

The Blandford Colonisation Society

There has never been a good time to be born poor but the early to mid nineteenth century was one of the worst. Conditions in Dorset were particularly bad. In 1843 the Reverend Sydney Godolphin Osborne wrote of conditions in Stourpain [sic], a village just outside Blandford and Child Okeford;

“Within this last year I saw in a room about 13 feet square, three beds: on the first lay the mother, a widow, dying of consumption; on the second two unmarried daughters, one 18 years of age, the other 12; on the third a young married couple, whom I had married two days before....It was in these cottages that a malignant typhus fever broke out about two years ago which afterwards spread through the village”.

A Commissioner into the “*Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture*” found, again in Stourpain, “*a cottage in which eleven persons slept in three beds without curtains in a room ten feet square; the father and mother with two infants, in one bed; two twin daughters of 20 and a third of 7 years old in another; and four sons, aged 17,15,14 and 10 in the third.*” Behind the cottages “*there are shallow excavations, the receptacles, apparently of all the dirt of the families. The matter constantly escaping from the pigsties privies etc is allowed to find its way through the passages between the cottages...It was in these cottages that a malignant typhus fever broke out about two years ago, which afterwards spread through the village.*”

It had not always been thus, the golden age of the village had been in the 1750's but a doubling of the population between 1700 and 1800 and the resultant increased availability of labouring men had driven down wages. The enclosure of open fields and the common meant that the poor could no longer keep a cow or collect wood for firewood. The poor just kept on getting poorer until in 1795 the Justices of the Peace in a small Berkshire village, Speenhamland, introduced a system of poor relief which, although well intentioned, was to have disastrous effects for the poor. They agreed to supplement the wages of the poor to ensure they would not starve. The system spread rapidly through the country but it had one fatal flaw, the government declined to establish a minimum wage. As a consequence there was simply no incentive for the farmers to pay a living wage. Wages went down, the cost to the local rate payers shot up and widened the divide between the haves and have nots in the village.

The terror in revolutionary France, Luddites breaking machines in the north, the Peterloo massacre and the rise in Chartism all led to a climate of fear; the final straw came with the “Captain Swing” riots that broke out in the south of England in 1830. Starting in Kent and spreading via Surrey, Sussex, Hampshire and Wiltshire rioting arrived in Dorset in November. The poor, previously just a nuisance and expense, had become a threat.

In the same year five members of parliament met in the rooms of the Horticultural society in Regent street to form the National Colonization society. The London Evening Standard reported *“the Chairman read the resolution: they were to the effect that there was a redundant population of the country [ie the poor] which tended to increase crime and increase the burthens [burdens] of those able to pay rates....one of the soundest principles to remove the evils of pauperism is a sound practical system of colonization.”* In short the poor and all the problems they caused, were to be exported, the preferred destination was Australia.

Gradually the idea took root and the perceived benefits of colonization grew, the Salisbury and Winchester Journal 1833 reported that *“the poor will be better provided for and will become useful members of society....in time the number of rogues and vagabonds robbers, thieves and pickpockets will be materially lessened, and juvenile offenders will in the course of time disappear”* and of course most importantly *“The poor rates will be lessened and in time will be entirely extinguished.”*

For it to be successful the Colonization society needed a local presence but it wasn't until 1848 that one was set up in Dorset with meetings being held at Poole, Blandford Sherborne and Dorchester. The first meeting of the Blandford society took place on 2 3rd January 1849 when the *“Marquess of Westminster in the Chair. The hall was filled with the principal families of the town and neighbourhood.”*

