusual fashion and of an extraordinary length.*" Edward, of course, went on to become a famous explorer in Australia. Bessie was about 10 years old.

Back in NSW Mrs Balcombe and Betsy still had financial problems, and William's farm was far from Sydney and basic, so they sailed back to England in 1834, leaving the three sons in NSW. It is thought Mrs Balcombe, then in her 60s and in ill health for years, went to a sister in Yorkshire, and died before civil registration of deaths started in 1837. Betsy supported herself and her daughter in London by giving music

lessons and publishing her *Recollections of Napoleon*. They had contact with some of Napoleon's entourage from St Helena who wanted to reminisce about their Emperor.

Prince Louis Napoleon, Pretender to the Napoleonic throne (the son of Napoleon's brother, Louis, and Josephine's daughter, Hortense) was then exiled in London after failed attempts to overthrow the Bourbons. He was a regular visitor to Betsy's to talk about his famous uncle, hoping to be considered similar in features, but Betsy, ever frank, told him "No". Betsy kept contact with Louis after he returned to Paris in 1848 when he was elected President of the 2nd Republic following the revolution of 1848, and then declared himself as Emperor Napoleon III in 1852. Strangely, when he asked Betsy what he could do for her, she requested a land grant in the developing French Colony of Algeria, which he granted — but it was probably never taken up.

Betsy's daughter, Bessie (Jane), married well in 1848 to a man from a distinguished family, Charles Johnstone, and they lived in London. Unfortunately Charles died in 1868 and, with no children, his estates passed to his brother. The brother was not prepared to help Jane and she was left in poor circumstances. Betsy and Jane lived together in difficult circumstances, as they both noted in letters to Alexander and his wife, Emma. Betsy became increasingly despondent after her years of preoccupation with Napoleon, and died aged 69 on 29 June, 1871.

Jane (Bessie) published a 3rd edition of her mother's *Recollections* in 1873 to gain finances. It included a drawing of the cameo ring and an interesting Appendix with reminiscences of her mother and Prince Louis, Napoleon III, including his letter of condolence to Jane on being informed of Betsy's death. (Louis was then in exile in England following the disastrous war against Prussia and his defeat in 1870.) Jane must have had access to High Society as she was able to present her brother Alexander's youngest daughter, Alice (later Dame Mabel's mother) to the Court of Queen Victoria in 1882. Alexander asked Jane to come and live with them at "The Briars", Mt Martha, but by that stage she felt she could not make the major trip due to her age and ill health. She died in 1892, aged 70, in London in very poor circumstances.

Balcombe Sons in Australia.

After they initially attended Sydney Grammar School, William took over managing the properties, and Alexander became a clerk in the Commissariat Department, until dismissed in April 1831. Thomas worked for the Australian Agricultural Company at Port Stephens until severely injuring his head in a fall from a horse. He was then a draftsman with the Surveyor General's Department; working with Robert Hoddle on surveys in County Argyle NSW before Hoddle went to Melbourne.

William, only 21 when his father died, was given a 1,250 acre land grant by Governor Darling in compensation when the properties he had been managing for his father had to be sold. The grant was adjacent to his father's land by the Molonglo River and he called it the "Briars" after their St Helena home. It is still known as "Briars" today. He farmed it until the 1840s and is mentioned in "*The Australians, 1838*" under 'Agricultural Work.' He sold the property in 1842 to a neighbour, and then lived at Braidwood for a time, where he was noted as a good horseman, before going to the Turon goldfields in 1851 with his brother, Thomas. Unfortunately he caught a fever in early 1852 and died. Thomas made a poignant sketch of the graves of his brother and two others - just heaps of stones by a tree and not registered.



