

How they fared when they got here

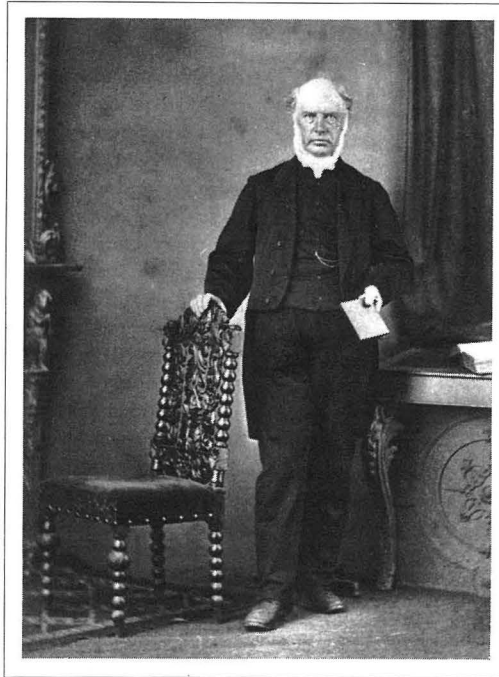
The subsequent history of the Staplehurst pauper families

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In my previous article for this publication¹ I described how the Rev T.W. Hornbuckle, philanthropic Rector of the Parish of Staplehurst in the Weald of Kent, managed to subsidise the passage to New Zealand of the Avery, Farmer, Hunt, Nash, Peckham and Relf families on *The Bolton*, arriving in Port Nicholson in April 1840. He did this in the face of Colonial Office and Poor Law Commission opposition by keeping a secondary accounts book, which still exists². The principle of funding the emigration of paupers from the Parish Rates was not illegal, but the Colonial Office did not think it proper to send women and children to such a wild part of the world where there was as yet no British Colony. One suspects too that the Liberal Government of the day had had sufficient brushes with Wakefield and the New Zealand Company to relish the chance to be disobliging.

But come the six families did. It was not until five years later that the railway across the Weald from Tonbridge to Dover was built, so they went by horse and cart to the Company's holding depot at Deptford. They carried with them the clothing and tools prescribed by the New Zealand Company and provided by the Parish Council³.

The Bolton dropped down the Thames estuary, past Gravesend, through the English Channel and out into the Atlantic. They were badly battered by a storm which carried the four year old Norman Nash overboard. Fortunately he was wearing what we would now call a windcheater, of weatherproofed material, caught tight at cuffs and waist which kept him afloat long enough to launch a rescue boat. The Farmers lost an infant, presumably from diarrhoea which remained a major cause of shipboard infantile death on Company ships until the diet was



Thomas Avery

changed. Mrs Hunt was brought to bed with a daughter who was to be named *Ann Bolton Hunt*.

They landed in Port Nicholson in April 1840 after a voyage of just over five months and were settled initially in Bolton Row, the Company built shacks in Thorndon, in the newly-named Wellington.

What I wish to do in this article is to look at the subsequent fortunes of these families. Although these 47 souls were a fairly homogenous group, it is a small sample of the several thousands of early immigrants and it would be extremely dangerous to make strong claims for my conclusions. However, I hope to indicate some of the factors which may have led to social success for some of them and social stagnation for others.

Inevitably, lack of records at this early point in the history of Pakeha settlement hampers certainty. But in a curious way, as history is usually written by those dominant in society about their peers, so the existence of records suggests social upward mobility. Of the six families, three of them have attracted the attentions of modern day genealogists and three haven't. It is no mere coincidence that the three families for whom we have good records were the successful ones. What few records I have been able to dig out for the other three suggest that they remained poor labourers for at least one, if not more, generations.

It is important to note that although members of these six families had been incarcerated in the Staplehurst Poor House before emigrating for New Zealand, it was only for the winter. Even in the deeply recession-hit Weald of Kent, there was still agricultural labouring work available in the summer, so these families were not long-term unemployed. Staplehurst was not just 'Shovelling out Paupers' to get them off the Poor Rate. Hornbuckle's history of

setting up soup kitchens and leather workshops in the Parish, strongly suggests that he recognised the problems that beset the working man with a large family. All these people needed was a chance and a fresh start.

