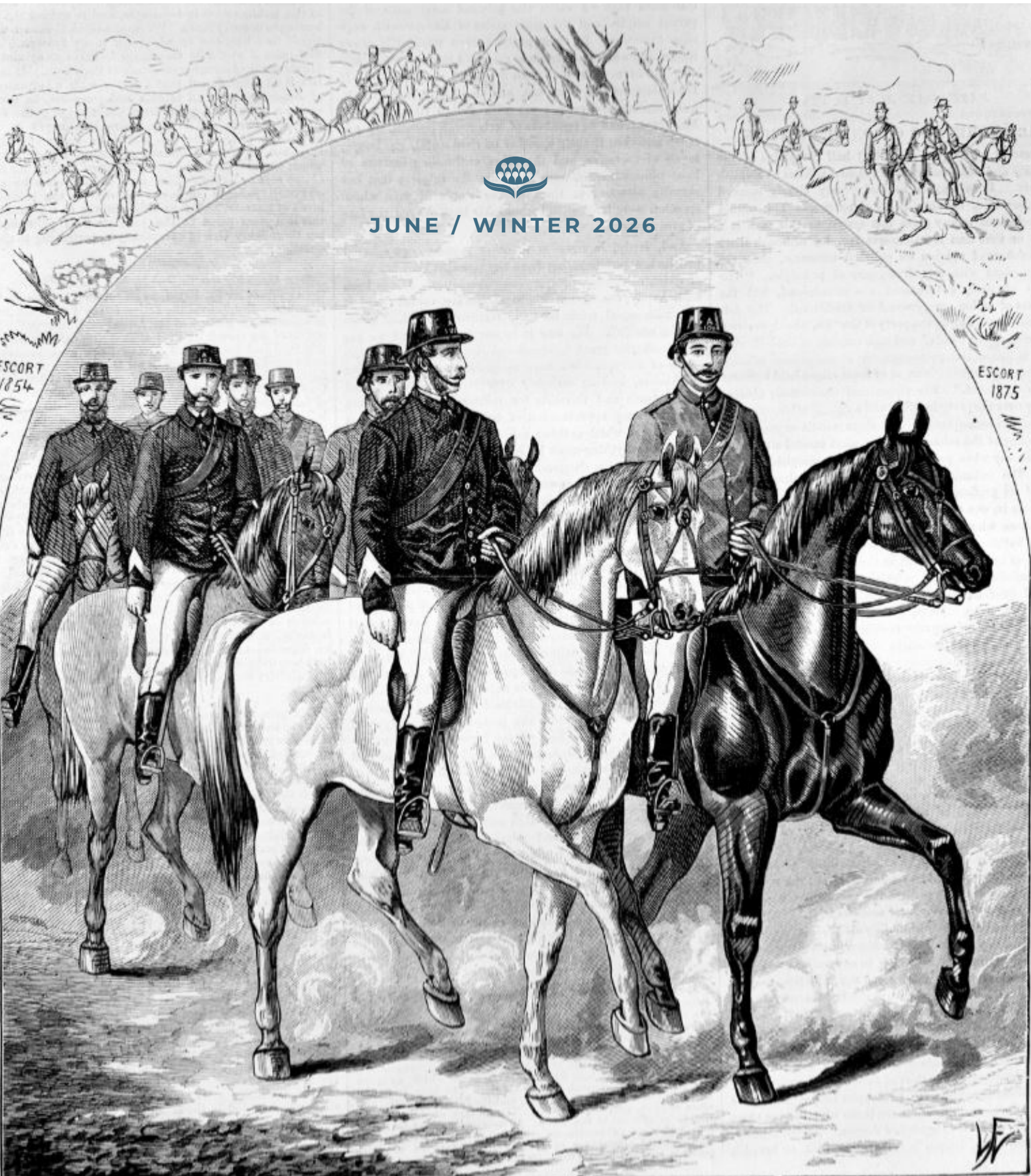


Descent

MAGAZINE OF THE SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIAN GENEALOGISTS



JUNE / WINTER 2026



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Descent

June / Winter 2026 [Volume 56 Part 2]
ISSN 0084 9731

Cover Image

Victorian Mounted Police Force, Wood engraving published in the *Australasian Sketcher with Pen and Pencil*, 10 July 1875, State Library of Victoria.

Editor

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Acknowledgment of Country

We acknowledge the First Nations peoples and we pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging. The Society acknowledges the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, the traditional custodians of the land on which Richmond Villa stands.

Editorial Committee

Danielle Tebb, Pauline Weeks, Tracey Grady,
Heather Garnsey, Philippa Shelley Jones, Janette Pelosi

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President's Message

PHILIPPA SHELLEY JONES

New Chief Executive Officer

Since our last edition of *Descent*, there has been a changing of the guard at the helm of the Society. Last month we farewelled Ruth Graham, who is now taking a well-earned break before embarking on her next adventure — we look forward to seeing what that adventure will be and hope to see much of Ruth in the future as she dons her member cap.

In Ruth's shoes is Mark Burdack, who brings a multifaceted background across the health, government and social sectors. Mark has held senior executive and governance roles and has a strong track record leading complex organisations and driving transformational change. Mark has already made an energetic start, and the Board looks forward to working with him as we explore new opportunities to strengthen the Society, support future growth and ensure long-term financial sustainability.

AGM

On 20 May 2026 the Society held its first fully online AGM since the COVID-19 pandemic prompted a virtual format in 2020. Congratulations to Peter Homan and Pauline Weeks, our two newest directors appointed that evening. I also congratulate the successful graduates of the Diploma of Family Historical Studies: Judith Charlton, Kathleen Hackett, Amy MacKintosh, Louise Millar-Hoffman and Belinda Tiffen.

Premises

In preparing for the President's Report for the AGM, I revisited the March 2016 edition of *Descent* to reflect on what was happening ten years ago. I was struck by the following comments from then President, Martyn Killion:

It is hard to believe that a decade ago the Society was in the midst of fundraising to acquire new premises. 2016 marks the tenth anniversary of our purchase of Level 2, 379 Kent Street and 28 February 2017 marks ten years since our library opened there for business.

At the time we put much work into making the new premises meet our members' requirements, ensuring that we brought to that building our most heavily used resources and fitting it out with the latest IT equipment. It has served us well, and was certainly a vast improvement on the old Rumsey Hall building which, while lacking air conditioning and lifts, excelled in dampness and mould! The financial support given by members to our Building Appeal at the time was extraordinarily generous and the decision to move out of the rental market and to buy our own premises was a sound one.

We could not have predicted then the changes that have taken place in genealogical research in the past ten years. The expansion of commercial online genealogy and the growth in social media have changed forever the environment in which the Society operates. If we were

setting up a new library and resource centre at 2/379 Kent Street today it would look very different!

The figures contained in the 2015 Annual Report starkly demonstrate these changes. Library usage in 2015 was down 50% compared to figures achieved in our first year of operation at 2/379 Kent (6880 visits in 10 months in 2007 compared with 3983 visits for all of 2015). Many parts of our book and microform collection, which were so carefully selected and transferred to our new library ten years ago are now rarely used by members, as they can now find many of the same resources digitised online for free or available through commercial websites. Indeed, fewer members now visit to use our resources, with only around 20% of our total membership coming in to do research in 2015. And the backbone of our financial stability — our membership — which stood at 6291 in 2007, now stands at 4387.

Two things stood out to me from Martyn's observations:

- Twenty years ago, when Level 2/379 was purchased, the new building was seen as a vast improvement on one which lacked air-conditioning and lifts and "excelled in dampness and mould"; and
- unpredictable changes in genealogical research over the following ten years led to dramatic drops in library usage and membership.

