

OSTLER: EMMA BRIGNALL (nee Roberts)

Born: Oct 1848, West Ham, Essex, England.

Married: 14 Jul 1868, Melbourne, Australia

To: William Henry Ostler (1833 – 1879)

First Woman Landowner/Settler in Levin Village: 1889

Died: 14 Apr 1922, Auckland, New Zealand

Buried: Purewa Cemetery, Auckland, New Zealand

As a young girl Emma emigrated to Australia with her parents Thomas Roberts (1805-1871) & Mary Ann (nee Griffiths) (1806-1890) and her 10 siblings. She was educated at a Melbourne school for young ladies, which didn't suit her temperament. She was principally interested in the physical sciences, especially geology, and was reputed to always carry a small hammer and chisel to examine rocks when, years later, she took her children on excursions.

After her marriage to William in Melbourne in 1868 she crossed the Tasman to the Benmore sheep station in North Otago, where he was runholder (manager).

In 1874 they moved to their own place, Ben Ohau station in South Canterbury.

Whilst at Ben Ohau they had 4 children:

Helen Mary: 1869 – 1957

Charles Hartley: 1872 - 1873

Edith Louise (Daisy): 1874 – 1947

Henry Hubert: 1876 – 1944

In 1879 William had a fatal accident and the mortgagees foreclosed the farm and the family had to move to town (Timaru) with nothing to show, not even the furniture from their home.

The only good fortune was 1,000 pounds life insurance which Emma used to educate her children. She turned to teaching dancing, painting and fancywork to make a living. Her two youngest children (Daisy & Henry) were sent overseas for their education (paid by the life insurance).

In 1888, she heard about the opportunities of moving to the North Island to obtain land. With her daughter, Helen, they entered into the Crown ballots for sections in Levin. A particular incentive was the lure of making money from selling timber cut close to the rail line that could be used for stoking the railway engines. Coal, used normally, was becoming increasingly scarce and expensive at this time. Helen called her mother's zeal "*an acute attack of land hunger ... land as the sole source of life, the source of wealth, of plenty, of beauty, and of the only security life could offer.*" (Wilson, H: 'My First Eighty Years' p.97)

Emma and Helen each applied for the only three sections with a water supply, as advised by an old friend, James McKerrow, who was the Lands Department's Under Secretary! The ballot took place in Wellington in March 1889. As it happened, Helen's name was drawn out for Section 58 Levin Suburban (20 acres, today bounded by Macarthur St, Queenwood Rd and Bartholomew Rd) for 90 pounds. Emma then bought the property off Helen.

They were the first settlers to arrive in the town with their goods and claim their winnings. It was known as 'Te Kama clearing' and had been one of the refuges for surviving Muaupoko after Te Rauparaha's invasion. Access was gained along Bartholomew's tramline, and there was a well in one corner used to feed a drinking trough for the sawmill's bullocks. They called it the 'Cashmere' estate, and expanded it to 35 acres in total.

Helen later wrote:

"The tall trees, though serving to produce the green mellow half-light, were hidden by a ceiling of undergrowth, principally tree-ferns. There were groves where silver ferns predominated, their fronds, white-backed, intertwined high overhead, making a fretted ceiling. ... That day we forgot such sordid things as farming in our delight over this luxuriant causeway, with its smooth soft sawdust underfoot and the choir of birds overhead. What an approach to our new home!"

Staying at the Petersens' (where the New World supermarket, in Levin, is today) they walked to and from their new property. A Swedish 'bush carpenter' built their first dwelling, a 4-metre by 4-metre whare, with reject timber from Bartholomew's mill. Helen re-roofed it and extended it several times, with a kitchen, bathroom, a second bedroom and porches. In 1892, it became *Cashmere* homestead, located where MacArthur Street is today.

The two women built sturdy post-and-rail boarded fences as they cleared away the bush. But they protected the giant trees surrounding Te Kama clearing.

Can you imagine two women, on their own, and in the clothing of the day, doing that, in the 1890's !!

