

WITTY

William Knight Witty, hotelier and sugar miller, was born around 1834 in Hanley, Staffordshire. Like Thomas Lodge Murray-Prior before him, he was one of a group of pioneers who are associated with Moggill but who never lived in the district. William was one of eight children of Richard John Lawrence Witty and Phebe Knight¹. He was a butcher's assistant in his early years and worked for his cousin John Knight in nearby Burslem². In 1863, he married Mary Knight in Wolstanton, North Staffordshire and together, they left Gravesend on 21 April 1864 as assisted emigrants aboard the ship *Fusilier*. The journey took nearly four months and was documented by the passengers in a weekly bulletin, published every Saturday³. The journal included 'Notices of Amusements', 'Music Literary and Dramatic reports', details of navigation, correspondence, puzzles, reports of boxing, whist and much more. Importantly, the journal contained reports of births and deaths on board. Heavily pregnant upon leaving England, Mary gave birth "somewhat unexpectedly" in the 2nd Cabin to a daughter Edna Anne: 'On board the Fusilier, on the evening of Tuesday, 19th July, the wife of W.R.Witty, Esq., of a daughter'. However, William and Mary's happiness was short-lived. Edna was baptised by the ship's doctor, E W Hodgkinson M.D. on Sunday 31 July but sadly died on 9 August. Edna would have been buried at sea and the journal records the scene on another day:

At two o'clock a temporary platform was prepared at the starboard gangway, and immediately two sailors emerged from the intermediate cabin bearing a small burden covered with the Union Jack. The dim outline of the child's corpse could be traced through the ample folds of the flag, and as the captain proceeded to read the beautiful burial service with much solemnity and feeling, nearly the whole living freight, all uncovered, crowded around him. In a few minutes more, the body was slipped from the gangway and the deep rolls over another gathered to its rest.

"PACIFIC ISLAND LABOURERS ACTS OF 1880-1892,"					
FUSILIER					
NO. OF ISSUED PASSAGES LIFE.	NATIVE NAME OF PASSENGER ALSO ENGLISH (IF ANY).	AGE	SEX	DATE OF DEPARTURE	NAME OF SHIP BY WHICH PASSENGERED.
	Smith	John 26		Witty	W. 15 28
	"	Mary A. 26		"	Mary 25
	"	Mary 2		Wenne	John 15
	"	Infant		Watson	William 20

Assisted Immigration
Record for 'Fusilier'
14 August 1864 ©
Queensland State
Archives

William and Mary arrived in Moreton Bay aboard the *Fusilier* on 14 August 1864⁴. They made their way to Brisbane where they set up a retail china business in a shop next to the Town Hall in Queen Street. We have no idea if William and Margaret had any expertise with this kind of enterprise but the business only lasted a year or so. *The Brisbane Courier* tells us that W K Witty 'was giving up the business' and had organized a 'great sale' for Monday 30 October 1865 including dinner services, toilet ware and 'a great many articles too numerous to mention'. The sale took place at his shop 'opposite St Patrick Tavern in Queen Street' and the whole of the valuable stock was sold 'without the slightest reserve'⁵. Within three months, at the beginning of 1866, William Witty began a business in more familiar territory. He took up his old profession from England and was plying his trade as a pork butcher in Queen Street⁶. Subsequent advertisements in *The Brisbane Courier* indicate that the business was expanding if not flourishing. Two

months later, he advertised for a good general servant, 'a MAN (sic) who understands tripe dressing',⁷ 'a man who understands small goods making and 'a strong active YOUTH to make himself useful'⁸.



Brisbane Town Hall in Queen Street, ca. 1868. The post office is seen on the left of the building and Witty's china shop may have been on the right hand side. ©John Oxley Library. Negative no. 13588

By October, he needed 'a MAN COOK and youth to wait at table'⁹ and by November, he was in need of a cook, confectioner and smart waiter, later trumpeting that he 'had engaged a first class confectioner' and would be selling ice creams, jellies, ham and beef sandwiches and tongue'. He further called the 'attention of the public to his first class Luncheon Rooms' and especially to his 'celebrated Melton Mowbray pork pies'¹⁰. Clearly, William was on a trajectory: in fact, two years later he took the plunge of opening 'an Inn or Public House under the sign of Witty's Family Hotel and Restaurant' using the premises of the Imperial Hotel in Queen Street¹¹.