Ten years after Martyn wrote these words, we face the same dilemma on both counts. Richmond Villa continues to deteriorate, with relatively little improvement having been made to the ageing building during the 45 years of our tenancy. We understand the pressures on government and the many demands on the public purse, acknowledging the NSW Government's longstanding commitment to the Society over many decades. However, despite consistent attempts by management and the Board to quietly engage with the government's property manager to get a plan to remediate the structural problems that have contributed to repeated flooding of Richmond Villa since 2018, we have so far been unable to secure a commitment to a timeline for the development of a restoration plan, or investment in this critical piece of our national heritage. At the same time, usage patterns at 379 Kent Street continue to evolve as genealogical research increasingly shifts online.

As we continue to tackle the WHS concerns at the Villa and deal with slow-moving negotiations with the government landlord around our tenancy arrangements, we appreciate the patience and flexibility shown by staff, volunteers and library visitors as we reconfigure 379 Kent Street to support increased operational needs while adapting to changing patterns of use. Please be assured that the Board and management remain focused on securing appropriate premises solutions for the Society and on preserving the integrity and accessibility of our archives as a central priority.

John Price (1855–1917)

BY VIKKI LEESON

John Price (1855–1917), miner and publican, was born on 1 January 1855 in Llangattock, Breconshire, Wales, son of Joseph Price, miner and publican of the Prince of Wales Inn, Llangattock, and his wife Margaret, née Jones. After receiving a basic education, John left school at a young age and commenced work in the Llangattock coal mine where his father and brothers also worked.

John married in about 1875 in Breconshire. The name of his wife is unknown, and she died in childbirth a few months after the marriage along with their newborn child. In 1879 John left Wales and sailed to Victoria, Australia aboard the *Cuzco*, arriving in Melbourne on 2 May 1879. He immediately headed for the Victorian goldfields and commenced work in the Sandhurst (Bendigo) gold mine.

On 2 February 1884, John married Elizabeth Robbins, the youngest child of Welsh miner Charles Robbins and his wife Ann née Rowland from Eaglehawk, Victoria. John and Elizabeth had four children together before Elizabeth died in 1901, giving birth to their fifth child.

In 1892, John became the licensee of the Camp Hotel in Eaglehawk. In 1894 he was charged with neglecting to deface the beer duty stamp on a keg of beer in his hotel, a requirement of the Beer Duty Act. John claimed that his wife had tapped the keg in his absence and, without instructions, had unknowingly neglected to deface the stamps. Nevertheless, he was found guilty and received a fine. John remained the licensee of the Camp Hotel until shortly before his death in 1917.

In 1895, John was involved in what became known as the “Deverall Testimonial Scandal”. Fundraising was conducted by the Deverall Testimonial Fund, of which John was a member, to purchase a locket and chain for a Constable Deverall. John and another committee member, John Kelly, made the purchase from a local jeweller, Herbert Credgington. Kelly, Price and Credgington were charged with conspiracy to defraud when it was discovered that receipts for the purchase had been falsified. John Price admitted being present at the time of the purchase but denied receiving any money. John Kelly was



John Price (1855–1917)
Seymour family photo collection

found guilty and fined £300. Price and Credgington were fined £50 each for their part in the incident.

Despite the controversy of his criminal conviction, John was an active and well-respected member of the Eaglehawk community. He was heavily involved in fundraising and local causes, sitting on multiple committees, many of which were held at the Camp Hotel. He was president of the Eaglehawk Football Club (1908–1912), chair of the Borough Band Sports Committee (1908), and chair of the Conglomeratiofun Committee (1908–1909), a group that organised fetes and fun local activities.

John was heavily involved in the Eaglehawk Masonic Lodge and was chair of the Loyal Catherine Lodge, Bendigo (1891–1893).

An accomplished tenor singer and keen musician, he was a member of the Eaglehawk Minstrels and sang regularly at local events. In 1890 he was presented with a gold medal as the musical director of the Sandhurst Eisteddfod.

John retired as licensee of the Camp Hotel in January 1917 after several months of ill health caused by throat cancer. Surgery in March that year was unsuccessful, and he died on 19 August 1917. John was given a master mason’s funeral and is buried in Eaglehawk Cemetery with his wife Elizabeth and their baby daughter. He was survived by two sons and two daughters.

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SAG runs a Certificate in Genealogical Research to assist members to hone their research skills and explore areas of study they may not be familiar with. The course also functions as a prerequisite to our Diploma in Family Historical Studies. One exercise is to write a biography of an ancestor between 500 and 750 words in the style of an *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry. In each issue of *Descent*, we feature one such biography.

IN SEARCH OF ...

POLICE & LAW ENFORCEMENT

by Ruth Graham

Across every family tree, there are moments where our ancestors intersect with the structures of authority, order, and justice. Sometimes they upheld it. Sometimes they challenged it. And sometimes, they simply found themselves caught within it.

In my own research, I have uncovered policemen in Ireland and Australia, men whose lives were shaped by duty, community expectation and, at times, the tensions of the societies they served. These discoveries prompted me to reflect more broadly: how many of our ancestors, in ways large or small, were part of the system of policing and justice?

This world opens a different kind of archive: one that reveals behaviour, conflict, responsibility, and resilience. It invites us to see our ancestors not just as names on certificates, but as active participants in the societies in which they lived.

Some stood on the frontline of law enforcement, as police officers or constables maintaining order in towns and cities, or as detectives piecing together the fragments of more serious crimes. Others may have worked behind the scenes, as forensic officers, intelligence analysts, or members of specialist units responding to the evolving challenges of their time. In Australia, roles such as police prosecutors and highway patrol officers reflect the growing complexity of legal systems in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Within the courtroom, the cast of characters broadens further. Your ancestor may have been a barrister arguing a case, a solicitor preparing it, or a Crown prosecutor representing the state. They may have appeared as a defendant, navigating the uncertainties of the legal process, or as a witness, offering testimony that shaped an outcome. Others contributed quietly but critically as paralegals or legal assistants supporting the machinery of justice.

Beyond advocacy, there are those who administered and upheld the system itself. Judges and magistrates presided over proceedings and determined outcomes, coroners investigated deaths and recorded their findings, registrars and clerks ensured that the business of the courts was properly documented, bailiffs and court officers maintained order, and jurors (when allowed depending on gender and class rights) were called upon to weigh evidence and deliver verdicts.

And the story does not end with the courtroom. Many ancestors would have encountered, or worked within, the systems of correction and supervision whether as corrective services officers, prison warders, or probation and parole officers, playing a role in what happened after judgment was passed.

What is striking, when we begin to look, is just how many ways our families intersect with these systems. The records they generated — court registers, police reports, depositions, inquests, and prison records — are among the richest sources available. They capture voices, relationships, occupations, and circumstances that are often absent from more formal records.

This issue of *Descent* invites you to explore those intersections. To look again at your research with fresh eyes. To ask not only who your ancestors were, but how they engaged with the rules, structures, and institutions of their time. After all, Australia was transformed by individuals banished to the other side of the known world through the legal system of the day.

Because within the world of police and justice lies something we all seek in family history: not just facts, but stories.



County Inspector Alexander Gray of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) died on 10 May 1916 from wounds received during the Easter Rising.

Aged 57, Gray was shot on 28 April 1916 during the Battle of Ashbourne in County Meath and succumbed to his injuries 12 days later at the Navan Infirmary.

The son of Rev. Alexander Gray of Aghaloo, County Tyrone, he was the most senior RIC officer killed during the Rising.

Donald McLean: Warder at Maitland & First Governor of the “new” Tamworth Gaol

by Helen Dennis

Just before nine o'clock on a dull winter's morning in July 1894, New South Wales' official hangman entered the death cell at Tamworth Gaol. Nosey Bob, as the hangman was more commonly known, was reputed to have once been a handsome fellow, but that was before a kick from a horse had left him without a nose, and a face that was twisted and horribly disfigured.¹ Some went so far as to suggest that the gaunt hangman's "repulsive look" might have added an extra dose of menacing terror to a condemned man's final moments.²

There were two prisoners in the gaol's "condemned cell" that morning, and the prospect of their executions had been keenly anticipated. The hangings were the first to take place in Tamworth's new gaol — which had been in operation for 13 years, but had never in all that time hosted such a newsworthy event.