It wasn't all work though. Emma and Helen joined other early land-owning settlers on a nascent district social circuit. They would thread their way through the bush and round the lake to visit the Retters and McDonalds and exchange bush-clearing stories with their near neighbours the Adkins. A favoured party piece of Emma's was of being a witness in a recent notorious murder trial in Timaru (1886), in which Thomas Hall had been sentenced to life imprisonment for attempting to murder his wife by poisoning. And that wasn't all! ... Hall escaped the death penalty only on appeal, after having also been convicted of murdering his wife's father!

Over time Emma astutely purchased other land (over 600 acres of various holdings), which earned her notoriety among disconcerted male settlers. For instance, she bought section no. 40 in 1891 and soon offered it to the Adkins at an inflated price. In later years, seven lots of 5 acres each of her original holding were offered for auction.

One of her most profitable deals was a 21-year lease of the gravel pit area, of just under 3 acres, in the village centre bounded by Oxford St, Bath St and Chamberlain St. This is from where road metal and railway ballast had been excavated and now it was a cesspit, lined with rubbish and night soil and infested with rats. In April 1900 Emma was ordered by Council to remove the night soil within 24 hours or face proceedings under the Public Health Act. (It was done, but not by Emma in person!)

Despite its shortcomings, this was a natural site for business premises, and much of the Oxford Street frontage was sublet to shopkeepers, the backs of their shops being supported over the edge of the pit by piles! These first shopkeepers included Marco Fosella (general goods), the Bradley brothers (livery stables) and Henry Anstice (blacksmith).

Near the Bath Street end, in 1904, Emma had a hall built for the Salvation Army (not the Temperance Hall). When the Salvation Army moved to Bath Street in 1906 the building was occupied by Stiles & Mathieson.

It is said that the local councillors were not happy with her because she was making money out of both the gravel pit and the sub-leases. Between 1909 and 1913, as her lease agreement was coming to an end, the sites of these shops, and the vacant plots between them, underwent a formal Council survey to establish suitable building and safety regulations for all future leases. These sites were then auctioned off to new tenants.

Emma still retained hold of a large building near the corner of Oxford and Stanley Streets, used as a Private Hotel, and leased out until sold by auction in 1919.

She was a woman of strong convictions. She was a staunch supporter of women's suffrage, knocking on doors to gather signatures for the suffrage petitions. She was an officer of the Levin branch of the New Zealand Women's Christian Temperance Union, a powerful pressure group across the country at that time, and national vice-President of the New Zealand Alliance, which campaigned for the abolition of alcohol.

Based on her many letters to the local papers (see Papers Past) she was a very strong advocate for equality and women's education, especially at the higher level.

Her oldest daughter, Helen Mary, who helped her break in the Cashmere estate, married a local man, Charles Kendal Wilson. They went into farming, mainly in the King Country and he was also an MP for three years. Helen wrote the book *"My First 80 Years"* which has given us much insight into those early days of establishing Levin.

The second daughter was Edith, called Daisy. She never married and was her mother's companion for many years.

Emma's son, Henry Hubert, went on to a distinguished law career, and was knighted for his services as a judge.

Emma moved to Wellington in 1914 and then to Auckland, with Daisy, probably because Henry lived there too.

A eulogy was written by New Zealand Premier, friend, and fellow-worker for prohibition, Sir Robert Stout. He described Emma as "calm, deliberate, sincere, courageous and intelligent and one of New Zealand's great pioneers."

Emma's magnificent homestead 'Cashmere' outlasted her by 50 years, but sadly not forever. Its extensive garden had been the setting for many garden parties in aid of the temperance cause leading up to World War I and the preserved native bush extended the memory of Te Kama clearing. But in 1972, despite a campaign to keep it, 'Cashmere' fell victim to developers as the town spread out to the north.

with reference to A.J. Dreaver's publications:

'Levin, the making of a town' and

'Horowhenua County and Its People, a Centennial History'