In late 1866, William purchased 60 acres of land in Moggill 'near the Brisbane River' for the princely sum of £1 per acre¹², but there is no evidence that the Witty family lived on this Moggill block. Interestingly, *The Brisbane Courier* reported on 6 December 1866 that of the 85 lots of land offered, only 17 were sold. In fact, the Witty family moved from Queen Street, Brisbane, not to Moggill, but to the Beenleigh district where William became a sugar miller at Yatala and Yellow-wood.¹³ He bought a small block of 7 acres in 1870 at the junction of the Albert and Logan rivers¹⁴ and a larger block of 55 acres of 'agricultural and pastoral' land at Beenleigh in 1871.¹⁵ In an article on 'the present state of the sugar industry' in 1885, *The Brisbane Courier* reported that the property of Mr W K Witty was a 'long established estate' employing 'almost exclusively ... kanakas' who appeared 'strong and healthy'.¹⁶ Sugar prices were very low at the time and the article goes on to say that 'farmers begged him to buy their cane, at any price' and in one case 'to give the cane, if only the mill would cut it down and take it away'.

SALE OF CROWN LANDS.					
<p>A SALE of Crown lands was held at the City Auction Mart, on Wednesday, by Mr. A. Martin. The lands consisted exclusively of country lots, in the counties of Stanley and Canning, and are situated on and near the Brisbane River, near Moggill, and on and near the Caboolture River and its tributaries. In all 85 lots were offered, of which seventeen only were sold. In a few instances only did the lots sold bring an advance on the upset price—but one lot of seventy acres on the Caboolture realized £3 2s. per acre, the highest price bid at the sale. The total area of land sold was 570 acres 1 rood 38 perches, and the total proceeds amounted to £775 16s. 11d., which gives an average price of about £1 7s. 6d. per acre. We append the details.</p>					
<p>Country lands in the county of Stanley, parish of Moggill, on and near the Brisbane River. Upset price, £1 per acre:—</p>					
Portion.	Area.			Purchaser.	Price per Acre.
	A.	R.	P.		£ s.
141 ...	5	2	11	Joseph Buckle ...	1 16
142 ...	8	0	0	Geo. H. Foxwell ...	2 1
143 ...	10	0	0	D. H. Sullivan ...	1 7
145 ...	43	2	0	C. Deires Broughton	1 6
146 ...	50	3	0	M. Jane O'Neil ...	1 0
148 ...	60	0	0	W. K. Witty ...	1 0

By necessity, William Witty became another sugar planter who was 'casting about for additional eggs in the basket of resources' as a result of the downturn in the sugar industry¹⁷. In this regard, he had been experimenting with making molasses 'portable and cleanly in use'. He had achieved this in 'a most perfect manner' by grinding up the megass (now known as bagasse or waste cane), saturating it with molasses and adding bran and pollard (a byproduct of flour milling of grain). He called this product 'saccheureka' and a writer from *The Brisbane Courier* was led to 'confidently assert that the invention is a valuable one ...and of immense benefit to both planters and stock owners'. The project received coverage in the press and William advertised saccheureka in the New South Wales papers.¹⁸

Sadly, further disaster was to befall the sugar planters and millers of south-east Queensland. In January 1887, extensive flooding affected the area with 'a terrible devastation wrought by storm waters'. William Witty gave an extensive account of his experiences: in the morning of 21 January, water had reached their Yatala property. 'The front room furniture became awash. The piano ... was overturned'. The next day, William's son Johnny was able to attract attention by reaching out through the manhole on the roof and 'wave the ensign' but by then the mill had been destroyed. He saw 'the sugar house with its pinnacle and weathercock, gyrating down in the rapids of the flood ... The groaning and rending of timbers, noises as of explosions and a final tearing, ripping sound announced the fact that my "saccheureka" factory had been demolished, and swept into the troubled waste of waters'.¹⁹

As a result of this devastation, William was unable to re-establish his sugar milling business and went into voluntary liquidation. His total assets amounted to £28,548 (of the order of \$350,000 in today's money) sufficient to pay off all creditors²⁰ and within 4 years, his animal feed business, the Yatala Sugar and Saccheureka Factory Company Ltd, was wound up.²¹ Even though saccheureka was not a commercial success, the invention was later patented by William's daughter, Edna, in 1894²² and again by his son Henry Knight Witty in 1904.²³ Interestingly, another son, Richard John Lawrence Witty, developed a plant and seed setter²⁴ indicating the inventive and resourceful nature of the family.

