

THE PROUSE BROTHERS

PROUSE: JAMES

Born: 2 October 1853, Wainuiomata

Married: 19 August 1879, Wellington

To: Clara Ann Sedcole: 22 October 1859 - 8 October 1953

Died: 9 February 1918, Levin

Buried: Tiro Tiro Rd cemetery, Levin

PROUSE: RICHARD III

Born: 3 February 1855, Wainuiomata

Married: 22 May 1879, Wainuiomata

To: Christina (Tina) McIllvride: 1 February 1860 – 17 March 1951

Died: 11 October 1921, Levin

Buried: Tiro Tiro Rd cemetery, Levin

Family Background

The Prouse family legend starts with James's and Richard's grandparents.

They were Richard Prouse (1792-1875) and Mary Snowden King (1787-1870). They emigrated from Aveton Gifford near Plymouth in Devon, leaving Plymouth on the "Duke of Roxburgh" on the 3 October 1839 and reaching Wellington on the 7 February 1840.

They travelled with their children, Mary (1820-1893), Sarah (1822-1872), William (1825-1878), Richard (Jnr) II (1829 -1894) Susan Osborne (1831-1894) and Thomas (1834-1908). Their eldest daughter, Elizabeth (1817-1901) stayed behind and then followed 10 years later with her husband and children.

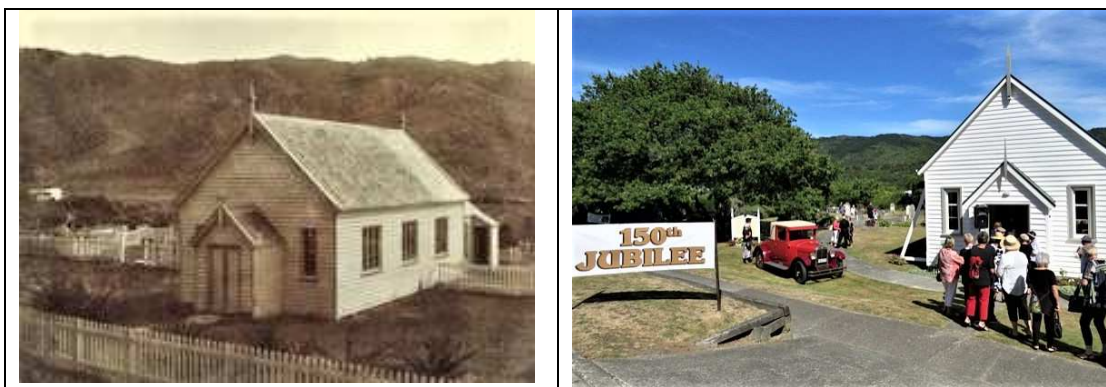
Richard (Jnr) II, the father of James and Richard III, left New Zealand as a young man for the Australian goldfields where he met Jane Gorrie (1831-1899). They were married in 1852 and then returned to New Zealand to join the family business.

Apart from the first-born James and Richard III, they had 10 other children.

Jane: (1856-1883)
John: (1857-1930)
Henry: (1859-1859)
Mary I: (1860-1860)
Mary II: (1861-1949)
Ann Elizabeth: (1863-1940)
Emma: (1865-1888)
Herbert Morley: (1868-1871)
Andrew Thomas: (1870-1886)
Fanny Louise: (1872-1948)

The Milling Business

The Prouses first settled on the Old Porirua Road north of Wellington and started cutting timber at Johnsonville, then moved their operations to Wainuiomata in 1844. Richard I (senior) 'gifted' a plot of land to local Methodists for a sum of 5 shillings on which they built their church, using pit-sawn timber from Prouses' mill. Their first service was held there in May 1863 (ref.V.Alexander, see below), and the church survives to this day, fully restored, as the oldest original Methodist church in the Wellington region.



**Wainuiomata Methodist Church in 1870s-80s (left), and during its 150th jubilee celebrations (right)
(www.coastroadchurch.nz)**

As timber became scarce, Prouses' milling moved to Taita (1856/7), then Whiteman's Valley, Upper Hutt, around 1866, and then to Levin in 1891.