Thomas' sketch of William's grave

Thomas had always shown skill as an artist – Interestingly, Betsy, in a letter to Emma, asked if any of her children took after their ancestor, the great Sir Anthony Van Dyke, and showed a talent for drawing. By 1837 Thomas had won repute as a spirited painter of animals - some of his work is at the Mitchell Library - and was praised for his pictures, and



sculptures in the Aboriginal Exhibition in 1848 (An Aboriginal sculpture is on show in “The Briars” Homestead at Mt Martha.). He married Lydia Stuckey in June 1840 and they had three children. However he suffered from fits of mental aberration from his head injuries and committed suicide in October 1861 at his home, “Napoleon Cottage”, Woolahra, Sydney. He was referred to as an “*artist of considerable repute and a gentleman in the most refined sense of the word.*” His son, William Alexander Balcombe, later called his home in Wahroonga, Sydney “The Briars”, based on the St Helena home, and it still exists.

(Sculpture in wax and natural materials by T.T. Balcombe.)

Alexander lived with William at “The Briars” farm, Molonglo, NSW for some time. He went to Port Phillip in 1839, and liking the country, returned to Molonglo to make preparations for permanent settlement. In August 1841 he married Emma Reid, 17-year-old daughter of the late Dr David Reid, a distinguished Naval Surgeon, of “Inverary Park” estate, Bungonia, south of Goulburn, NSW (“Inverary Park” homestead and property still exist in the Broadhead family who acquired the property from the Reids about 1853). Alexander bought livestock and took his wife to Port Phillip in 1842.



*Emma Reid &
Alexander Balcombe*

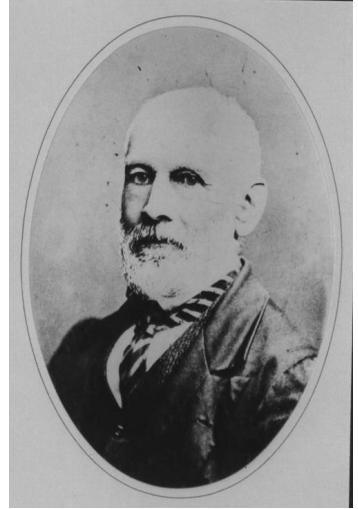
They stayed for some time at Merri Creek, then in 1846 settled at Schnapper Point, now Mornington. They took over the “Tichingorouk” run that Captain Reid had established in 1840, changing the name to “The Briars.” It was Crown land for which he had a pastoral licence. The property extended from the present Mornington-Moorooduc freeway to Mount Martha and Port Phillip, a total of 6000 acres. This was reduced by the Government for other development when the system of leases expired. In 1854 Alexander acquired freehold some 1000 acres. (Today the creek is named Balcombe Creek.)



(“The Briars”, Mt Martha)

Alexander also bought land at Moorabbin for staging paddocks when taking his stock to Melbourne; and the area and proposed Railway station were originally named ‘Balcombe’, but later named Mentone, although Balcombe Road still stands. The Balcombes also owned a house in East Melbourne.

Alexander and Emma had four sons, two dying young, and five daughters. In the 1850s Alexander joined the search for gold, leaving Emma to cope with the children and property and, at one stage, escaped convicts, with the only 'neighbours' Georgiana and Andrew McCrae on Arthurs Seat. On his return from the diggings, somewhat disillusioned, Alexander settled down to pastoral pursuits and the life of a country squire. He was appointed a Magistrate in 1855, the first Chairman of the Mount Eliza Road Board formed in 1860, and became a Member of the Melbourne Club. He died aged 66 on 21 Sept 1877 at his home, 'Eastcourt', in East Melbourne.



Alexander Balcombe

"The Briars", Mt Martha, passed down through Alexander's wife, Emma. Their youngest daughter, Alice and husband Harry Emmerton, parents of Dame Mabel Brookes, leased the property in 1891 for 15 years. After Emma died in June 1907, the land was transferred to their eldest daughter, Jane Emma, married to James Murphy, and continued with her Trustees after she died in 1924.

