



ST. GEORGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

SPONSORED BY ROCKDALE MUNICIPAL COUNCIL

53 Bruce Street,
BEXLEY.
8th March, 1968.

Dear Friend and Member,

The next meeting of the above Society will be held as follows:-

Date: Friday Evening Next, 15th March, 1968, at 8 p.m.

Place: Council Chamber, Town Hall, Princes Highway, Rockdale.

Our President, Mr. D.H. Sinclair, will present a paper of interest to members. Subject - "Frederick Ward, Captain Thunderbolt".

Would lady members please bring a plate.

Supper Roster. Mrs. M. Coghlan (O.C.), Mrs. B. Perkins,
Mrs. E. Sinclair, Miss E. McCartney, Mrs. K. Austin.

D. H. Sinclair,

R. W. Rathbone,

President.

Hon. Secretary.

58.4813.

EXHIBITION OF TEAPOTS. Have you a teapot? Is it your
pride and joy? Has it a story?

Bring it to our March meeting when we will be having an
exhibition of teapots.

OUTING TO MANLY AND WARRINGAH. An all day excursion to
the historic Manly-Warringah area will be held on Saturday,
23rd March, 1968, leaving the Rockdale Town Hall at 9 a.m. Full
details will be available at the meeting.

THE NAPPER FAMILY. PIONEERS OF MUDDY CREEK, ROCKDALE.
 Gifford Eardley. NSW.

About the year 1855 four sons of the Napper family, Charles, Edmund, Enos and George, left their home in Somersetshire, England, to seek their fortunes in Australia. The family name, incidentally, is a trade-name denoting one who was engaged in napping, i. e., the raising of the nap, or pile, on various kinds of cloth, particularly woollen goods. Their home County, Somerset, a land of soft tree-clad hills, has long been noted for its flocks of sheep and the excellent quality of its woven fabrics.

The four brothers settled in Victoria, but soon came to Sydney where Enos Napper took over a large parcel of land at Randwick, situated between what is now Avoca Street and Coogee Beach. The family name is perpetuated to this day in Napper Street, Coogee. This land was cleared of its natural growth, and by dint of arduous work on the part of the four brothers, a market vegetable garden was established.

In due time the brothers went their own devious ways. Edmond settled at Ulmarra, an estate of 150 acres on the Clarence River, whilst George became a stone-mason, specialising in tomb-stones for the adjacent Waverley Cemetery and general building work in that area. Enos remained on the farm at Randwick, assisted by Charles, until the latter found a suitable area of fertile land to commence gardening on his own account.

Charles Napper was first attracted to the West Botany district by an advertisement detailing an auction sale of land at Lady Robinson's Beach. He saddled his horse and rode out to watch the proceedings. Thirty acres, bordering the shore line of Lady Robinson's Beach, where the Hotel Brighton now stands, was offered to unwilling buyers at £1. per acre. Charles Napper was not interested and rode back to Randwick thoroughly disgusted at a day being wasted. To quote his own words - "It was only barren sandhills and would not grow even a blooming cabbage". This description was correct from his point of view as he was seeking rich bottom land capable of being intensely cultivated.

However, the journey was not altogether wasted as he had observed an area of lush wilderness near the head of the tidal portion of Dark or Muddy Creek. In 1857 he purchased 130 acres of this alluvial land, much of it being swamp and sandhill country, which had its western frontage against the then incipient West Botany Street and extending eastwards to Moate Avenue. Sam Warren's property was bordered on the southern alignment whilst McIntyre Avenue formed the northern boundary. These various street boundaries, of course, belong to a much later period than that of Charles Napper's land purchase of 1857.

The clearing of the land began, a slow and laborious process, as the surface was covered with virgin forest on the higher and drier portion, and the lowlying section, against the creek, was matted with

a dense growth of casuarina (or Swamp-oak) trees, tea-tree, lilly-pilly, and other water-loving vegetation. First and foremost, the creek had to be cleared of obstructions in the way of submerged logs, belts of reeds and thickets of rushes, the haunt of tiger-snakes, in order to avoid the periodical floodings which occurred under wet climatic conditions. The banks of the stream were raised to give better drainage, a muddy, messy job carried out with the assistance of voluntary labour, afforded by nearby settlers as a matter of common interest.

It is surmised that during the period of the initial clearing of his land, until such time as a small two-roomed cottage had been erected on the site, Charles Napper continued to reside at Randwick. This little building, modelled after the design of a rural farmhouse of his native Somerset, lay at right-angles to the later constructed West Botany Street, and was eventually utilised as the separate kitchen to a larger four-roomed cottage subsequently built adjacent to its western end, of which more anon.