Initially the mill was operated by the elder Richard, then continued by his son Richard II. By the time they reached Levin, 1891, it was now Prouse Brothers, with the grandsons James, Richard III and John as the partners. James and Richard III operated the mill, and John was the manager in Wellington.

The last stage of the Prouse mills business was the operation of the 'Prouse and Saunders' mill at Mangarakau, near Collingwood in the north-west corner of the South Island (Golden Bay). Here the work had passed to the great grandsons Percy and Bert (sons of James and Clara). Tree felling ceased about 1915 but the name continued until after 1920.

A timber yard was established in Dixon Street, Wellington, then moved to a large (132ftx54ft) purpose-built four-storey offices and warehouse site in Taranaki Street in 1908, remaining until work ran out. Initially it was named 'Prouse Bros Timber Merchants' but was changed to 'Prouse Lumber Ltd'.

In all, the business operated for over 80 years and was in turn operated by sons, grandsons & great grandsons.

The Move to Horowhenua

It was James and Richard III who moved the family sawmill from Whiteman's Valley to Levin. They would be the second family to establish a sawmilling business in Horowhenua, following Peter Bartholomew who began milling here in March 1888, at the northern end of Levin.

James walked the railway line from Ohau with his two small sons and selected the site for the mill, at Weraroa. Meantime, Richard supervised the dismantling of the Valley mill and the despatch of machinery, bullocks, horses, house cows and poultry, mill hands and families.

The Prouses brought a whole community with them, people who would take many roles in the growing village: Johnson, Parsons, Salmons, Smithson, Davidson, Hanson, Polson, Smith, Crighton, Arcus and others.

The brothers' energy and business ability soon built a thriving business, many millions of feet of timber being dispatched to market.



**Prouse Bros. Weraroa mill, 1895, with Richard III's home,
back right**

(horowhenua.kete.net.nz)

Another mill was opened at Hautere, south of Otaki, where the splendid totara resources of the district were successfully exploited.

With the disappearance of the bush, the brothers turned from the saw to dairy farming and their considerable holdings were enterprisingly worked, all contributing in no small degree to the general prosperity of the district.

The brothers were among the first Methodists in this district and, as their grandfather had done in Wainuiomata, they provided the land and timber for the town's original Methodist church in Cambridge Street. Indeed, it was the first church building erected in Levin, opening its doors in July 1895. They also provided five acres for the parsonage.



**Levin's first Methodist Church, circa 1900
(horowhenua.kete.net.nz)**

This church was superseded by a new larger building on the opposite side of Cambridge Street in 1936.

The brothers established their family homes (built by Peter Arcus) in the two-storey stately manner of the time, identical but reversed in plan. It is suggested they tossed a coin to see which house they lived in! James and Clara got Queen Street East and Richard III and Christina got the one by the mill at Weraroa - now demolished. The Queen Street East house is still in the family, occupied (in 2022) by James Prouse's great grandson Stephen Prouse and his wife Karen. (Apparently the planned Otaki to North of Levin road bypass will be diverted around Ashleigh so as to further preserve it.)



The Queen St East house, 'Ashleigh', pictured around 1900

There was an identical one built in Clifton Terrace in Wellington for younger brother John. It is still there and was recently shown in the media as a renovated heritage building, pictured below.



James

His obituary described James as one of the fathers of the town of Levin and a pioneer settler universally esteemed and widely known. To write a history of the progress of this prosperous community is also to write the life story of James.

"No movement for the advancement of town or district was pushed to a successful consummation without the aid of his foresight, energy and tact. He was always eloquent concerning the possibilities of the district, and lost no opportunity of advertising its productivity and residential attractions."



James Prouse

In public life James was never idle. Already a County Councillor from 1899, and elected chairman in 1906-07, he was also a promoter of a Levin Borough Council being created. So when that happened in 1906, James was an inaugural Borough Councillor, serving through to 1911 before standing down citing the pressure of business. He was a prime mover in the many schemes for the advancement of the town, notable among them being the water races.

The Water Race System

With only two natural springs in the area, Levin was poorly served with water, and the race system was proposed to run water in open drains, principally from the Ohau River, across the town.