Although executions were no longer public affairs, a small knot of "privileged" spectators had gathered to witness the occasion.³ Local newspapermen had scrambled — along with the mayor, a local businessman, the prison doctor, several policemen, warders, and a number of reporters from out of town — for admittance to the show.⁴

The assembled onlookers were aware that Nosey Bob had bungled executions in the past. He'd famously once put a pair of felons "on the wrong ropes" resulting in a horrific, drawn-out death for one of them.⁵ The local scribes might have secretly hoped for a repeat performance; macabre content with which to impress their editor, or even elevate a local newspaperman to prominence in the big city.

Among the group of anticipative onlookers was my great-great-grandfather Donald McLean in his official capacity as Governor of the Tamworth Gaol, a position he'd held since the prison opened in 1881.⁶

Donald never intended to be a gaoler. Born in Dingwall, Scotland in about 1834, he was working as a labourer when he married Jessie Ross in the picturesque village of Cawdor, in the Scottish Highlands, on Christmas Eve in 1852.⁷ Jessie was pregnant with their first child when, 18 months later, the young couple stepped from the shores of the murky waters of Liverpool's River Mersey, onto the sailing ship *Genghis Khan*, bound for the Australian colonies.⁸

By all accounts, Jessie was a hardy lass; five years Donald's senior, from a hard-working family of nine siblings. Nevertheless, the rough seas and cramped conditions took their toll. Several weeks into the voyage, Donald stood by helplessly as the limp body of his tiny, premature first-born — a little girl they'd named Anne — was sewn into a pillowcase

and tossed into the tempestuous abyss of the vast Southern Ocean.

Upon arrival at Moreton Bay, the couple headed south to Morpeth, where Donald obtained employment, first as a shoemaker and later as a nightwatchman on the Morpeth wharves. Around 1862 he began working as warder at nearby Maitland Gaol.⁹

Donald had not long been at the gaol when, in August 1863, incarcerated bushranger Henry Wilson made a daring, but failed, bid for freedom.¹⁰ Using a rope fashioned from strips of blanket, Wilson managed to scale about seven feet up the prison wall before the rope broke. He was executed for the crime of murder, likely in Donald's presence, in October 1863.

On another occasion, Donald had helped thwart an attempt to smuggle brandy and tobacco into the gaol. Suspicion was aroused when a rope, with two black parcels attached, had been thrown over the prison's wall. The *Singleton Argus* reported that the resulting chase — undertaken by Donald and another warder — was "a very exciting one" and, although the warders were unsuccessful in apprehending the culprit, they managed to seize the man's hat, along with the two black parcels.¹¹ *The Argus* later joked: "It may doubtless be interesting to the person to learn that he can obtain his hat and the other articles by making application to the gaol authorities".

Donald and Jessie resided in the Maitland area for 26 years. Jessie bore seven more children; four survived to adulthood: my great-grandfather Thomas, another son Duncan, a second Ann (called Annie) and Elizabeth.¹² Donald worked his way up the ranks and after 19 years at Maitland Gaol, he was promoted and became the first governor of the new gaol at Tamworth — the third in the town's history — which was opened in early 1881.¹³

And so it was, 13 years later, that he found himself closeted among the handful of solemn, but curious, onlookers who had gathered to witness Tamworth's first hanging in decades. Nowadays, it is difficult to understand the justifications the various religions put forward in favour of capital punishment. In the mid- to late-1850s however, the view that the death penalty was warranted, as retribution for certain crimes, was widely held. Donald and Jessie were Christians who followed the teachings of the Scottish churches — Presbyterian, and probably also the Scottish Free Church. While witnessing a hanging might be unthinkable to us, during *their* time the event would have been seen as acceptable.

The condemned men, Alec Lee and John Cummings, had been inmates at Tamworth Gaol for less than three months.

In April of that year, the pair (allegedly, in Cummings' case) had stormed the Commercial Bank at Barraba, a sleepy little town located 60 miles to the north-west. In the excitement, Lee fatally (but, he claimed, accidentally) shot the manager. In a panic, the two felons fled — minus their loot — “galloping away to the wildness of the mountain ranges”.¹⁴

The men were only able to evade capture for a couple of days — enough time, nevertheless, for several national newspapers to issue warnings that the fugitives were “as daring and as ruthless as were the worst members of the Kelly gang”.¹⁵

Alec Lee and John Cummings were captured, separately, and brought to trial where the jury took just three-and-a-half hours to find both men guilty of the capital offence of murder.¹⁶ Cummings protested his innocence to the last, his assertions being backed up by Lee's sworn statement that Cummings was not the man who had been with him in the bank that day. But no one believed him.

At around 1.30 am on the morning of Lee and Cummings' executions, Donald had been dragged unceremoniously from a deep sleep by a panic-stricken warder. The Governor was needed at once, the warder entreated, for Cummings had been found lying in a rapidly spreading pool of his own blood. Later, Cummings revealed that he'd been hiding the rusty penknife blade, with which he'd slashed his left arm, in his mouth — between his gum and his cheek — since his arrest three months earlier. He claimed that the bid to take his own life was born from a desire to “save his family the shame of his end on the gallows”.¹⁷ Donald was relieved that his warders had been able to staunch the bleeding — for, had Cummings' injury remained undiscovered, the prisoner surely would have bled to death.

At nine o'clock on the morning of Friday 20 July 1894, the ghoulish-looking hangman led the prisoners from the death cell to the corner of the yard where Donald and the other official spectators waited expectantly for the show to unfold. The gaol was set on flat ground and was a one-storey building with no stairs. This was just as well as Cummings, greatly weakened from his suicide attempt, was having trouble walking and had to be wheeled from his cell in a chair.

The gallows, newly constructed and located in the corner of the prison yard, was ten feet high, with a pit — completed only the day before — six feet deep beneath the drop. If the condemned men had glanced towards the heavens, they might have noticed half a dozen gawking schoolboys perched high in the canopy of a towering white-box tree that rose from outside the gaol walls.¹⁸

Lee strode stoically towards his fate, bending to whisper words of comfort to Cummings as the little procession reached the scaffold's wide wooden stairs. Cummings stood and the two men ascended the stairs together, before the enfeebled prisoner slumped exhausted into a chair the warders had placed above the platform. After a short speech, in which Lee reiterated Cummings' innocence, the prisoners' hoods were drawn, and their ropes adjusted. The deaths, according to the newspapers, were instantaneous, Nosey Bob having undertaken the task with superb efficiency.¹⁹



Tamworth Gaol, c. late 1890s — the second storey was added to the gaol at the end of 1897. Photograph courtesy Museums of History NSW, State Archives Collection.

One of the last duties Donald performed before his retirement from the Tamworth Gaol at the end of 1896 was to act as a witness to the marriage of a young female inmate.²⁰ Ethel Wright had been sentenced to four years for perjury, after accusing her neighbour of attempting to poison her family with strychnine mixed in flour.²¹ The court heard that the two families had been “at variance”, but that the accused neighbour was a “quiet, inoffensive, respectable working man”. After several days' cross-examination, and pressure applied by relatives, Ethel — then aged 17 — changed her story and declared that she'd made the whole thing up.

She was admitted to Tamworth Gaol in early February 1896, by that time obviously very pregnant. The fact that conservative Donald acted as a witness to this unmarried mother's marriage is emblematic of the sympathy that much of the general population felt for the young girl. The author of *The Worker's* woman's column — disguised by the sobriquet “Vida” — put it thus: “Had the age of consent been raised to 18 years, as I hope it soon will be, some man would be criminally liable for this girl's condition”.²²

The marriage ceremony, which was held within the gaol walls, was performed by the local Church of England minister; Donald and his daughter Annie acted as witnesses. Sydney's *Evening News* revealed that the bride had been “allowed to discard her prison garb for the occasion, and was dressed in the same clothes as she wore before her trial”.²³

Donald's wife, Jessie, died in 1889, aged 58, and was buried in the Presbyterian portion of the Tamworth cemetery. Her large granite headstone contains a beautiful floral carving set above a lengthy epitaph attesting to the love the family held for her. Poignantly there is space remaining on the headstone; presumably set aside for Donald when the time came.