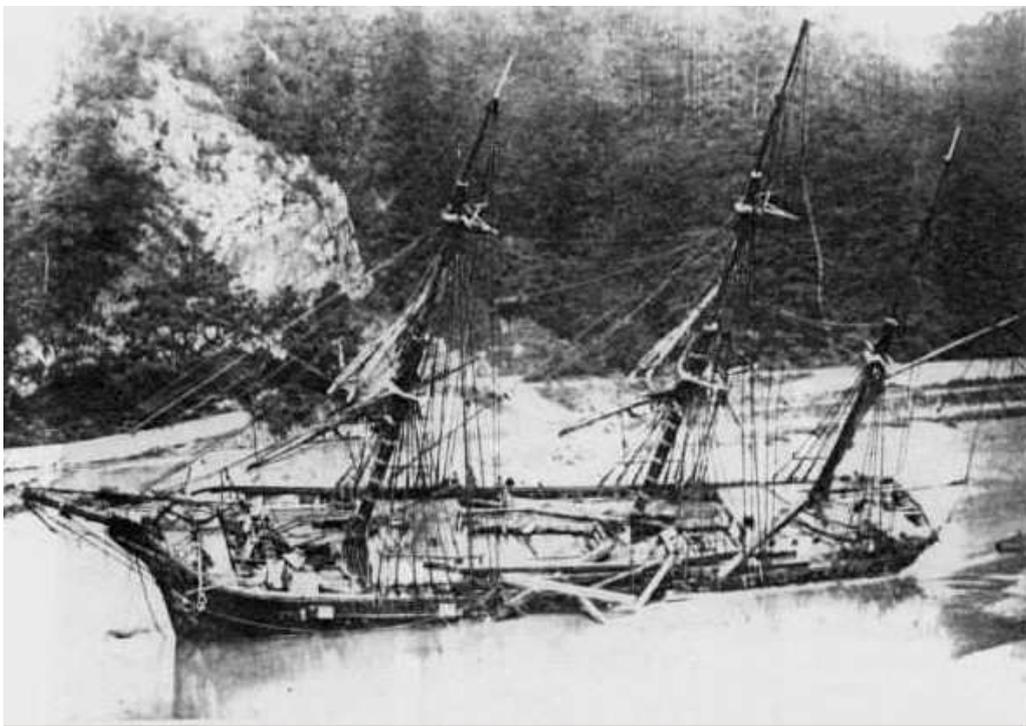
Indeed they were, the local MP's George Bankes [owner of Kingston Lacey] and Henry Ker Seymer [owner of Hanford House and extensive lands in Child Okeford] were joined by Sir Edward Baker [whose family gave the name to the Baker Arms], George Peach [owner of Millbrook House] three local clergymen and a host of other worthies. The only people missing were the poor, although it is unlikely they would have been admitted if they had turned up. This point however was a concern for “The Atlas” newspaper which adopted a rather tongue in cheek attitude to the society.

The occasion, we are told was *“most important”* the hall *“very numerously and respectably attended by the gentry and ladies of the, town and neighbourhood.”* *The Most Noble the Marquis of WESTMINSTER presided, and around his grace were grouped upon the platform honourable M.P.'s and gallant Colonels, worshipful justices and reverend incumbents and all these were met by one common impulse to devise some good for the labouring man. But the presence of even one of those labouring men whose benefit was designed, the local reporter was either unable to detect, or has omitted to chronicle. This absence is much to be regretted. It is no reflection upon the excellent intentions of the society, or the truly benevolent cause in which its members are engaged, to say that the proceedings at the Blandford meeting were only works of supererogation. To the well-dressed and well-read company assembled in the Town Hall, the graphic pictures of comfort and plenty in our Australian colonies were already sufficiently familiar.....It is upon the poor man's mind that this lesson should have been impressed.”*

In fact the poor had been suitably impressed for on Monday 5th March “*the first party of emigrants who have gone out under the auspices of this society started en route for Plymouth, to embark in the “Emigrant” Capt. Kemp bound to Sydney. The number of emigrants comprising this party was 134, more than half the number being from the parishes of Stourpaine and Durweston, about thirty from Child Okeford and the remainder from different villages in the vicinity of Blandford.*”

Before we come to the emigrant’s themselves it’s worth just considering what the trip itself had in store for them.

The “Emigrant”.



This was the ultimate fate of the emigrant. She foundered.