James was a member of the first water race committee in 1904 to help the county administer the scheme (controversial because it demanded county rates rises!). Initially the drains ran along each north-south lying street in the town, but an extensive race James was prominently involved in instigating ran from Gladstone Road west across farmland, down Bath Street, along Oxford Street, then down Queen Street to the lake. With pastoral farming becoming the chief industry of the district, the races greatly increased ready access to drinking water for grazing cattle and horses. It would also be a key water source for the new volunteer fire brigade (1902).

Other Community Service

Among the numerous activities of a busy life was his enthusiastic support of the Levin Horticultural Society, of which he was president for many years. He had a hand in the formation of the Levin Cooperative Dairy Company, joining the Board of Directors in 1909 and serving as chairman at the time of his death in 1919. He took a very active part in negotiating the sale of butter during World War 1, especially remembered for reducing the period of storage charges on butter awaiting shipment. At his funeral were many messages expressing gratitude for the good work done for the welfare of the dairying industry as a whole.

As steward, member of the choir, local preacher, and representative to Conference, James did a lot of work of lasting value. The NZ Conference recognised his splendid work by electing him a representative to the General Australasian Conference.

The YMCA was another local institution which felt James's inspiring help and for a number of years he conducted a most successful Young Men's Bible class in that institution.

James and Clara had five children.

James Percival (Percy): (1880-1968) married Ellen (Nell) Cowan (1879-1935)

Richard Norman: (1882-1968)

Herbert Stanley (Bert): (1885-1962) married Agnes (Nell) Paterson (1889-1955)

Emma: (1889-1959) married Thomas Gaius Vincent (1886-1954)

Lancelot West (Lance): (1895-1955) married Martha Lena Milnes (1894-1962)

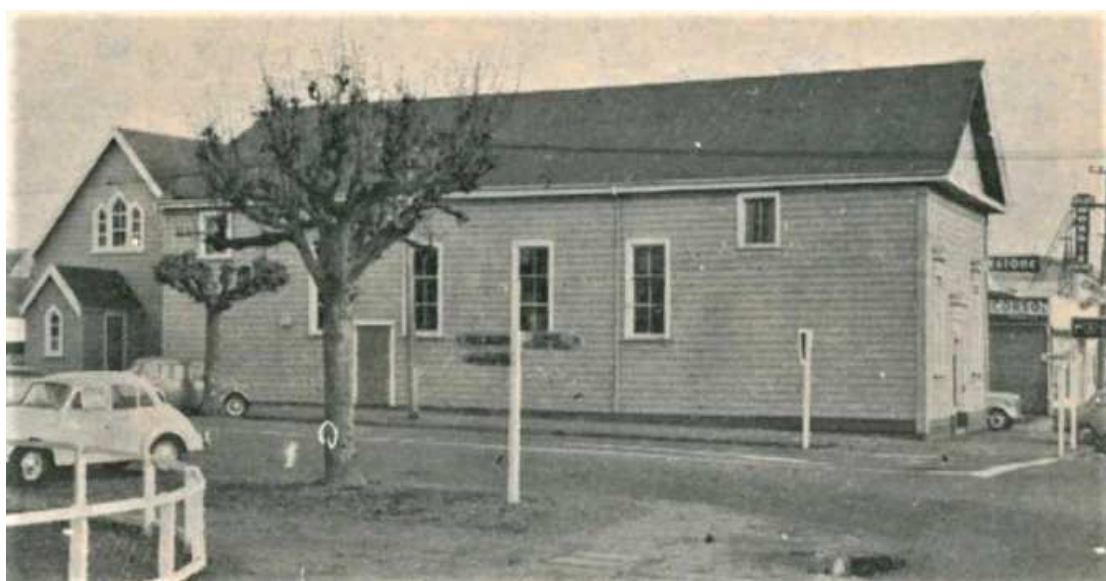
Richard III

Like his brother, Richard was a prodigious worker. In his farming he led the way in practical and profitable methods of cultivating the soil.

He was also active in community affairs and, like his brother, elected onto the first Levin Borough Council in 1906 – 1907, returning to serve again from 1911 to 1915.

Levin School committee also had the benefit of his services for a considerable period, including a spell as chairman.