Six years later however, at the age of 61, Donald remarried.²⁴ Upon his retirement, Donald and his new wife Catherine relocated to Sydney where they lived for the remaining 12 years of Donald's life.

Donald McLean died in Balmain on 7 February 1908, aged 74, and is buried with Catherine at Rookwood Cemetery.

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Helen Dennis had no enthusiasm for history until a 2017 overseas trip sparked an interest in old things. She began listening properly to her elderly aunt's reminiscences, and was surprised to learn that her own ancestry was bursting with fascinating, often salacious, tales. In 2023, Helen completed a University of Tasmania Diploma of Family History which ignited her passion for not only researching, but writing about, her ancestors. She has written a book on her husband's convict forebears and is currently working on a biographical novel based on the life of her aunt. She dreams that someday her children will be interested in her stories.



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Find me a Scandal, Please

by Rachel Croucher

Scandal as Starting Point

"Find me a scandal, please!" my mother has urged countless times since I began digging into my family tree around 20 years ago.

Alas, the most dramatic revelations among the respectable working-class Irish stock from which she hails amount to little more than a convict guard and an unmarried uncle with a rainbow mosaic toilet. "Sorry Mum, Dad's side got all the juicy stuff."

In contrast, the stories from my English and Indian paternal ancestors reveal a far richer tapestry of encounters with policing and legal systems, from subverting the White Australia Policy to generally flouting the law. Some of their stories made me laugh; others still leave me reeling.

Policing his Own: The Irish Convict Guard

On the hunt for a maternal scandal, I solemnly informed my mother that her grandma, Mary Jane Gray, had been born only three months after her parents' wedding.¹ "Ah, yes, an Irish premmie," she replied wryly. "I repeat, Rachel, a *real* scandal."

The only other peculiar leads were a *Légion d'honneur* (Legion of Honour) supposedly awarded to some distant ancestor, and whispers of a — ssshh — convict guard. Hardly scandalous, but the latter drew a raised eyebrow. "What's so bad about being a convict guard?" I asked. "Nothing," she said, "You gotta eat. But the Irish weren't meant to guard their own; that was seen as enforcing the coloniser's laws."

Little did I know that in chasing whispers of a Legion of Honour recipient and a "collaborator", I was chasing the same man: Peter Starkey of Galway, Ireland, born 14 May 1829, and died aged 71 in Melbourne, Australia in 1901.² As I squinted at the cramped script between the columns of my 3 x great-grandfather's death certificate, I finally deciphered: "Imperial Army Welch Regiment of 41st Foot and Imperial Army Convict Superintendent." Jackpot!

After confirming Starkey's role as assistant warder of the convict department at Fremantle Prison in the Swan River Colony, I immediately went in search of his regiment's movements.³ A startled laugh escaped me when I located his 1858 discharge papers from Her Majesty's Service. The family villain, it turned out, was also the family hero. Starkey really had been awarded a Legion of Honour in 1856 for his service in the Crimean War at Alma, Inkerman, and Sebastopol, where he was severely wounded in the Battle of Redan.⁴



Little did I know that in chasing whispers of a Legion of Honour recipient and a "collaborator", I was chasing the same man ...

Having received France's highest order of merit, Starkey also enforced the machinery of empire against his fellow occupied Irish. The contradiction resists easy moral labels, but begs the question: who was Peter Starkey beyond the black-and-white details of his deeds?

Uncle Jack and the Rainbow Toilet

I jotted a few notes, grabbed my phone and dialled Mum. After the usual greetings, I lowered my voice and conspiratorially told her I had uncovered a scandal of outrageous proportions, courtesy of an hour-long call with one of her long-lost cousins.

Her paternal cousin Liam was not the scandal, I explained, but their mysterious Uncle Jack. Born in Williamstown, Victoria in 1894, Jack Lehane was the second of nine children born to southern Irish Catholic immigrants, Jeremiah and Catherine, and my grandad Eugene's older brother.⁵ I had begun to question my skills as a researcher when I could find no trace of a marriage or descendants, until Liam mentioned offhandedly that Jack had

never married but boarded in a Sydney terrace with several male housemates after moving there in his 40s.⁶

I suppressed a chuckle as he described a trip to Sydney in the early 70s to visit Uncle Jack, and how walking into Jack's home was like "stepping into a kaleidoscope". A glass blower by trade, Jack's terrace was filled from top to bottom with colourful, oddly shaped glass artwork, light catching and scattering in every direction, even in the bathroom, where the toilet had been

transformed into a rainbow mosaic of coloured glass.

I contacted a fabulously flamboyant friend and asked if he had any theories about my mother's uncle with the rainbow toilet. "Oh babes," he giggled, pointing out that Jack's terrace on Moore Park Road was just down from Oxford Street.⁷ "You need me to spell it out?"

Not wanting to draw conclusions on a hunch, I contacted Professor Timothy Jones, President of the Australian Queer Archives, to ask for tips on researching potentially LGBTIQ+ ancestors.⁸ He replied he couldn't offer much more than I already knew, but questioned why we assume our ancestors are straight, and demand a higher standard of proof to consider if they may have been queer. Despite the rainbow flag tattooed on my wrist, I still don't know how to answer that question.

And my mother?

"Gay is normal, though, even if it was illegal then. Back to the charts you go."

Love and the Law in White Australia

In contrast to the straightforward charting of successive Catholic nuclear families on my maternal line — my sister and I are the seventh known generation to carry Mary in our names — my paternal ancestry forms a messy patchwork quilt of blended families stitched together with a dash of love and smorgasbord of sadness and scandal.⁹

I was ignorant of the extent of anti-Asian sentiment during the White Australia Policy era until beginning my genealogy journey.¹⁰ Through two decades of tracing certificates and navigating conflicting oral histories, I verified that my Melbourne-born great-grandmother, Emily Edith Bellingham, married Natha Singh, a former soldier and farm labourer from Mahru, Punjab (undivided India), in Queensland in 1909, nine months after the death of their first child.¹¹ They had another two children, my grandmother Florence Melba, and her sister, Beatrice Maud.¹²

My jaw dropped when I discovered the names of my Punjabi 2 x great-grandparents, recorded on the certificate, but my excitement soon faded when I saw the words “Indian + white” pencilled into the left margin. For whose benefit was this annotation? Was a parallel system of classification operating alongside the official record? Who was observing whom, and to what end? Under the racially restrictive framework of the White Australia Policy, such markings reflected a bureaucratic culture preoccupied with policing difference, where civic personal records became instruments of enforcing racial control.¹³

It is therefore unsurprising that, after the breakdown of her marriage to Natha, Emily Edith’s second partnership with Inder Singh, the father of a further five children, was never formalised. Their relationship survives in birth certificates, school records, newspaper articles, and an array of endless descendants I’m lucky to call family.¹⁴

Drink, Disorder and the Dock

We cannot travel back in time, but historical newspapers allow us to reconstruct the past. Contemporary reports are vital for deciphering social context, although what we uncover may sometimes require a trigger warning. As researchers, we control the questions, not the answers.

Just two months after World War I was declared on 28 July 1914, my nan’s stepdad Inder was one of several men who took part in a pub crawl on Election Night, 5 September 1914. According to the report “Election Night Row” in the *Bairnsdale Advertiser and Tambo and Omeo Chronicle* on Tuesday, 22 September 1914, Inder Singh, Lave Singh, and Sun Sing spent the evening of the 1914 federal election drinking heavily at several hotels before the



Inder and Natha Singh, c. 1902

night descended into violence at Inder’s home in Maroney Street. Witnesses testified that Inder was so intoxicated he had to be transported home in the back of a cart. Emily Edith Singh later accused Lave Singh of assaulting both her and Inder. This report revealed the instability of the household, including Emily Edith’s dependence on Inder for financial support and tensions surrounding her previous marriage to my great-grandfather, Natha.