These men were not the best England had to offer – the best were in work already, and why sail 12,000 miles if you already have a job? But they were of better quality than some of the other early emigrants. Colonel William Wakefield, the Company Agent in Wellington, complained in a letter to Mr Alston, the Secretary of the New Zealand Company in London, dated 25 February 1841, that the majority of the Assisted Emigrants were 'the scourgings of Gravesend and nearby Workhouses' recruited less through a desire for quality than for a need to fill up ships' berths⁴. It is true that they came from the Workhouse, but they were not 'townies'. They were agriculturalists, of whom there were all too few in this new-born colony.

Of these six heads of families, only one had a trade before he got to Wellington. This was James Nash who came from the neighbouring hamlet of Sandhurst. At 25, he was also the youngest, the rest being in their late thirties or even early forties. He was a rope-maker, which trade he plied very successfully, first in Te Aro. In 1849, he moved north to the Foxton area, where the vast stands of phormium tenax (New Zealand flax) in the Manawatu valley swamps promised the birth of an empire-supporting industry. Unfortunately, no one could devise a less labour intensive technique of removing flesh from fibre than the Maori method of scraping with sea shells, and the industry went into decline.

Thomas Avery had no particular skill other than agricultural labouring, but he and his family saved and worked hard. As early as 1843, he is described in Jurors' lists as a leaseholder and his son George as a freeholder of land in Lower Hutt. This was almost certainly the result of the New Zealand Company encouraging labourers to take on smallholdings rather than rely on the Company to fulfil their promises of guaranteed employment. There is a family tradition that apart from the kitchen garden, the Avery family specialised in producing hay and beans, for the increasing number of horses and bullocks in the

Colony.

William Peckham, at 44, along with his wife Mary, were the oldest of the group, and William died within nine years of landing. William, his eldest son, aged fifteen, on arrival, soon picked up the skills of a sawyer. This was a trade always in demand, particularly after the appalling earthquakes of 1848 and 1855 which underlined the unsuitability of brick-built houses. It was after delivering a load

of sawn timber that William Peckham (Jnr) met his end by drowning, mistaking the embankment for a new bridge over the Kaiwharawhara stream for the ford. Peckham owned land along the Porirua road but was a disillusioned man. Two of his younger sons had died in bush felling accidents and it was said in his obituary that he had intended selling up and going back to Kent.

Of the other three families, the Farmers seemed to have disappeared almost without trace. Jurors lists are quite useful for tracing families as unlike voters lists, there was no property qualification. Thus in 1845 in Wellington and in 1847 in the Hutt, we find a John Farmer described as a labourer and eligible to serve as a juror. A James Farmer, probably the James listed as

being 11 years old on embarkation, appears in Grahamstown near Thames in 1872, but again the trail peters out.

There is more evidence of the fortunes of the Hunt family, William, the head of family is recorded as a labourer in the Hutt until 1858 and possibly it is his death 'of a head injury' in Christchurch that same year which explains his absence from subsequent jurors lists. Of his three sons, James died in New Plymouth, in 1855, still a labourer, and Stephen and Richard are listed as labourers in the Hutt until 1852. After this date, they must have left the area as no deaths are recorded and they disappear from jurors lists.

The Relph's were a very difficult family to trace. They were all illiterate and there is an extraordinary variety of ways to spell their name! Robert, the father, died early while still a labourer in the Hutt, his sons, Robert and James appear variously as labourers and sawyers until 1852 when their names disappear from the area. They may have gone to the Thames area where it is possible it is they



Elizabeth Avery, wife of Thomas Avery

who were enfranchised by virtue of owning a house in 1872. But again the trail goes dead and they do not appear in the 1882 National Roll of Landowners.