His interest in horticultural matters was reflected in his role as a founder of the Horticultural Society. He was also instrumental in getting the Century Hall built in 1900, for many years the largest hall on the coast between Wellington and Palmerston North. It was used by the Methodist Church but also by the community for concerts, balls, fetes and indoor sports, and especially appreciated during World War I for fund-raising events.



Century Hall 1900 -1969, corner of Queen St & Cambridge St, (now Pak `n Save) with the original Methodist Church right behind, left of picture (horowhenua.kete.net.nz)

Richard held at various times almost every layman position in the Methodist Church. Not the least important of his activities was being the Sunday school superintendent, a post he filled faithfully for over 20 years. He was so endeared to the children of his day that they affectionately called him "Uncle Richard". As a tenor, a sang in the church choir for many years.



Richard and Christina on their wedding day, 1879

At his funeral he was described as a splendid settler, a public-spirited man.

Richard and Christina had nine children, three of whom, sadly, died in infancy.

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| Richard Allan (IV): | (1880-1880) |
| Isabella Grace: | (1880-1922) married Charles Cecil Nation |
| (1873-1928) | |
| Jessie Agnes: | (1883-1961) m. Frank Ernest Parker (1881-1951) |
| Gertrude Mary: | (1884-1956) m. Edward Stephen (Ted) |
| Webley (1882-1932) | m. (2 nd) Charles Allen (1880-1975) |
| Christina Mabel: | (1885-1976) m. Tom Selwyn Goldsmith |
| (1887-1941) | |
| Richard (V): | (1887-1887) |
| Eunice Annie: | (1892-1893) |
| Richard Allan John McGregor: | (1894-1973) m. Agnes Margaret Williamson (1899-1972) |
| Phyllis Elizabeth: | (1898-1983) m. Trevor Clive Taylor (1899-1976) |

Sources included:

"The History Of Wainuiomata's Coast Road Church And Cemetery"
by Vicky Alexander (pub. Wainuiomata Historical Museum Society)

John

John Prouse was the third brother in the business, running the timber/lumber company in Wellington as the general manager. Although he never had any direct connection to Horowhenua, apart from his family and business ties, he's worthy of mention here for the notable additional career he enjoyed.

PROUSE: JOHN

Born: 16 October 1857, Wainuiomata, New Zealand

Married: 17 October 1875, Wellington, New Zealand

To: Helena (Lena) Harding: 9 September 1853 – 18 August 1931

Died: 4 August 1930, Wainuiomata, New Zealand

Buried: Homedale Methodist cemetery, Wainuiomata

John became an international baritone singer. Early in his life he showed he possessed a mellow-toned voice, and for 40 years he was the principal baritone in the choir of the Taranaki Street Wesleyan church in Wellington and was much in request as a soloist at local concerts.

His fame became more than local when he gave his first performance of the part of Elijah in Mendelssohn's oratorio of that title at the 1888 musical festival in England.

His performance of this highly dramatic music was so effective that on occasions he was chosen to take the place of Sir Charles Santley (when he was indisposed). John also sang at St James's Hall, Crystal Palace, and at various places in the provinces.

On his return to New Zealand in the early 1890's his position was at once established as the foremost baritone in New Zealand. For many years thereafter no important musical gathering was complete without him.



John Prouse

He toured New Zealand with the (www.teara.govt.nz) famous Madame Dolores, Kubelik the violinist, Backhaus the pianist, and other famous artists. He travelled to Melbourne to appear with Dame Melba, at her request.

At a musical festival in Wellington, just after his death, many tributes were paid to him. One from the Honourable L M Isitt stated "I pay my tribute as an admirer of the man as a vocalist and as a lover of the man as a man."

John and Lena had five children.

Florence Annie:	(1875-1940)	married Francis Charles Poole
(1874-1956)		
William John Dewitt:	(1877-1956)	m. Octavia Florence (Ava)
Symons		(1893-1940)
Constance Mary:	(1880-1958)	
George Stanley:	(1883-1980)	married Rosetta Laura
Gagliardi (1895-1973)		
Oliver Richard:	(1885-1949)	married Enid Marion Barry
(1891-1969)		