Further reports reveal Emily Edith’s life was tainted by violence and uncertainty. On 1 February 1916, Inder was brought before the Bairnsdale Police Court yet again after being noticed the previous evening “somewhat gay and merry in charge of a horse and cart.” The *Bairnsdale Advertiser and Tambo and Omeo Chronicle* later reported that police charged Inder Singh with being drunk and disorderly, including “knocking a woman about who stopped with him ... and otherwise misbehaving.” This assault took place only three months after the death of Inder and Emily Edith’s second child, and in the home they shared with four-and-a-half-year-old Florence, two-year-old Beatrice, and one-year-old Chundah.

Only three weeks after his November 1917 arrest and fine for drunkenness, Inder made a request for the court to grant a prohibition order against himself. The *Bairnsdale Advertiser and Tambo and Omeo Chronicle* reported on Wednesday, 27 November 1918, that Inder admitted: “I want to give up the drink. I take one or two and lose my head.” When asked why he drank, he replied: “Sometimes I can’t help it.” The order was approved, prohibiting licensed persons in the Bairnsdale Shire from supplying Inder with alcohol for 12 months. I have been unable to locate a report of public drunkenness since, and therefore hopefully the order got Emily Edith some reprieve.

After the Charts: Scandals and Survival

I’ve been back to the charts, and the greatest scandal is the uneasy truth that ordinary lives can coexist with histories Australia would rather forget. Scandal is ultimately less about shock than perspective. The records show people moving through systems of law and survival that rarely fit neat moral labels. I will keep returning to the charts, as my mother advises, not for answers but to better understand the legacy they leave behind.

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passionate mentor for beginner genealogists

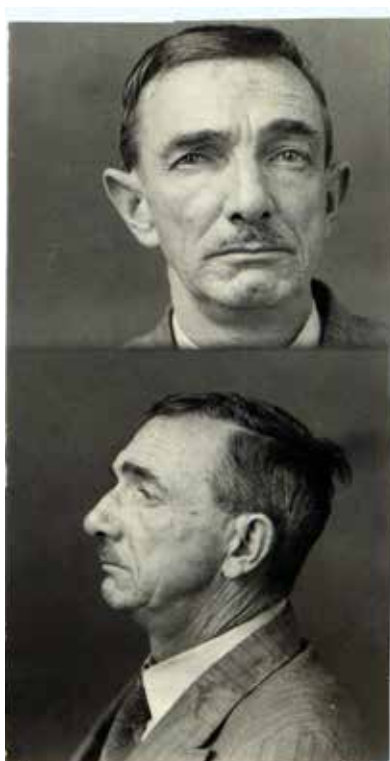
in the Writing Your Family Story course taught at the Genealogical Society of Victoria. Rachel also consulted on the SBS documentary series *The Secret DNA of Us*.



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The many names, crimes and wives of Herbert McCulloch, con man and bigamist

by Nyree Morrison



Downey, George W.
(07/04/1922 to 12/04/1957),
[REF-00042691].
University of Sydney
Archives, 115.

Herbert Eric McCulloch — also known as George Walter Downey, Eric Maxwell Thompson, Douglas Macdonald Stewart, Norman Stewart Barrett and at least 17 other aliases — was sentenced to 12-months imprisonment with hard labour for bigamy in March 1938.

Under the name of *George Walter Downey*, he had studied at the University of Sydney as an unmatriculated evening student in 1914 and 1915. He later enrolled as a medical student in 1919, but was expelled from the university for misconduct on 4 April 1922.

While working as a medical student at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital (RPA), he proposed to Florrie Jones, an RPA clerical worker. He told Florrie that his name was *Eric Downey*, and he lived with his father on Lang Road, Centennial Park. Florrie's sister Lyla Jones, suspicious of his behaviour, made enquiries and discovered "Downey" had a different name, was already married, and living in Randwick.

Downey then visited Florrie's mother in an attempt to convince her not to inform the university of his behaviour. On a second visit he told her he intended to shoot Lyla as she "was mainly responsible for finding out the true situation ... and that he intended to ruin Miss Florrie Jones's character."

At a meeting of the Proctorial Board on 31 March 1922, Downey was found "guilty of the misconduct referred to ... and that his name be struck off the University Books".¹

Downey's elaborate deceptions under his numerous aliases are well documented in the Australian press and accessible through Trove.² In 1938 the press reported on his seven marriages — possibly more — and claimed that he "committed bigamy for the sheer love of it"! His counsel argued that the bullet wound he received to the back of the neck while serving in France in World War I was to blame for his "inexplicable disregard of the matrimonial conventions" but Downey himself blamed it on his deafness.³

Downey enlisted twice during World War I, both times under the same name, although lying about his age and occupation. He enlisted first in Sydney on 17 June 1916, aged 23 as a student and was discharged less than a month later for misconduct.⁴ He then enlisted in Melbourne on 4 December 1916, this time stating he was 24 years 5 months and working as a university lecturer. He saw active service in France for three months in 1917 and was discharged medically unfit in 1918 with "disordered action of the heart and deafness".⁵

GEORGE WALTER DOWNEY; George Walter Elliott; Walter Downey; Eric W. Thompson; David Stewart; George Walter Flood; Dr. Robert James Jackson; Dr. D. McStewart; John Robert Jackson; Dr. D. H. Stewart; Dr. Eric Stewart; Dr. James; Dr. Strong; Alfred Flood; Douglas Donald Stewart; Herbert McCulloch; Herbert E. McCulloch; Douglas McDonald Stewart; George Wallace Elliott; George Downey; Douglas Stewart; Herbert Paisley.

NEW SOUTH WALES. Sydney	1916	Uttering	6 months H.L.
QUEENSLAND. Ipswich	1923	Marry girl under the age of 21 years w/o the consent of parents.	Convicted & ordered to enter recogn. £50 to appear for sentence if called upon w/in 6 months.
Brisbane	1923	False pretences	3 months H.L.
Brisbane	1923	Imposition	3 months H.L.
VICTORIA. Melbourne	1924	Larceny as a bailee	12 months H.L.
Melbourne	1924	Bigamy	12 months H.L. cum.
WESTERN AUSTRALIA. Perth	1933	Forgery	2 years H.L.
NEW SOUTH WALES. Bathurst	1937	False pretences (by warrant)	No appearance. Bail £10 forfeited.
VICTORIA. Melbourne	1938	Bigamy	12 months imp.
NEW SOUTH WALES. Sydney	1939	False pretences	1 year H.L. to date from 7.1.39.
Central, Sydney	1940	False pretences	12 months H.L.
Central, Sydney	1940	Larceny as a bailee	6 months H.L. cum. on 12 months previously imposed.
Central, Sydney	1940	Goods in custody	5 months H.L.
Sydney	1940	Appealed against sentence upon conviction at Central for larceny as a bailee. The appeal having been withdrawn, the Judge confirmed the conviction without costs.	
Sydney	1940	Forgery	4 years H.L. on each charge const.
Sydney	1940	Uttering	

List of aliases and charges. Downey, George W. (07/04/1922 to 12/04/1957), [REF-00042691]. University of Sydney Archives, 119.

Given what we now understand about the effects of prolonged artillery exposure, it is entirely plausible that Downey did suffer hearing loss.⁶

What is striking is how his earlier misconduct at the university is not reported in press accounts of his marriages and trial, with his “almost four years training as a doctor” noted in passing.⁷ Given the tangled web of lies he spun over the years, it is easy to see why journalists might have struggled to separate fact from fiction.

Downey contacted the university in 1930, requesting the registrar to provide certification of his exam results for the Junior Public examination and the university. The Vice Chancellor expressed the opinion that the certificates not be given and requested that Downey provide information on his family circumstances, employment and future intentions. It appears that Downey did not reply as there is no information on file.