One factor in the social climb out of the labouring class was the possession of a skill or at least specialisation in a niche market. Another factor I suggest was that of religious principles. The Weald of Kent is made of cold grey clay which exacts much human toil before grudgingly yielding fruit. Even today its population is more London commuters than sons of the soil. Small wonder that the proto-Puritanism of John Wyclif's Lollards found receptive ears amongst a population described as 'frugal, long lived, hard working and resolute... a God fearing and God loving people'.⁵

James Nash was a Methodist, and in 1848 he is recorded as having preached at six locations around Wellington. When he moved to the Manawatu, he was largely instrumental in setting up an inter-denominational Chapel. The family was described by Rev James Duncan as being 'very respectable' and of 'the Wesleyan connection'. He was a local preacher and referred to by later writers as 'The Reverend'. Much later on, he emigrated to Australia and took a job transporting gold. He was set upon by two would-be hijackers. His religious principles forbade him carrying arms but this didn't prevent him bashing one of the footpads over the head with a heavy stick and leaving him nursing his wounds in the ditch.

Although William Peckham (jnr) was married in the St Paul's Anglican pro-Cathedral of St Pauls, when he moved to the Porirua Road, the Peckhams became closely involved with the family of the Rev Taylor, who was the firebrand Minister of the Primitive Methodist chapel there.

Thomas Avery was an Anglican with a reputation for piety, descended from a family of Dissenters. The photograph of him shows a man of resolution, and despite his illiteracy, he has one hand on the Bible and in his other holds what looks to be a prayer book. One of his daughters, Mary, married the Quaker Isaac Hill of Nelson⁶ and although she was happy to attend Meetings, never forsook the Anglicanism of her parents. Of the piety of the other three we really know nothing. But in an era when it went

hand in hand with hard work it is indicative that the labouring families who did get on were also noticeably pious.

So far, the 'social climb indicators' I have invoked have been uncontroversial. However, I would now like to suggest that a major factor in this climb was the character of the six families' womenfolk. The fecundity of the women early settlers was extraordinary, many of them having well



Charlotte Avery (née Tandy) wife of George Avery.

over a dozen children, though one wonders whether it was the fecundity that was so extraordinary or the low level of infantile mortality. One suspects that a comparative study of child life expectancy between the Weald of Kent and New Zealand at this time would reveal a favourable balance towards the Colony. As the generations progressed, so did the birth-rate decline, causes for which are outside the scope of this paper.

One example was Charlotte Tandy⁷ who married George Avery in 1846. They had 17 children of whom all but one lived to adulthood. It is interesting that although she married at the age of 15, she didn't start having children until she was 18. Her sister-in-law, Mary Avery, also had a gap between early marriage and procreation.

As neither had any problems with their subsequent fertility, could this be a case of men 'booking' their womenfolk and not actually cohabiting with them till they had achieved greater maturity? When Stephen Hunt married Sarah Relph, however, both of them still in their teens, the gap between marriage and birth of the first-born was less than six months. One wonders if the locking-up of one's daughters was not yet another indication of social pretensions!

At the other end of the scale, within two years of the death of George Peckham, the 50 year-old Mary, his wife, had married George Mudgway. It was not until much later on in the Colony's history that the male/female ratio evened out and until then, women of lower social class could marry advantageously. This happened in both the Avery and the Nash families. Ann Avery married the widower Peter Hume who came from Australia as a 'bullocky' and rose to own prodigious-sized properties in the Wairapa. Elizabeth Nash married the skipper of *The Jewess*,

Captain Sedcole, whose father was the representative of the Crown in all naval matters in Wellington.

In the very earliest years we read of the Avery and Nash womenfolk who took in washing and so provided a very useful livelihood for their families in addition to the money earned by their men as agricultural labourers. The Nash family invested £25 in a mangle, the only one in the Colony, by which Mrs Nash earned 25 to 30 shillings a week. Thus Ann Hunt contributed equally to the family income. In contrast, Hannah Hunt left her husband and lived in the bush with 'a low blackie and sarazen from Sydney' by whom, 'she has had one child, the fruits of her shame and it is said that she is again encentie'.⁸ It seems likely that the mothers of the Peckham, the Farmer and Relph families did not live very long after their arrival. It is tempting to suggest that this loss contributed to lack of family cohesion and social advancement.

While the male/female ratio was so unequal it is not unreasonable to assume that the mere fact of having a female head of household held an important social cachet. Perhaps too it was the consciousness of their contribution to the settlement of the country that a hundred years ago, led New Zealand to be the first sovereign state to grant women the vote.