Imagine for a moment that you have never seen a train, or the sea, or a ship. Sounds unlikely today but in 1849 it was normal not to have experienced any of these. Then imagine, those of you with children, that you are going to be confined with them in a sailing ship for three months ,with probably only one encounter with land en route, where you will almost certainly not be let off the ship. Possibly you might die en route , possibly you might give birth or your children fall ill. This was what faced the thirty or so emigrants from Child Okeford when they set sail in the “Emigrant” a ship designed and purchased for the purpose of transporting colonists.

We have no account from them of what it was like but an excellent website describes it well.

<http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/stories/shipboard-19th-century-emigrant-experience-0>

What we do have however is a verbatim account from the Rector of Durweston, Sydney Godolphin Osborne of the trip to Plymouth. The mid-Victorian clergy were not known for their compassion or sense of social responsibility but the Revd Osborne, who wrote this account, was an exception. Despite himself being a “lord” he was well known for his vociferous defence of the poor using the Twitter of his day – the newspapers.

To the Salisbury and Winchester Gazette,

Sir,

“On Monday the 5th of this month 136 souls of ages varying from two years to 41 left my immediate neighbourhood under the auspices of the Blandford branch of the Colonisation Society Every pains had been taken to see that they were properly outfitted for the voyage and two respectable individuals volunteered to go in charge of them superintending their provisions etc on the road from Blandford to Taunton. At the latter place by the kindness of the railway companies third class carriages were found for them and they were sent on with little delay to Plymouth. At the Laira station I met them they having joined on the road by a fresh batch from another part of the county an earlier train having brought in large numbers from Somerset Wilts and Gloucestershire.

By taking all the flies on the stand and one omnibus we soon stowed away the women and children : the men were glad to walk the two miles in to the depot at Plymouth. To the great credit of our two superintendents and owing also to the precautionary rules we had drawn out for the journey not a single box was lost and all our live and dead stock for the good ship Emigrant arrived safe at the depot ; nor was any complaint made to me of ill conduct on the part of one of the travellers through a wearying journey in which none for 36 hours could have much if any rest.

Of the depot itself I need not say much it consists of large buildings within a gateway with extensive yards. These buildings are fitted up to receive the emigrants for the time they may be detained waiting for their ship and also to undergo the inspection of the medical officer and to receive certain canvass bags and other articles, part of their outfit furnished by the commissioners from deposit money paid by each emigrant. As to the nature of the depot arrangements its mess rooms laundries and dormitories although in some small matters of order and detail I could wish for some improvement I saw nothing to which I could make any reasonable objection. All the officers of the establishment seemed disposed to show every kindness to the emigrants and I found my people the next day after their nights rest quite happy and comfortable with nothing to complain of, all very busy writing home to tell of the wonders of a railway journey ending at a place where they looked out upon the sea and saw real ships.

I went on board three emigrant ships; to two of them I paid repeated visits. I saw the Emigrant of 753 tons the ship in which my poor were about to embark before even the bedding was come on board. I saw the Florentia for Adelaide with all her passengers on board having come down the channel with them in very heavy weather. I went on board the Lady Peel a few hours after she had embarked 180 Irish girls, bound for Sydney. I had therefore every opportunity of examining into

every detail of their economy. I was most kindly assisted by every officer of her Majesty's commissioners whose duties were connected with the inspection of the ships and the embarkation of the emigrants; they refused me no opportunity of obtaining every detail of information however minute which I was desirous of obtaining. It appeared to me that no precaution was omitted on the part of the Government to secure thoroughly safe and sound ships that they should be well found well manned and respectfully and skilfully commanded.

I have spoken of temporal matters; the emigrants are not neglected in spiritual matters; each ship I found again and again visited by one of the Plymouth clergy, a lady who seems to devote herself to this good work and a gentleman whom I believe to be an agent of the Pastoral Aid society. These good Samaritans seemed thoroughly united in their work. They were assiduous amongst the emigrants giving them Bibles Prayer books etc, providing work for the women for the voyage; advising them on their conduct seeking to form classes amongst them for mutual instruction etc. Nothing struck me more forcibly than the respect paid by the captains crews and all concerned to the persons who thus act amongst the emigrants. I can remember when a boatload of preachers, teachers and Bibles would not have met the respect and ready assistance I have here witnessed again and again. I was asked to baptize two infants born on the voyage down in the Florentia, just about to sail out again. The captain was himself present and took every means in his power to show not only his sense of the solemnity of the service but his sympathy for the rather trying position of the mothers.