In 1946 he again contacted the university, alleging that a recent court case in Tasmania established the university had no power to punish a student for a breach of moral conduct and, that as a substantial period had lapsed since the incident in 1922, the offence should be purged. The university did not agree.

In 1957, Downey applied to study veterinary science at the university but was denied, with the Vice Chancellor writing to him:

He [The Chancellor] is surprised that you should apparently think that all that would be required of someone whose name had been struck off the University books would be to apply to the Registrar to be admitted as a matriculated student in a faculty. Under such circumstances the Registrar would have no alternative than to point out to the applicant his ineligibility. It is quite outside the Registrar's function to forgive and forget.⁸

Despite his long trail of deceptions, Downey was evidently a highly capable and persuasive con man. Wherever he worked, he seemed to be well-liked, respected, and regarded as diligent. Perhaps more details will come to light with so many aliases to choose from, further discoveries may simply be a search away.

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- 2 “Downey Case”, *Queensland Times* (Ipswich, Qld), 31 May 1923, 4, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article120045839>. “A Bigamy Case”, *The Age* (Melbourne, Vic.), 9 December 1924, 15, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article155537915>. “Dr. David Stewart”, *Sunday Times* (Perth, WA), 5 March 1933, 7, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article58675760>. “Ex-Perth Doctor's Seven Wives”, *Mirror* (Perth, WA), 26 March 1938, 11, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article75444916>.
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- 4 National Archives of Australia (NAA): MT1486/1, Downey/George Walter, Item ID: 6514576, <https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Interface/DetailsReports/ItemDetail.aspx?Barcode=6514576&isAv=N>.
- 5 NAA: B2455, Downey G W, Item ID 3520063. (The National Archives of Australia has another army record for George Walter Downey. In file Item ID 3520063 he enlists in Melbourne on 4 December 1916, age 24 years 5 months and his occupation is a university lecturer.)
- 6 K Conroy & V Malik, “Hearing loss in the trenches – a hidden morbidity of World War I”, *The Journal of Laryngology & Otology*, Vol. 132, Iss. 11, November 2018, pp 952–955. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022215118001755>.
- 7 “Australia's Greatest Lover”, op.cit.
- 8 Downey, George W (07/04/1922 to 12/04/1957), [REF-00042691] <https://archives-search.sydney.edu.au/nodes/view/82387>.

Originally from Glasgow, **Nyree Morrison** is Senior Archivist at the University of Sydney Archives. She was involved in the university's *Beyond 1914* to record the lives of the men and women before, during and after the war.

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Lunacy or loneliness? The demise of Mary McInnes Windsor

by Elizabeth Hartnell-Young

Mary's arrest might have happened something like this.

"Walter, where are you?" she called into the misty bushland. It was a drizzly day in the goldfields area of central Victoria, and the clay lumps of the mullock heaps stuck like leeches to her boots. "Walter? Walter!" she cried, stumbling as she headed from her shack along the narrow track, looking desperately for her husband. She felt so alone in this isolated place.

But Walter could not hear her. He had been in hospital for weeks, in a town not far away.¹ Mary became disorientated in the dull light, and, without a coat, the winter chill was reaching her old bones. She heard the brushing sound of leaves behind her, and turning, was surprised by the shadowy form of Senior Constable Riley. "What ho! Who goes there?" he shouted in his professional voice.

"Walter Windsor! Where have you been?"

It wasn't Walter. The policeman came closer, and realised that Mary was very cold and confused. She didn't seem to recognise him at all, and mumbled incoherently, something about rabbits and needing Walter to catch them. He knew that Walter, a fossicker for gold who had lived in the bush for years, was ill, probably with tuberculosis, which was rife in the community. He also knew that Mary was only surviving with the help of the Ladies Benevolent Society. But today he could see that the eccentric old lady was more distressed and delusional than usual. "I'll have to take her in," he thought. And with that, he arrested her on a charge of lunacy.²

So it seems that a puzzled Mary Windsor, of Majorca Road, quiet and submissive, spent the wintry night in the bleak log lockup in the Police Paddock at Carisbrook. Next morning, the Magistrates' Bench sat at the Court of Petty Sessions in the town. As the law required, two doctors had examined the prisoner. Dr Haley swore, "I believe her to be of unsound mind and she should be confined in a lunatic asylum for care and treatment", and Dr Weld agreed.³ Mary had no say in the matter. Hearing that the prisoner had been wandering at large, the magistrates conferred, and declared her to be "a lunatic".⁴ This was a common appellation, especially for the poor, the demented, and even those with post-natal depression.⁵ Sands points out that the care of the mentally ill at the time had much in common with the penal system.⁶

Bundled into the horse-drawn ambulance, Mary had no idea where she was going as it bumped over the 100 miles to Melbourne. By 5.30 pm that day, she had been admitted to the Kew Lunatic Asylum in Melbourne with senile dementia: "frail, restless and untidy in dress", but in good bodily health.⁷

In happier times, Mary was born in the parish of Iona, a small island in the western highlands of Scotland, around 1839. With changes in land laws and a potato blight, thousands of highlanders were forced to emigrate during "the Clearances".⁸ At the age of 15, Mary was in Glasgow with her father, both servants to the McKinnon family.⁹ It's possible that her mother had died by then, and it's likely that her sister — my 2 x great-grandmother Christina — left Scotland for Melbourne around that time.¹⁰

Mary sailed on the *Coldstream* from London in December 1863, destined to work with other Scottish women for Mrs Mattingley in the National School on Errol St, Hotham (North Melbourne) for an annual salary of £18.¹¹ Mrs Mattingley was quite a woman. Married at 17, and eventually mother of nine children, she managed hundreds of infants in her school in the 1860s. By 1864 she had 137 examination candidates under seven years and 183 pupils over that age.¹² Mrs Mattingley needed good staff. Mary McInnes, aged 25, was selected.

Just weeks after Mary disembarked in March 1864, she placed an advertisement in the Missing Friends section of *The Argus*, a popular daily newspaper, hoping to make contact with Christina, who she knew was now married to Charles Penny.¹³

MRS. CHARLES PENNY, late Christina M'Innis,
—your sister is at Mrs. Mattingley's Errol-
street National School, Hotham.

Advertisement in The Argus, 16 April 1864

Evidently Christina, living near the gold mining town of Clunes, less than 100 miles away, heard about the advertisement because some time later in the same area, Mary married Englishman Walter Windsor, who had been searching for gold in the volcanic quartz reefs for 10 years.¹⁴ Walter purchased 187 shares in the Columbia Quartz mining company in 1869, but apparently had little success.¹⁵ Nine months after the marriage, Mary gave birth to a son, with Christina assisting in the delivery.¹⁶ As was common practice, the Windsors' first son was named Thomas, after Walter's father. The second, born in 1872, was named Donald, after Mary's father.¹⁷

Little is known of Mary for nearly 30 years. Her sister Christina and family moved away to Crossenvale, Echuca, in the north-east of the state, in the 1870s.¹⁸ Donald did not survive much past five years old, and the Windsors remained in districts around the Loddon River for many years, although living in poverty.¹⁹ By 1900, when Mary was arrested, Walter was a patient in Amherst Hospital, near their home.

The Lunatic Asylum

The Kew Lunatic Asylum in Melbourne was one of the largest asylums ever built in Australia, designed to house the growing number of people labelled “lunatics”, “inebriates”, and “idiots” in the Colony of Victoria. According to Day, the design of the elegant and beautiful buildings, set in landscaped grounds, was political: a magnificent asylum for the insane would portray Melbourne as a civilised and benevolent city.²⁰

On 18 July 1900, when 60-year-old Mary Windsor was brought by police and admitted with senile dementia, the records show that she had been supported by charity. Described as a frail woman, restless and untidy in dress, she was said to talk incoherently and was unwilling to enter into conversation.²¹ As an inmate, Mary would have been given regulation asylum clothing — badly fitting and drab — generally shared among the residents. Many women in Kew Asylum were depressed, withdrawn and even suicidal, but they were not all poor or working class. Most were married and had been admitted by their families, but unlike Mary, few were from rural areas.