The new edifice, according to report, did not possess a name, and was built of hand-made bricks, presumably obtained from the primitive brick-kilns which were in operation on the spit of clay land which projected into Pat Moore's Swamp either on, or in, the immediate vicinity of Thomas Mascord's orchard and garden at East Kogarah. A span roof of galvanised iron had brick-filled gables at each end, whilst on the northern side a narrow-width verandah ran the full length of the building, the sloping roof of which protected the entrance doorways and window apertures of each of the two rooms.

The kitchen, with its in-built chimney breast flush with the outside of the western wall of the building, was a cosy room, lit by a pair of small-paned windows inserted one on either side of the verandah doorway. As usual in these small farm cottages the kitchen formed the main living room of the family, and against its southern wall, but snuggled beneath the same roof spread, were two narrow compartments which were essential to the comfort of the occupants. The easternmost of these enclosures formed the bathroom, where overall ablutions were carried out per medium of a circular iron wash-tub, whilst that on the west housed the scullery, the latter being served by a doorway from the kitchen and another, leading through the western wall, gave access to the well and the grounds beyond. A third doorway led from the scullery direct to the bathroom. For functional planning this arrangement was excellent, as the men returning from their toil, oftentimes muddy from the market garden, were enabled to clean up before entering the spotless precincts of the kitchen.

The open fireplace in the kitchen, with its chimney capped by a "Venetian" pot of terra cotta, was provided at first with a "Colonial" oven, an appurtenance which was heated by fire on its top surface as well as another fire placed beneath. This arrangement was subsequently replaced by a cast-iron stove, or range, which proved much more convenient to the cook. Pots, pans, and cast-iron kettles, were

originally supported by a couple of iron bars laid across the uppermost fire, where they provided an excellent example of the old adage of "The pot calling the kettle black". Several shelves were fastened to the walls for the storage of household crockery and other bric-a-brac of a domestic nature, including the inevitable tea-caddy. There was a small pantry for the foodstuffs, but to keep the butter cool it was necessary to place the dish in a bucket and lower it, at the end of a rope, to near the water level of the well, a system also in use for the setting of jellies and the better preservation of the weekend joint. At first the glow of the fire, augmented by the fitful gleam of a candle flame, provided sufficient illumination of a night to make the all-pervading darkness visible. A wide-necked pickle bottle was most serviceable in keeping the candle in an up-right position until such time as funds were available for the purchase of the more efficient kerosene lamp, which was then coming into general use.

The household water supply was taken from a large cement-rendered well, covered by a wooden platform to prevent accidents, and located at the south-western side of the two-roomed cottage. A centrally placed and lidded hole in the platform enabled water to be hauled up by means of a bucket dangling at the end of a rope. This was a back-breaking job, and it was not long before a cast-iron pump, fitted with a gracefully curved handle, was installed.

The solitary bedroom of the cottage was located at the eastern end of the building and was entered from a doorway opening from the long side verandah. A single window, inserted in the northern wall of the room east of the doorway, gave the necessary daylight and ventilation conditions. In later years this room was known to the younger generation of the Napper family as "Uncle Sam's bedroom". A small out-shut, the walls and roof of corrugated galvanised iron, was placed against the southern wall of the bedroom, to house the spades, rakes, watering cans, and other workaday tools necessary for cultivation purposes. The stable, built of rough bush timber, occupied a site a little to the north-east of the cottage. There was a paling fenced enclosure, of rectangular shape, abutting on the northern side of the building, which protected a small flower garden and a fig tree. Over the years this fig tree grew into a grotesque shape and provided an abundance of fruit, a circumstance not over-looked by the younger generation of Napper boys, and also the local bird population, much to the annoyance of Charles Napper, Senior.

The area was particularly noted for the swarms of flies which came by day, and the hordes of locally bred mosquitos which came by night. It was estimated that there were at least five thousand mosquitos to each person living in the immediate district. Every bed was fitted with mosquito nets, a very hot and stuffy enclosure in the summer months, but the only then known method of avoiding the constant attack of these blood-sucking insects. Around the cottage, particularly in the early evening, it was customary to light a fire in an old wash-tub, fitted with a false bottom and place it near the verandah. The flames were covered with cakes of dried cow-manure which sent up clouds of

acrid, pungent smoke, which permeated the house and its environs, and made life most miserable for the mosquitos, and also for their intended victims.