The Hunt, Farmer and Relph families disappear into the cracks of history, yet the Nash family produced Mayors, MPs and newspaper proprietors and the Averys millionaires and Prime Ministers in later generations. So why did these two families and to a lesser extent the Peckhams, so fully justify the faith of Rev T.W. Hornbuckle and the parish of Staplehurst who had so generously provided them with the funds with which to emigrate? Why did the others fail? I would maintain it was their carving out of niche markets where they saw their opportunity, a strong religious background and above all, the character of their womenfolk.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ 'A better class of pauper', *Stout Centre Review*, Vol 1: No 3, VUW, April 1991.
- ² p 347 12/27, Accounts Book, Rev T.W. Hornbuckle, 1830-1843, Kent Archives Office, Maidstone, Ken.
- ³ Learning from the failures of the scheme to colonise South Australia, the New Zealand Company were determined that their settlers would be properly clothed and equipped with the tools of their trade. The applications of other would-be emigrants were turned down because they lacked the wherewithal to clothe and equip themselves to the Company's specifications. The cynically minded might suspect that some of the enthusiasm of the Staplehurst Parish Council for the spending of Poor Law funds in this manner might have owed something to local retailers being well represented on the Council.
- ⁴ PRO CO 208 127, Public Records Office, Kew, London.
- ⁵ Robert Furley, *A History of the Weald of Kent*, Ashford, 1871-74, quoted in Rollo Arnold's *The Farthest Promised Land*, Wellington, 1981. I am much indebted to Dr Arnold for his initial suggestion that I direct my researches to the earliest period of immigration to New Zealand, for his tutorship and many other kindnesses.

⁶ References to Isaac Hill in W.H. Oliver (ed.) *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography vol 1. 1769-1869*, Allen & Unwin, Wellington 1990 and in *Private Papers and Letters of Isaac Hill*, held by Mr Bernie Black of Auckland. The Hon Mike Moore is descended from this side of the Avery family. Sir Frank Renouf is descended from a separate line of Averys.

⁷ Charlotte Tandy arrived in New Zealand on *The Lord William Bentinck* and had 17 children. She died at the age of 44 from jaundice following childbirth. There is a family tradition that while she was living in the Hutt, she heard that her husband was ill in the Wairarapa. Leaving the younger children in the charge of the eldest daughter, she walked over the Rimutakas, nursed him back to health and then walked back. One suspects that if she wasn't pregnant already, she probably was by the time she returned to the Hutt.

⁸ Letter from Robert Nash of Bolton Row, Wellington, to Wm. Barnes of Staplehurst, 19 September 1842, original in the possession of the Staplehurst Historical Society, Kent.

All photographs courtesy of Mrs Phyllis Avery of Fielding.

Francis King, educated at Oxford University, is the Director of the British Council in Wellington. Much of the material for this article is taken from his dissertation for a Diploma in Local History entitled 'From the Weald to Wellington', May 1991, for the University of Kent at Canterbury.

Stout Research Centre: Notes

The Stout Research Centre is admirably promoted in the current leaflet describing the aims of the Victoria University of Wellington Foundation, an independent registered charitable trust working in support of projects of national and international importance at Victoria. In seeking support for research, the pamphlet illustrates the activities of researchers from preserving the giant weta to studies of earthquake damage. A selection of publications by residents at the Stout Research Centre is included, an impressive array by any criteria. To help publicise the diverse achievements of the Stout Centre for the recent Victoria University Open Day our secretary Valerie Jacobs has arranged a series of displays. These show the diversity of research being undertaken, and have remained on display at the Centre.

DONATIONS

Gifts of books have been gratefully received from Jane Tolerton, Peter Coleman and Douglas Lilburn. A gift of a photo album has been received from Bob Brockie for the use of residents. This will be on display in the Centre so that members, at any time, may view it.

CORRECTION

The unfinished sentence in Ann Beaglehole's article in the last issue of the *Stout Centre Review* (June 1993) should have read:

"The positive side of the ignorance about Jews has been that little of the old world's anti-Semitism has contaminated New Zealand."