Now Sir do not let me be misunderstood. I do not mean to say that the "between decks" of the emigrant with her 326 emigrating souls or in office language her 256.5 statute adults being Dorset Wilts Somerset and Gloucestershire labourers was an Elysium, a scene of perfect comfort and convenience;- no it is a folly to tell emigrants that a ship can afford to labouring men with large families all that they could wish or we could wish for them, But I am perfectly satisfied that whilst the diet is infinitely superior to anything they have ever been used to their accommodation by day and by night is as good as any reasonable being could expect to be at the command of so great numbers conveyed free of all expense, so great a distance, in a ship.

The single men's and single women's compartments and the infirmaries are except in the matter of ornament nearly as good in their accommodation as that of many a yacht in which nobleman live for months -superior to thousands of berths paid for by parties emigrating at their own expense. The crying evil is the noise and pranks of the very small children which until one has got use to it made the married peoples compartment literally a Babel. But as the parents did not seem to mind it, I suppose it was not so insupportable as it appeared to a looker on: however from my present experience I do not feel inclined to urge persons with many small children to emigrate; and I think the commissioners exercise a wise discretion in being chary of free passages in such cases.

By the kindness of a gentleman at Plymouth who put his yacht at my service I was enabled to go some little way out of the sound with my people; to the last I saw them cheerful, contented and happy. On the whole I saw no one reason to regret the pains I and my neighbours have taken to

launch there our poor fellow creatures on a sea of adventure which I trust will bear them to lands where their industry and honesty may win for them comforts for life denied them here.”

Rev. Sydney Godolphin Osborne March 1849

The Emigrants from Child Okeford

“At a Meeting of the Owners of Property in this Parish [Child Okeford] legally intitled to vote,... at the Church in this Parish on Thursday the 22nd day of February...it was resolved that the Churchwardens and Overseers [of the Poor] shall, and they are hereby directed to raise the sum of twenty five pounds as a fund for defraying the expenses of the emigration of poor persons having settlement in this parish and being willing to emigrate to be paid out of the rates raised or to be raised for the relief of the poor in this parish.”

In March 1848 some 30 villagers in Child Okeford had volunteered to emigrate to Australia aided by the money raised. They arrived on 7th June some three months later, after a very speedy voyage. Records of emigration before 1890 have not survived in England but the immigration records of the Australian authorities ensure that we know who they were. I am grateful to those descendants who have traced them and who have published their findings on Ancestry but even so there are a number of gaps in our story.

The White family was led by William [38] and his wife Lucy[35]. William was a shepherd and the couple had four children. William is mentioned in the Child Okeford census of 1841 but other than that we know nothing about him or the others whilst in this country. William died in 1879 and Lucy in 1900 in Parkes, New South Wales [NSW] about 360 km from Sydney. His children, with one exception all survived into the twentieth century and the oldest living, Mercy, died at 83 having had 15 children.

Of the second family, the Shorts, even less is known. There were clearly two family groups; the first was led by Henry aged 40 a farm labourer. Susan his wife was aged 24 and their two children were Eliza [3] and Emma an “infant”. It is highly possible that the latter was born en route . The second set of Shorts was led by Joseph aged 36 another farm labourer. His wife Elizabeth was 23 and they too had a 3 year old, George Edwin, and Larmia also an “infant”. No more is known of them.