William was certainly a man to diversify his interests and in addition to his restaurant and hotelier business and sugar refining companies, he also had interests in mining, in particular, gold.²⁵ In times when the cane and sugar industry were not profitable, William had bought a 'small two-stamper quartz-crusher' so he could test 'on a fair scale, some gold-bearing ore from Mount Yellow-wood' yielding 'a fair sample of gold'. For these pioneer sugar planters, it was a case of 'if the sugar won't pay them, they will find something on or out of their land that will!'²⁶ William also had an interest in silver shares at the Yarrol mine²⁷ and a tin claim at Kettle Swamp, near Stanthorpe.²⁸ Although it is not clear how the Witty family survived after the devastating losses of 1887, he revitalized his business interests in south east coastal Queensland by taking over the Grand Hotel at Deepwater Point, Southport in 1891.²⁹ This seems to have been William's main business venture and he promoted the hotel regularly as a place with 'unrivalled accommodation at reduced terms' and where spectators could get a 'splendid view' of the Southport Regatta from the hotel verandahs.³⁰

Over the years, William became very much part of the local south-east Queensland community. He held a number of wide ranging committee memberships and offices including positions in the Freemasonry

movement. In 1869, he became Senior Deacon of the Athole & Melville Lodge No. 455, in Southport³¹ and later, Foundation Member of the Southern Queensland Lodge, No. 29 in Beenleigh³². In subsequent years, he was elected a committee member of the Brisbane Licensed Victuallers' Association³³, of the Logan & Albert Sugar Growers Union³⁴ and of the Agricultural and Pastoral Society of Southern Qld.³⁵ He was Secretary of the Southern Queensland Turf Club,³⁶ and a member of the Acclimatisation Society,^{37,38} In addition to all these responsibilities, he found time to sit on the bench as a Justice of the Peace³⁹.

William and Mary had eight further children born between 1865 and 1880. The second eldest, Henry Knight Witty was born in Queen Street hotel and his eldest son, Henry Matthias Witty was one of the last surviving Witty grandchildren, who died in 1994. Henry senior enjoyed a successful career in the Customs and Excise Department before becoming an Inspector for the Bureau of Central Sugar Mills. In 1918, he followed in his father's footsteps and acquired the Pacific Hotel in Southport.⁴⁰ There is no record in the electoral rolls of any member of the Witty family living in Moggill: Henry Knight Witty continued to live in Yatala, then Southport whilst his sister, Edna, lived in Enoggera. Their block of 60 acres was still owned by the family in 1908, situated to the east of Matfield Street and straddling what became Witty Road. Mary Witty died at the Grand Hotel Southport on 13 July 1894 and William died at Beenleigh on 16 October 1900.

Neville Marsh

¹Bruce Witty Family Tree, <http://trees.ancestry.co.uk/tree/51902013/person/13283887623>, Viewed 17 July 2014

²National Archives of the UK, 1851 Census, Class HO107/2003, folio 381, p. 9

³*How we went to Queensland, on board the "Fusilier": a weekly journal written on board 1864*. Published Brisbane. National Library of Australia electronic version online: <http://nla.gov.au/nla.aus-vn657227>. Viewed 15 July 2014.

⁴Queensland State Archives: Index to Registers of Immigrant Ships' Arrivals 1848-1912, Series 13086, item 18474, p. 221. Viewed online: <http://www.archives.qld.gov.au>, 7 August 2014. The *Fusilier* returned to Britain and on its next voyage to Melbourne, foundered on the Girdler Sands in the River Thames estuary with a large number of emigrants on board. The 'poor creatures' were rescued by the Margate lifeboat and after repairs the vessel was chartered for a run to Calcutta, then to Demerara (British Guiana) where she picked up 400 coolies and emigrants bound for Natal. Unfortunately, the ship suffered more bad luck and was wrecked on rocks off Natal with the loss of 20 souls drowned, 'having previously lost 189 from fever'. *Queensland Times, Ipswich Herald and General Advertiser*, Tuesday 10 October 1865, p.4

⁵ *The Brisbane Courier* Thursday 26 October 1865, p.6

⁶ *ibid* Wednesday 10 January 1866, p.1

⁷ *ibid* Thursday 1 March 1866, p.1

⁸ *ibid* Friday 16 March 1866, p.1

⁹ *ibid* Tuesday 30 October 1866, p.1

¹⁰ *ibid* Thursday 1 November, p.1, Friday 30 November, p.1 and Monday 17 December 1866, p.1

¹¹ *ibid* Tuesday 23 June 1868, p.1. Note: at various times, the Witty family occupied the Oxford Hotel and the Grand Central Hotel, both in Queen Street.

