

FROM WESTCOTE TO NEW ZEALAND IN THE 1870S

by Angela Dix (archivist) and Pamela Rouse (secretary) of Westcote Local History Society

Soon after the formation of the Westcote Local History Society in 1987, the Rector made the contents of the parish chest available for inspection. Amongst other interesting documents, an exercise book was found containing notes taken from the churchwardens' and overseers' accounts. One sentence read 'In 1873 31 people left Westcote for New Zealand, two of C.T.'s brothers in the party'. To lose that many people from a small village of approximately 250 must have left quite a void. Unfortunately the names of the emigrants were not given. It wasn't until 1992, inspired by a talk on New Zealand emigration in the 1870s, that it was decided to start a search to try to identify those who had left and subsequently trace their descendants in New Zealand.

The little village of Westcote lies on the borders of Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire. There was considerable unrest among the agricultural workers in the 1870s. There had been a rash of land enclosures in the 1850s, especially in the Wychwood Forest area. Depressed farming in the 1870s brought great hardship, especially as families were often very large. The 1870s

saw the establishment of the Agricultural Workers' Union by Joseph Arch. In 1873, the New Zealand government offered free passages. When the really harsh times came, the Union encouraged emigration. The Oxfordshire agent, who organised the emigrations, was R C Carter. He held meetings in the Wychwoods. One, at Milton, in November 1873, attracted 500 to 600 people.¹ Westcote is very near to the Wychwoods and the enthusiasm would no doubt have spread from there.

The Emigrants

As the local history society's archivist, I was faced with a considerable challenge in my search. The only available clue was the initials C.T. in the parish notebook. We have in our archives copies of the census returns, 1841-91. So I looked at the 1871 and 1881 censuses and made a list of any families who were missing from the 1881 return but had been there in 1871. I then checked the burial registers and deleted any who had died during that time. This left me with

five possible families - Tombs, Silman, Bartlett, Calcutt and Simmonds.

By now it was fairly obvious that C.T. stood for Charles Tombs. My next move was to ring the New Zealand Embassy to see if they held copies of the shipping lists of emigrants in the 1870s. Unfortunately, the records do not begin until a much later date. So I then decided to



Eliza Tombs, baptised in 1861

write to the New Zealand Society of Genealogists in Auckland, explaining what I was doing and asking if they held details of immigrants. They replied they didn't hold the shipping records and suggested I write to Hawkes Bay Library and the National Archives in Wellington.

Help from New Zealand

The National Archives in Wellington were very helpful, but couldn't make a search without the name of the ship. The Hawkes Bay Library replied that if I could supply Christian names for the surnames I'd sent they might be able to trace them in the Post Office Directory. So full names were promptly despatched. I then received photocopies of the relevant pages from the Post Office directory which showed a Job Tombs living at Sefton, Canterbury in 1878. I then learned that a ship called the *Mongol* had sailed for New Zealand in December 1873. So I contacted the Hawkes Bay Library again asking if

they could possibly check the passenger list for Tombs. They couldn't help, but suggested I write to the Canterbury Public Library at Christchurch. They were unable to supply me with passenger lists, but they did send me copies of church register transcript information relating to the name Tombs. Amongst these I found a Charles Tombs, son of Job, baptised in 1875. The Canterbury Library also gave me the name of a genealogical agent, Val Becker, whom they thought might be able to help.

Val Becker consulted the shipping lists and sent me the names of people who had emigrated from Gloucestershire in 1873. Amongst them were Job and Eliza Tombs and their five children who sailed from Plymouth on the *Mongol* on 23 December 1873. William and Martha Tombs and their nine children sailed from Plymouth on the *Scimitar* on 26 December 1873. On the same ship were the Calcutt family - John and Sarah and their six children. That made a total of 26 people out of the 31 who had left Westcote. At a later date I discovered that James and Charles Tombs, sons of William and Job's elder brother, Thomas, and three members of the Simmonds family, had sailed from Bristol on the *Ocean Mail* on 17 August 1874. So the 31 were now accounted for.

Val Becker had also sent me newspaper cuttings from local papers about the arrival of the *Mongol*, which had caused quite a stir locally, as several passengers had been infected with scarlet fever and other illnesses.

'The signal of a steamer to the northward yesterday morning was immediately followed by the appearance of the vessel herself between the Heads, where she loomed up a big barque rigged boat, showing a great deal of side above water. She was at once pronounced a stranger by the shipping authorities of the port, and then a very general conclusion that she would be no other than the expected Mongol was arrived at, and proved to be correct. And a fine stately vessel she looked as she steamed rapidly though the Cross Channel, and then, just as the folks were beginning to speculate on the probability of her coming right up, she eased steam and came to anchor in the Quarantine Ground. This was regarded as an ominous proceeding ...

As soon as she was moored, Captain Thomson, the health officer, together with Dr O'Donoghue and Mr Monson, of the Customs

Department, proceeded down to her in the steamer Golden Age and were met by the unwelcome intelligence of sickness on board in the form of scarlet fever, measles and bronchitis. This, of course, left but one course to be pursued, viz., to quarantine the steamer, and communicate with the Board of Health at Dunedin. Accordingly instructions to hoist the yellow jack at the main were given, and the Golden Age returned to port.²

More life in the Tombs!

The next challenge was to find some of the descendants of these people. As there were so many from the Tombs family I decided to start with them and placed an advertisement in the Family Tree Magazine, which has world-wide coverage, in October 1992. Early in 1993 I received a reply from Ray Fransden who lives at Blenheim on the South Island. He wrote saying his maternal grandmother was Eliza Tombs and wondered if there was any connection. Eliza Tombs was a daughter of William and Martha Tombs, baptised in Westcote on 27 January 1861. I gathered together information and sent it off to Blenheim. He sorted out details of his family history which he sent over, together with copies of numerous family photos, including some of William and Martha Tombs and their children.