Mary’s case notes in the first fortnight show that she asked for some cloves as she had always been troubled with bad breath. She appeared “unable to collect her thoughts so as to convey her wants in conversation” and was “greatly confused and demented”. By November, her bodily health was good, although there was no change mentally. On 18 December, Mary was transferred to Beechworth Lunatic Asylum, arriving in “unsatisfactory” bodily health, “untidy in dress” with her “memory impaired, dull and demented”.²²

For the next few years, although Mary “got stouter”, the notes of the annual examination were cursory, mainly just “idem”: the same. By 1905, the Asylum was known as a “Hospital for the Insane” as the *Lunacy Act 1903* had changed the title of all asylums, intending to emphasise treatment, rather than detention.²³ Would Mary have realised she had been an inmate for 1547 days, when an incident occurred that proved to be a turning point for her? Leafing through the casualty book of the time I found the record of a Colles fracture in Mary’s right wrist, as a result of being “pushed down by an inmate named K Reau in no 3 corridor” on 12 October 1904. “The usual treatment was adopted. No blame was attached to the nurses.”²⁴ However, Mary began to decline and was admitted to the hospital ward, where she died two years later, in the early hours of 29 November 1906, aged about 67.²⁵

Mr Joseph Rowan JP conducted a magisterial inquiry on the same day, to hear from the staff of the asylum. Alice Walker was a nurse at Beechworth for about 20 years, and cared for Mary from the day of the fracture until her death. She said at the inquiry: “She was a feeble case. I was instructed to give her medicine and medical comfort, which I did. Deceased never improved but gradually became weaker.” In the clinical manner one might expect from the resident medical officer, Dr Gustave Zichy-Woinarski said:

She was suffering from dementia. Up to 12 October 1904 she was in fair health, considering her age, when she was transferred to Hospital ward ... She was regularly visited by me and received such medical treatment and stimulant and other medical comfort as her condition required.²⁶



Mary Windsor, conviction of lunacy, Carisbrook Court of Petty Sessions



Kew Lunatic Asylum (Nettleton, c.1878)
courtesy Royal Historical Society of Victoria



Nurses at the Beechworth Lunatic Asylum, 1900
courtesy of the Burke Museum, Beechworth

Nurse Walker was present when Mary died.

I put her to bed and sent for the medical officer. Deceased gradually sank and died at 1.55 am today ... Deceased never made any complaint to me. No friends called to see her.²⁷

Mary had been an inmate of asylums for six years, and her death certificate had no details of her family, noting only that she died of “disease of the brain and heart”.²⁸ Apart from Nurse Walker and Dr Zichy-Woinarski, it seems she lived and died alone.

Clearly Mary had suffered from dementia for many years, but was otherwise fairly healthy until the fracture. Could there have been a better way to manage her illness? Would deinstitutionalisation — the closure of psychiatric institutions and development of community services — which occurred in Victoria late in the 20th century, have helped her? Unless services and supports were available in her local area, it would have been difficult.

Her husband, often in hospital himself, could not look after her. He sent her letters using a post office address, but none are included in the files. Their only son, Thomas, was married with young children in New South Wales.²⁹ Later he returned to live in Maryborough, and Walter moved in with him, but it must have been too far to travel to visit their wife and mother in the asylum.

Still alone in death, Mary was buried in the Presbyterian section of Beechworth cemetery, far from her husband — who died the next May — and others of her family who lie in the Maryborough cemetery: son Thomas and his wife Susan, and at least two grandsons.³⁰

Had she remembered her early life in Scotland, she may well have felt like William Lisle Bowles:

Yet many a look back on thy hills I cast,
And many a softened image of the past
Sadly combine, and bid remembrance keep,
To soothe me with fair scenes, and fancies rude,
When I pursue my path in solitude.³¹



Dr Elizabeth Hartnell-Young, an Honorary Fellow in the Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne, celebrates and recognises women's lives through her writing. She co-presents the Genealogical Society of Victoria course *Writing Family Stories*, and is

a member of the editorial board of *Provenance*, the journal of the Public Record Office Victoria (PROV). She co-founded Honour a Woman in 2017, a movement agitating to increase the proportion of women receiving Australian Honours.

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Tracing your German ancestry: A guide for Australians

by Sven Grewel

1. Start with Australian Records:

Gather clues at home

For Australians exploring German roots, the first step is to start with what you already have at home. Family photographs, letters, ship manifests, or naturalisation papers may hold the initial clues you need. Even a single name, an approximate date, or a vague place of origin can become a valuable lead. Begin by interviewing older relatives, collecting family stories, and documenting every detail — no matter how small.

Many German immigrants to Australia arrived in distinct waves: the “Old Lutherans” fleeing religious persecution in the 1830s–1840s, the gold rush migrants from Hamburg or Bremen in the 1850s, or later settlers who came as part of labor schemes. Their traces often remain in Australian birth certificates, Lutheran church records, naturalisation files, or old family bibles, which can provide the exact German hometown you need to begin your search in Germany.

One of the earliest challenges is deciphering the handwriting in historical German records. Until the mid-20th century, many documents were written in Kurrentschrift or Sütterlin, scripts that can seem impenetrable today. Free online tutorials and printable guides from genealogical societies offer step-by-step help. If you're stuck, Australian-based German-Australian clubs or Facebook groups can provide assistance or refer you to experts.

2. Transition to German Archives:

Where to look next

Once you've gathered names and dates from Australian sources, the next phase involves German archives. The key is to identify your ancestor's exact German hometown — this is the foundation for all further research in Germany.

A. Church Records (before 1876)

Before civil registration began in 1876, church records are often the only way to trace ancestors. These records document baptisms, marriages and burials, but access varies:

- » Baptism records are restricted for 110 years.
- » Marriage records are restricted for 80 years.
- » Death records become accessible after 30 years.

Many records remain in local parishes or regional archives, but a polite inquiry — often in German — can yield copies for a small fee. For example, if your ancestor was Lutheran, contact the Landeskirchliches Archiv (regional church archive) in the relevant German state. If your ancestors were Jewish, the Arolsen Archives or Leo Baeck Institute may hold relevant records.

B. Civil Records (after 1876)

After 1876, civil registration records (Standesamt) become the primary source for births, marriages and deaths in Germany. These documents are more structured but remain subject to privacy laws. Death records often include precise birthplaces, helping you trace your family further. Requesting copies is straightforward: contact the Standesamt (civil registry office) in your ancestor's German hometown. Many German states offer online access to digitised records, but some require direct contact or a visit. German civil records often list occupations, residences and parents' names — details that can help you connect back to earlier generations.

C. Emigration and Passenger Records

For Australians, shipping records and migration schemes are invaluable starting points. German settlers arrived in Australia through organised programs, such as:

- » The South Australian Company's Lutheran migrations (1838–1840s).
- » The gold rush migrations of the 1850s, primarily from Hamburg or Bremen.
- » Later labour schemes in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The National Archives of Australia holds naturalisation records from 1904, while Trove (National Library of Australia) and Ancestry.com.au provide access to digitised passenger lists and historical newspapers. These sources often include places of origin, which you can use to request records from German archives. The State Library of South Australia holds collections of German migration records, including passenger lists and settlement documents, which can help pinpoint your ancestor's exact hometown in Germany.

3. Overcoming Common Challenges

It's worth noting that German migration to Australia wasn't always direct. Some ancestors may have spent time in England, Russia (Volga Germans), or the US before arriving. If your research hits a dead end, explore records from these intermediate locations. Australian resources like Trove or local genealogical societies can help bridge the gap between Australian and German records.

Don't overlook Australia's naturalisation records, which frequently include birthplaces and arrival years. These records can provide the exact German town you need to continue your search in Germany. Once you have that town, you can identify the correct German archive or church holding your family's records by consulting local directories or contacting regional genealogical societies.