After the tree-felling and subsequent burning of the resulting debris had been completed, attention was given to the levelling of the market garden and the formation of the various rectangular shaped growing beds. Watering ponds were sunk and strict attention paid to the drainage of the land which tended to be water-logged, although the soil was excellent for the purpose intended. Watering the vegetables was carried out by means of a large watering can, a slow and laborious job which had to be repeated daily throughout the hot summer months. Cabbages, lettuce, peas and beans formed the usual crop, but few carrots and parsnips were planted as they were slow in their growth. Potatoes proved somewhat of a problem due to the fact that a dry spell was generally encountered around November, before the normal harvesting time, which usually resulted in a small crop of marketable tubers being obtained, the smaller sizes were worthless apart from providing pig food. However, by continued experimentation Charles Napper gained a measure of control over the adverse situation, a circumstance which was not lost on his nearby neighbours. Evidently, the said Charles must have been a leg-puller of no mean order and when questioned about his dry-farming method would let them into the otherwise closely guarded secret. It transpired that when planting the seed potatoes in rows he placed an onion plant between them. With the dry spell the potatoes, as was their wont, cried aloud for water and still more water. This was where the onions played their part in the scheme. Their pungent aroma would make the potatoes eyes water, thus providing the necessary moisture, and assuring a good crop.

The produce was gathered daily, washed, bagged, or tied into bundles, and then trundled by wheel-barrow to the stable and cart shed. At about 2 a. m. the following morning the horse would be harnessed and the long trek begun to the City markets. The first section of the journey would be through the splendid greenery bordering the bush track, following roughly the alignment of the present day derelict course of Eve Street, which skirted the hillocks, stumps, and bogs, until Tempe Dam was reached, thence by the Cooks River Road to Sydney-town. After selling the vegetables to his best advantage Charles Napper made a round of the various livery stables, gathering together a load of the ever necessary horse manure, before carting same to his property, which would be usually gained about 10 a. m.

The raising of pigs became of great interest financially and the porkers supplied to the local butchers called for their enthusiastic comment. How did he manage to produce that lean streaky bacon, so much desired by housewives, was a question frequently asked. Finally the broad-shouldered leg-puller let the trade into his secret. He stated that he deliberately raised a long thin breed of pig, in order to start the process. Then carefully watching their growth he would feed them with all they would eat for one full week, this would result in a layer of fat being formed. The following week the animals would

be almost starved, whereby the desired streak of lean meat was formed. This process of alternate feasting and fasting was continued for some six weeks, after which the butchers found that the condition of the flesh was greatly to their liking.

Whilst on the subject of pigs, it should be mentioned that a roughly fenced "hide-out" was discovered in Napper's Bush, in the vicinity of Lady Robinson's Beach, where pigs, obviously stolen from nearby farms, were slaughtered at night and the carcasses dismembered. Next day delectable pieces of pork, reclining in a fern lined wicker basket, were peddled to settlers in the vicinity on a no questions being asked basis.

Another profitable sideline was the keeping of poultry and Charles Napper, amongst others, arranged for a meeting to be held in the Wesleyan Chapel at Rockdale, where a representative of the Agricultural Department of New South Wales gave an address on the subject. The meeting was well attended and one old Irish biddy brought up the burning question of "how to distinguish young cockerils from young pullets?" The representative suggested facetiously "that she dig a couple of spadefuls of earth, from a damp place in the garden, when she would find that the male birds would only eat the male worms and the hens only those of their own sex". The ancient colleen thought this advice over carefully but, as the representative was preparing to take his leave, she button-holed him with the question. How would she be able to tell the male worms from the female worms? With true Public Service diplomacy he told her that she would have to question a speaker from the Entomology Department, as he himself specialised in poultry problems and possessed little knowledge of the sexual organism of worms.

It is difficult today to envisage the isolated position of the Napper farmstead as in the early days of its occupation. There were few local shops and, should Mrs. Napper decide to go to Sydney, it was necessary for her to walk over the indifferent and oftentimes muddy bush tracks to Tempe. Here a horse-drawn omnibus was boarded which traversed the windings of Cooks River Road to Newtown Railway Station, where the train was caught for the Redfern Terminal (not to be confused with the present Redfern Station). Then came a further journey by horse-drawn omnibus to reach the shopping marts of the city. A certain amount of shopping was also carried out at Newtown, particularly with the old established firm of Hatty's (later Brennans) who delivered purchased goods to the various West Botany farms, on specified days, per medium of a pair of donkeys harnessed to a small donkey cart.