William and Martha Tombs

In December 1994, I had a letter from a lady who lives in Australia who was researching the name Tombs and had found the addresses of two ladies in New Zealand whose interest was Tombs, Westcote, in the Genealogical Research Directory. Barbara Pullar lived at North Otago and Heather Adams at Invercargill. I wrote to them both and both replied. Barbara's line is descended from Mary Anne, eldest daughter of William and Martha, baptised in Westcote on 29 July 1855. Heather's line is descended from Lucy, baptised on 29 June 1863 in Westcote, and one of the daughters of Job and Eliza. Heather also supplied information and copies of photos, including one of four generations of females, starting with Eliza herself.

Visiting New Zealand

The story is now taken up by Pamela Rouse, our secretary, who visited New Zealand with her husband in February 1996, and who decided to contact some of the descendants and try to find out more information. Ray Fransden was particularly welcoming when he was approached and offered to meet them off the ferry at Picton when they came over from North Island and have them to stay in Blenheim.

Before we left North Island we spent some time in Wellington and visited the National Library where we read all the details of the arrival of the *Mongol* from the *Otago Daily Times* of 14 February 1874. We also visited the National Archives and perused the shipping lists. We noted that William and Martha's baby daughter, Eunice, died on the voyage out, and that Job and Elizabeth's baby son was one of the casualties on the *Mongol*. Whilst in Wellington, through a university friend, we also met with Dr Charlotte McDonald, who has a special interest in women immigrants to New Zealand in the nineteenth century and has published work on the subject. We learned quite a lot about the sort of conditions which would have met the incomers and the hardships they had to overcome. For example, we knew from Ray Fransden that Martha Tombs was the first midwife in Ravensbourne, Dunedin, and discovered what a vital part she would have played in the community.³

On our arrival in South Island we were met by a very warm welcome from Ray Fransden and his wife. On our first evening we were introduced to Edgar and Betty Wratt - descendants of Charles Tombs, son of Thomas. Edgar, an old farmer, has kept a very thorough record of family history, comprised of documents, letters, photos and family stories passed

down from father to son. So we were experiencing a real taste of oral history!

Family Details

According to family lore, Thomas Tombs was a shepherd working on a Dr Jay's farm in Nether Westcote. His son, George, was a carpenter and wheelwright working on the same estate. The story goes that the Jay family died out and the jobs folded. George and his brother, Charles, decided to emigrate to Canada. Once there they suffered from eye blight or snow blindness, so they returned home to Westcote. George decided to stay put. Charles decided to go to New Zealand and persuaded brother, James, to go with him. They sailed from Bristol on the wind-jammer, the *Ocean Mail*, accompanied by their neighbours, the Simmonds family. They arrived at Nelson on 8 November 1874, after a fast voyage of 78 days. They then came to Blenheim by sea in the *Port Lyttleton*. Edgar remembers his grandfather Charles well and he took a holiday every 8 November to celebrate his landing in New Zealand.

In 1885, Charles and James bought fifty acres of land in Spring Creek, near Blenheim, from a landowner whose family had bought land and been a signatory at the Treaty of Waitangi, and Edgar possesses a copy of the original deed. In 1883, Charles married Emma Bonnington and the farm was divided in half. James never married. We followed the descent of the family farm to Edgar, through his mother, Amy, a daughter of Charles and Emma. She married Howard Wratt and they later acquired more of Charles' half of the property, although some was also sold out of the family. **Edgar and two of his sons are still farming the remaining land today.** Edgar remembers his grandparents well. His mother looked after them in their old age and he spent many hours with them as a small boy. His grandfather never lost his Gloucestershire accent and used old Gloucestershire words.

Most interesting to those of us in Westcote today is the fact that Charles and James kept in touch with George's family back in Westcote. George married a Sarah Taylor and they had a large family. Their youngest daughter, Edith, corresponded with the New Zealand branch and it was she who told her nephew, Edgar, about the family back home. The Tombs children,



Four Generations - Elizabeth Tombs, Lucy Helen Ford and baby Marjorie Ford, Lucy Walters

George, Charles and James never went to school as they were grown up before the school was founded in 1873. Charles gained his education at a Mrs Young's cottage in their village for a few coppers a week. There he learnt to read and write. When he got to New Zealand he used a Marlborough Express Ready Reckoner to do his arithmetic, which Edgar still has. Edgar is full of admiration for his grandfather and great uncle who, with this basic education, saved and bought and managed successfully their own farm - an excellent example of men who seized their opportunity in a new land.

Edgar went on to tell us of the homes of his family in Westcote, now demolished, his visit in 1957 when he was given his great-grandmother Jane's (née Cambray) Bible, and what has happened to the descendants of his branch of the family, both in New Zealand and England.

We met up with Barbara Pullar, who travelled from Dunedin to see us in Christchurch. New leads have recently led us to Lovell Tombs, descended from William and Martha's son George, and to Marion Hofsteed, the first to contact us from North Island. She will be coming to visit Westcote in 1997, and so the numbers increase!

Notes

1. Rollo Arnold *The Farthest Promised Land*, chap.6 in *Oxford and Wychwood Forest* Victoria University Press, Wellington-Price Milburn Co., 1981.
2. *Otago Daily Times*, February 14, 1874.
3. Charlotte McDonald *A Woman of Good Character - Single Women as Immigrant Settlers in Nineteenth Century New Zealand* Bridget Williams Books Ltd., Wellington.