¹² *ibid* Thursday 6 December 1866, p.2

¹³ *ibid* Thursday 26 November 1931, p.10

¹⁴ *ibid* Friday 11 February 1870, p.3

¹⁵ *ibid* Thursday 7 September 1871, p.3 and Queensland State Archives: Land Selection, item ID 29955, Selection file: Witty, William Knight, Beenleigh 320.

¹⁶ *Ibid* Thursday 29 October 1885, p.9

¹⁷ The collapse of world sugar prices by a third in mid-1884 was primarily due to massive dumping of subsidised European beet sugar on the British and American markets. Additionally, in 1885, Samuel Griffith's Liberal government in Queensland announced it would bring in legislation to prohibit importation of Pacific Islanders after 31 December 1890. In 1888, Griffith's Liberals were defeated at the general elections and Sir Thomas McIlwraith (the new Queensland Premier) appointed a Royal Commission to investigate the Sugar Industry which in its finding recommended the continued recruitment of Pacific Islanders – under government control). See: Peter D. Griggs, *Global Industry, Local Innovation: The History of Cane Sugar Production in Australia 1820-1995*, pub. Peter Lang, Bern, Switzerland (2011) p.52

¹⁸ *The Morning Bulletin* Wednesday 26 August 1885, p.6; *The Sydney Morning Herald* Monday 12 April 1886, p.2

¹⁹ *Queensland Figaro and Punch* Saturday 5 February 1887, pp. 203 and 206.

²⁰ *The Queenslander* Saturday 24 December 1887, p.1008

²¹ *Queensland Government Gazette* Volume 53, 1st May – 31st August 1891. Brisbane: James C Beal, Government Printer, page 1148.

²² New South Wales Letters Patent. *Improvements in cattle food to be called Witty's improved Queensland saccheureka and the process for preparing same* - Specification by Edna Annie Witty. National Archives of Australia Series 4617, 1894

²³ Application for Letters Patent for an invention by Henry Knight Witty, titled - *An improved cattle food*. National Archives of Australia Series A627, 1904

²⁴ New South Wales Letters Patent. *A plant and seed setter* - Specification by Richard John Lawrence Witty. National Archives of Australia Series 4617, 1902

²⁵ *The Brisbane Courier* Saturday 21 March 1885, p.5 and *Evening News* Saturday 29 May 1886, p.11

²⁶ *ibid* Thursday 29 October 1885, p.9

²⁷ *Maryborough Chronicle* Tuesday 5 July 1870, p.3

²⁸ *The Queensland Times, Ipswich Herald and General Advertiser* Thursday 30 May 1872, p.3

²⁹ *The Brisbane Courier* Friday 10 July 1891, p.4

³⁰ *ibid* Tuesday 5 December 1893, p.2 and Thursday 22 March 1894, p.2

³¹ *The Queenslander* Saturday 4 December 1869, p.2

³² Southern Queensland Lodge, No. 312, United Grand Lodge of Queensland, minutes for Monday 15 July 1878

³³ *The Brisbane Courier* Friday 6 May 1870, p.2

³⁴ *Australian and Town & Country Journal* Saturday 14 May 1881, p.20

³⁵ *The Queenslander* Saturday 16 September 1922, p.11

³⁶ *ibid* Saturday 6 November 1875, p.6

³⁷ *ibid* Saturday 23 December 1871, p.6

³⁸ The Queensland Acclimatisation Society was based in Brisbane and operated from 1862 to 1956. Its primary interest was in the introduction of exotic plants to Queensland, both for economic and ornamental purposes

³⁹ *The Brisbane Courier* Tuesday 15 October 1878, p.1

⁴⁰ *ibid* Thursday 26 November 1931, p.10

Acknowledgments

The Australian Sugar Industry Museum provided information on the world sugar crisis in 1884-5. David Cook of the United Grand Lodge of Queensland provided minutes from the Southern Queensland Lodge.