Charles Napper was a big man physically, weighing about sixteen stone and measuring over six feet in height, a pioneer in every meaning of the word. The lack of good road conditions to his farmlands was a constant source of trouble, particularly under wet weather conditions. As other nearby settlers were in the same predicament he instigated a public movement to seek Government assistance in providing better access facilities to the district of St. George. He rode his old pony

from place to place, covering all the settlers between Cooks River and Georges River, in an effort to obtain the necessary signatures to his petition. He was instrumental, amongst others, in having the West Botany Municipal Council formed, with its first headquarters in the old settled village of Arncliffe. The first meeting to form this august body was held at the Tempe Hotel on February 13th, 1871. Charles Napper served the new municipality as an alderman between the years 1871 and 1875.

Over the years Charles Napper and his good wife were blessed with five sons and four daughters, the boys being named Joseph, James, William, John, and Samuel, and the girls Ann, Emma, Sarah (who died at an early age), and Martha. For the record it should be mentioned that in due course Joseph married Therese Herman, a daughter of an early local German settler, James married Mary Ann Bowmer, William married Elizabeth Bowmer, John married Annie Arnold, Samuel married Mary Donahue, Ann married Benjamin Bowmer, Emma married Alf Bowmer, and Martha married Frank Stanley. This latter pair went to live in Western Australia. The happy incidence of the marital relationships between the Napper's and the Bowmer's is explained by the simple fact that the two families lived next door to one another, whilst the other partners were recruited from nearby households.

Once his family began to increase, both in number and stature, Charles Napper found it necessary to erect a larger four-roomed cottage. A site was chosen immediately against the western end of the original two-roomed edifice, the latter building still being utilised, insofar as its kitchen facilities were concerned, whilst the boys were now relegated to the original bedroom.

The new cottage, rectangular in shape, was of the double-frontaged brick type and possessed a narrow front-verandah, with enclosed ends, running its full width. The front doorway gave entrance from the verandah into the parlour, which, together with the dining room, formed the two southern rooms both being provided with fire-places against their southern walls, the flues being united to emerge, above the galvanised iron roof, in a squat chimney capped by a terracotta pot of Venetian design. The "Best" bedroom, and the girls bedroom, entered from the parlour and the dining room respectively, were ranged along the northern side of the cottage and had their separate windows inserted in the northern wall. A back doorway led from the dining room to a spacious rear verandah which connected with the western end of the verandah belonging to the earlier cottage. A small front garden was enclosed by a picket fence in order to circumvent animal interest being bestowed upon the flowering plants within.

In due course, the large Napper estate was subdivided and some sixty acres of the sandhill country, wild scrubby land, was sold about 1900 to a real estate firm for the sum of £600. The market gardening property, from which their living was earned, was divided between three of the sons, Joseph, William, and Samuel. Joseph lived in a cottage with a five acre market garden at the rear, to which access

was gained from Francis Avenue, as the one time bush track is now named. William lived in a cottage placed northwards along Francis Avenue and also had a large market garden which comprised some six acres. Portion of this property later came into the hands of the Brighton Bowling Club. Samuel Napper lived in the original homestead and farmed its garden, being succeeded in this property by his only daughter, Miss Gladys Napper.

James, the second eldest son of Charles Napper, after his marriage to Mary Bowmer, left Rockdale to assist his Uncle Edmund Napper with his dairy farm at Ulmarra, on the Clarence River, about nine miles downstream from South Grafton. Unfortunately a succession of river flood ensued which forced him, together with his wife and five children (Rose, Charlie, Lily, Clarence William, and Arthur) to return to Rockdale during the year 1892. Here he built a brick cottage on his three acre portion of the family property, near the southern end of Francis Avenue, and eventually entered into partnership with Ben Bowmer, his brother-in-law, to commence business as produce merchants at Rockdale township. Their first premises were located in Bay Street at the western end of and adjacent to the burial ground of the Wesleyan Chapel, which is now the Methodist Church. Their next move was to Rocky Point Road on property owned by the Walz family, which later came into the hands of the Commonwealth Bank. In recent years this site has been cleared of its buildings and is now a grassy sward adjacent to The Seven Ways at the junction of Princes Highway and Bay Street.

John Napper, the fourth son of Charles Napper Senior, who did not follow the market gardening proclivities of the rest of his family, entered the employ of the Rockdale Municipal Council, where he became an overseer, a responsible position which he held for some thirty years or so.

Charles Napper, Senior, married a second time, and about 1905 left his farmstead to reside in a small cottage near the southern end of Farr Street, Rockdale. He died at the age of eighty-two on August 27th, 1912, leaving seven children and forty grand-children to mourn their loss. He was an outstanding pioneer, in every sense of the word, and had done much to achieve the early development of the fertile eastern farmlands of Rockdale.