In 1954 the land was transferred to Jane Emma's three married grand daughters, Mary Noel Moore, Elizabeth Clare a'Beckett and Anne Lilius Armit. In 1957 Mary and Elizabeth bought out Anne Armit's share, and Elizabeth a'Beckett retained the northern Lot, which included "The Briars" Homestead - and had to fight proposed acquisitions, first for a quarry and then a sewage treatment works. Owen and Mary Moore farmed the southern half to Range Rd which they named "Chechingurk" and lived there until about 1972 when they sold the property.

In 1976, the 8-hectare Homestead and garden site was gifted by Elizabeth a'Beckett's three sons, Richard, Tony and Michael, jointly to the National Trust and the Shire, in memory of their mother, and the

northern broad acres section of 225 hectares was sold to the Shire. The Mornington Peninsula Shire manages the “Briars Park” property as a public Park with a Wildlife Reserve section with native animals, and a Wetlands and bird viewing section. Part of the property is leased for cattle grazing. There is also a rose garden, grape vines, a Shire Nursery, sheds and old machinery, and a restaurant named “Josephine’s”.

“Coradgery” holding property, near Parkes, NSW.

Alexander Balcombe’s sons, Herbert Henty Balcombe and Alexander Stephen Balcombe purchased the property in 1882 and built their 2 houses along the lines of the original “Briars” home in St Helena. Herbert Henty’s son, Alexander Mornington Balcombe, took over “Coradgery”, then one of the largest holdings in the Parkes District. The property was sold to the Orr family from Nth Ireland in 1920, and is still owned by descendants of that family.

“The Dame Mabel Brookes Family Records of Napoleon”.

Dame Mabel Balcombe Brookes expanded the memorabilia Napoleon had given the family on St Helena to more than 300 items. On her death in 1975, she bequeathed her Collection to the National Gallery of Victoria, who decided it best to loan it to the National Trust for showing in The Briars Homestead. While most of the books, letters and papers, which are fragile, are held in protective store in the Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery, some 60 interesting items are displayed in the Homestead. These include a copy of the death mask made of Napoleon when he died in 1821 on St Helena; relics of Napoleon’s hair, and willows from his original grave on St Helena. (His body was later exhumed and returned to Paris and placed in a magnificent tomb in Les Invalides.)



The items include furniture and crockery of Napoleon's and of the Balcombe's from "The Briars", St Helena; the guitar Napoleon gave to Betsy; medals, plaques and busts, paintings and etchings of Napoleon and St Helena; lampoons from the English papers denigrating Napoleon as a monster; and books and letters.



*L. Bronze bust
on a marble
base.*



*R. Framed
miniature on
porcelain
by Gerard*



Lock of Napoleon's hair

"Recollections of Napoleon" by Mrs Abell



The French Government presented Dame Mabel with the Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur in appreciation of her purchasing "The Briars" on St Helena and presenting the title to the French Government at Malmaison in 1959, and this is also on show. The French Government were given "Longwood" by the British Government, and maintain a permanent Consul (Caretaker) there.



Dame Mabel Brookes presents the title deeds of the original Balcombe property on St Helena to Monsieur Jacques Vimont at Malmaison in 1959.



Legion of Honour Award

References

- Dame Mabel Brookes: *Crowded Galleries* (Melb. 1956); *St Helena Story* (Melb. 1960); and *Memoirs*, Macmillan, 1974.

- Mrs Abell: *Recollections of the Emperor Napoleon during the first three years of his captivity on the Island of St Helena: Including the time of his residence at her father's house, "The Briars"*, 1st Edition 1844; 2nd Edition 1845 with Appendix; 3rd Edition, 1873, revised and added to by her daughter, Mrs Charles Johnstone.

- Research papers and reports held at "The Briars".

Acknowledgements: Richard & Sue a'Beckett, Caroline Gaden, Shirley Joy, Shirley and Keith Murley, Dr. Anne Whitehead.

Illustrations used in this booklet are either from displays in the Briars Homestead or are from books and images that are part of the Dame Mabel Brookes Collection in storage at the Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery.



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2006