The Norris family also had two parties sailing to Australia. William Norris was 32 and described as a groom. As a single man he would have travelled in the bows of the ship. Isaac Norris was Williams brother and was aged 49 when he left England with his wife, Mary and three children. He too was a groom, his son [18] a sawyer and his daughter [14] a house servant. One may assume that the Norris’s had not had an easy time in Child Okeford. Their father, Thomas, had been in gaol in Dorchester twice. The first time in 1817 he was committed for stealing barley,

and served two weeks. As was the custom then they recorded his appearance which included a number of cuts over the eyes indicating he had been fighting. The second time, in 1822, he was committed having abandoned his wife and children to be “chargeable”, that is left to depend on the poor rate. He was then given three months hard labour. Isaac himself had been in trouble, in 1844 he had served two months for “*vagrancy and leaving family chargeable.*” He had been committed by George Peach, owner of Millbrook House who was a local magistrate.

William and Isaac had three siblings who had previously emigrated to Australia and to say the least had not done very well. Ann their sister died in Freemantle Australia 1836 at the age of 32, she had given birth to 6 children and appears to have died shortly after the birth of the last one. Henry their brother died aged 33 in Camden Park NSW. They also had a brother Sampson who died in 1856 in unpleasant circumstances. He entered a river to get a cask of water and in attempting to drive out some bullocks who were in the river got trampled by them and drowned, whilst his wife was on the bank watching.

William got married shortly after arriving in NSW and he and his wife, Mary-Anne had seven children before she died at the age of 35 a year after their last child. He survived until 1883 when he died aged 65. For Isaac his days of abandoning his family were over; his wife Mary died in 1893 when she was 94 and he died three years later at the age of 86- they had been married 63 years.

The largest single family were the Gullivers. William Gulliver, the second to bear that Christian name, was 38 and is recorded in the 1841 census as a farm labourer, living in Gold Hill roughly where Aplans close is today. Life had not been entirely smooth for him either. In 1834 His father had been committed to a months hard labour in Dorchester Gaol for stealing hurdles and the prison records show that at some stage he had had small pox. William [2nd] had married Sarah Lyne from Holwell in 1833 and by the time they embarked for Australia they had five children, four girls and a boy who was named William like his father. Another son was to be born to them in Australia.

They settled in Maitland NSW and William 2nd died in 1865 aged 54. Sarah had a sad end; after her husbands death she lodged with another lady in Maitland but was becoming increasingly “feeble and getting of weak intellect.” On 16th May 1878 she told her landlady she was going for a walk and was later found drowned in a pool under a local railway bridge. She was 68.

William Gulliver [2nd] had a number of children and we cannot detail them all here but the life of Jane Gulliver is interesting. Her occupation when she landed in Sydney was given as, “housemaid” indicating that she had already been put to work. She was just 16. When she was 19 she married and with her husband of 48 years, John Hall, she eventually had 12 children. They established a mail post and then post office in what was then the outback in Tamworth NSW before moving to Hallsville some 420 km from Sydney. A photograph of her is typical of the time; a stern unsmiling woman gazes out at you but you should never judge a book by its cover. At some time after 1877 “*she found the Christ her soul longed for*” and became a very active

Methodist. On her death in 1914 there were numerous memorials published to her. She was a woman whose *“piety was free from ostentation”*. *“The kindness of her disposition, the unselfishness of her nature, her spontaneous eagerness to do good...infused around her and atmosphere of sweetness and geniality.”*

In 1917 *“an old and esteemed resident of Dunmore”*, her brother, William [3rd] Gulliver died aged 75 after a *“strenuous life engaged in agricultural pursuits.”* He had been sexton of his church for over 30 years.

And so ends the story of 30 emigrants from Child Okeford. Did they regret their decision? We can never know as none left memoirs. Looking at all of their fates it was pretty mixed. A daughter of William Gulliver died aged 12, a son died aged 32 leaving a wife and four year old child, but many lived to a grand age and the size of the families that many of their descendants had, indicates that many were successful and thrived. Australia provided more than economic benefits however. If you examine the newspapers in England, at least until the first world war, you will not find obituaries of erstwhile housemaids, or agricultural labourers, no matter how virtuous they had been in morals or strenuous they had been in work. But Australia was built by such as these and it valued them in a way their home country never did.