Reverting to the affairs of James Napper, the business man of the Napper family, we find that after his return to Rockdale in 1892, and in the course of time, he added Cecil, Ivy, Roy and Wesley, to his flock of children. His produce business flourished, and eventually three of his children, namely Clarence William, Arthur, and Cecil, were admitted into the business, concentrating their activities on the delivery side of their initial training.

Clarence William Napper, the second son of James Napper, was educated at Rockdale Public School and later studied business methods at Stott and Hoare's Commercial College in Sydney. After

completing his studies he travelled the North Coast districts on behalf of Messrs. T. C. Davis and Company, and later became delivery clerk for Messrs. Shepherd, Harvey and Company. In 1911 he became a partner in his father's business at Rocky Point Road, Rockdale, which then became known as J. Napper and Sons. In 1919 Clarence William took over the business from his father. In 1948 the produce business was reconstructed and new premises at 541 to 545 Princes Highway (formerly Rocky Point Road) were occupied. The new store was regarded as being the most up-to-date of its kind in the Sydney Metropolitan area, as it was replete with all manner of labour saving equipment, and thus eliminated much of the heavy manual work which is generally associated with the produce industry.

It is of interest to note that at one period six horses and eight carts were employed at the original shop in Bay Street, the horses being stabled on James Napper's property at Francis Avenue. A large motor lorry was eventually purchased to convey produce from the City markets, and later two smaller motor vehicles were obtained for local deliveries, together with a "Baby Austin" for the use of the firm's traveller when canvassing for orders. An average of 1000 bags of chaff, brought in from the country districts, was sold each month to customers in the St. George District and also those residing in the Sutherland Shire, together with a corresponding quantity of corn, oats, hay, and straw. The local poultry farm proprietors generally ordered collectively, and on a monthly basis, some 50 tons of bran and pollard and 1200 sacks of wheat. In addition to the above the firm handled large quantities of firewood, coal, and coke which was sold and distributed for household use in an era when domestic fires were in general use for both cooking and heating purposes.

In recent years, owing to the advent of motor transport, which replaced the horse drawn vehicles, and the fact that the local dairymen and poultry farmers were literally forced out of their respective farms, the firm of J. Napper and Sons realised that it was necessary to enter the fruit and vegetable trade in addition to their now severely curtailed produce business. A branch store was opened at Hurstville, and another at Brighton le Sands, both shops being placed under the charge of grandsons of William Clarence Napper. It should be mentioned that the latter gentleman has seven sons, nine grandsons, and three great-grandsons to carry on the family name. He has led an extremely busy life, both in business and civic activities, and has fulfilled a period of five years as President of the Rockdale Chamber of Commerce and six years as President of the Sydney and Suburban Produce Merchants Association. He has been connected, as a steward and trustee, with the Rockdale Methodist Church for over sixty years, and also spent fifteen years as an Alderman of the Rockdale Municipal Council, representing that body on the St. George County Council for a term of three years. As Senior Vice President of the St. George Historical Society, he has presented many papers illustrative of the early history of Rockdale in particular which are now recorded in the archives of the State. In addition he has been interested in the field of sport, a truly remarkable man.

The market gardening activities on the original farmland of the Nappers at Muddy Creek ceased to function about the 1930 period, and the enclosed area came into use for agistment purposes by several local tradesmen. The daughter of the last owner (Samuel Napper), Miss Gladys Napper, lived in the old homestead until about 1960, when the property of five acres, together with the residence, was sold to the Elizabethan Bowling Club. This organisation built a neat modern cottage, to the east of the original home, which Miss Napper now occupies on a life tenancy basis. The old homestead was then bulldozed flat and its materials used for filling purposes. Upon the site there now stands an ingeniously constructed clubhouse, of which the members may well be proud, standing as it does on ground hallowed by the former activities of the Nappers, one of the principal pioneering families of Rockdale.

In conclusion, it should be mentioned that after the firm had extended its activities to Hurstville, about the mid-thirties, the family became greatly admired by the local canine fraternity to such an extent that a paragraph was inserted in the local press. It reads as follows:

"All the dogs round Forest Road, Hurstville, go about with happy contented looks on their faces. They're a friendly little bunch of pooches; none of this sidling up to each other, stiff legged, hackles up waiting for the other one to start something. They jog down the street together, sniff at the same things and when they feel like it, they hop down to Napper's produce store, where there's always a supply of dog biscuits in little trays. There's no hit and grab about it, they have a look at the different trays. Sometimes they're not feeling very hungry so they have a little coloured one, just to keep each other company. If one fellow's been out all night he might have a couple of big ones. When they've all got one each they look around to see where to have their morning tea. They mostly sit in the gutter in front of the shop. Mr. Napper never worries - they're his friends, and after all, what 's a biscuit between pals".

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