Genealogy is a journey, not a race. While many German records are digitised, Germany lags behind Australia in online accessibility. Not all archives or church registers are available digitally, so direct inquiries to local parishes, regional archives, or German genealogical societies are often necessary.

The most important advice: Just start. Pick one document — an Australian birth certificate, a ship manifest or a church record — and note what you know. Proceed step by step, using each clue to guide your search in Germany. Your family's history is waiting to be discovered.

If you have questions or need assistance with German archives, I'm happy to help:

Ahnenkontor – Sven Grewel

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Instagram: @ahnenkontor



Low probability or no probability?

by Anthea Fraser Gupta

Six people who are documented as great-grandchildren of George and Anne have tested their autosomal DNA at Ancestry (Figure 1).² Two male descendants on the paternal line, Hugh and Simon, also took the Big Y-700 test at FamilyTreeDNA. Hugh and Simon share a terminal SNP on Big Y, estimated about 1850CE, which corresponds to the documented record. However, some of the autosomal matches within the group are at the low end of probability for the documented relationship (Figure 2), which gave rise to concern that there may be an unexpected parent somewhere.

As more descendants tested, it became clear that the six individuals are likely related to each other as documented: low probability is not no probability.

George's father is first attested in the 1861 UK census, and next when George marries Anne in 1862; but nothing is known with any certainty about his origins or whether he had any siblings. Although George was one of five children, he is the only one who has living descendants. George and Anne had seven children, three of whom had children of their own: William, Jane and Robert. Hugh is the only living descendant of William, while both Jane and Robert have a large number of living descendants. The six descendants presented here are the only descendants of George and Anne who are known to have tested their DNA.

The estimates of the number of centimorgans (cM) shared by descendants of a given relationship modify over time and differ from one tool to another. Currently, the expected size of a match given at Blaine Bettinger's Shared cM Tool is 41–592 cM for second cousins, 396–1397 cM for first cousins and 1160–2436 cM for half-siblings.

By any measure, Hugh's matches to Richard, Helen and Simon are all of low probability for a second cousin, but his matches to Angus and Lizzie are of high probability. Helen's match to Simon is low for first cousins, and Simon's match to Lizzie is exceptionally low for half-siblings. The possibility has to be considered that the family members are not related to each other in the way documentation shows them to be related.

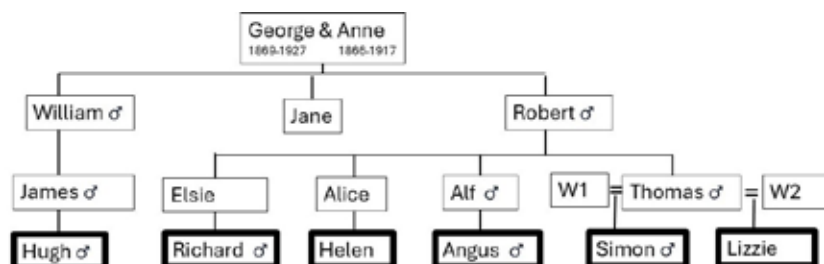


Figure 1: The documented relationship of the six tested descendants of George and Anne.

	Hugh					
Hugh	-	Richard				
Richard	107 (5%)	-	Helen			
Helen	57 (0%)	923 (90%)	-	Angus		
Angus	253 (65%)	1040 (90%)	793 (86%)	-	Simon	
Simon	43 (0%)	931 (90%)	582 (6%)	777 (86%)	-	Lizzie
Lizzie	247 (65%)	873 (90%)	789 (86%)	925 (90%)	1157 (9%)	-

Figure 2: Centimorgans shared by tested descendants, with probability as given by Ancestry. Unusually low values in red bold italic.

If the individuals in this family group are not related as documented, what alternatives are possible?

1. Either Hugh or Simon is not descended from George.

The Y-DNA result supports Hugh and Simon sharing a recent male line ancestor.

Could the father of William or Robert be one of George's brothers? Hugh would then be a third cousin to the other five, not a second cousin as documented. Shared cM Tool gives 0–234 cM as the expected range for third cousins. Hugh's match to Richard, Helen and Simon is therefore within the third cousin range, but his matches to Angus and Lizzie are unexpectedly high for a third cousin.

George had one living brother at the time of the conception of William and Robert. This brother was only 15 at the time of the conception of William, who was born four months after the marriage of George and Anne. George's brother was 17 at the time of the conception of Robert, and was living with George and Anne, but this boy seems an unlikely candidate for an extramarital father. If he was a youthful lover of Anne and was the father of Robert, this would account for Hugh's three low matches, but would leave the two high matches as an anomaly.

2. Hugh is not the son of James, but his grandson.

It was common for illegitimate children of daughters to be raised by their grandparents. But Hugh is the only child of James, and was born when his documented father was only 24. James cannot be Hugh's grandfather.

3. Simon and Lizzie do not share the same father.

If Thomas is not the father of both Simon and Lizzie, the only alternative possible father for one of them is Alf. However, Angus's matches with Simon and Lizzie show that he is much more likely to be a first cousin to both of them than a half-sibling to either (3% probability). Angus's DNA matches to the half-siblings give strong support to him being their cousin, as documented, and for Simon and Lizzie being half-siblings to each other, as documented.

4. Either William or Robert is not the child of Anne.

All six testers have matches in the expected range for the relationship to descendants of the siblings of Anne (Figure 3). They are all descended from Anne.

5. The first cousins do not have the same grandmother.

All five first cousins have matches of similar size, in the expected range, to descendants of the siblings of Robert's wife (Figure 4), and Hugh does not have matches to any of them. The five documented descendants of Robert are all descended from Robert's wife.

A validation test was run on Banyan DNA. Some of the individual pairings were identified as being of low probability. However, the "overall quality of the tree based on the average number of standard deviations of the underlying match results" was classed as "Good", shorthand for "Match fits relationship".

The analysis of this family group reveals some matches that are unexpectedly low for the documented relationship. However, any undocumented relationship that would account for the low autosomal matches would cause problems for the high autosomal matches. The identity of the mothers is firmly established by shared autosomal matches, and, due to the Y-DNA result, any non-documented fathers must be on the male line shared by Hugh and Simon. The only alternative parents possible are brothers of men on this tree.

The conclusion has to be that the members of this family group are related to each other as documented, and that the low autosomal matches are caused by individuals inheriting different markers from their male line ancestors.

Applications used

Ancestry

<https://www.ancestry.com.au>

BanyanDNA

<https://www.banyandna.com/home>

FamilyTreeDNA, Big Y-700

<https://www.familytreedna.com>

What Are the Odds (WATO)? &

The Shared cM Tool, DNA Painter

<https://dnainter.com>

	A	B	C	D	E	F
Hugh	120	57	56	45	38	27
Richard	47	52	46	50	41	75
Helen	25	69	41	128	61	75
Angus	50	0	70	56	51	51
Simon	64	93	99	153	113	148
Lizzie	54	155	36	157	62	71

Figure 3: Size of matches to selected descendants of Anne's siblings (in centimorgans, Ancestry)

	W	X	Y	Z
Hugh	0	0	0	0
Richard	277	238	167	106
Helen	352	208	132	77
Angus	260	213	304	66
Simon	208	169	247	50
Lizzie	269	225	180	94

Figure 4: Size of matches to selected descendants of the siblings of Robert's wife (in centimorgans, Ancestry)

- 1 I have benefitted from advice from several people at various points in this research, especially Douglas Fraser, Chris Hingerty, Hillary Lowden, Maria Northcote and Donna Rutherford, for which I am grateful. They do not necessarily agree with my arguments in this paper.
- 2 Pseudonyms are used for all people, both living and dead. Hugh and Helen also tested autosomal DNA at FamilyTreeDNA, with little difference from the Ancestry result in the number of shared centimorgans between them.

Dr Anthea Fraser Gupta is a retired

academic who has been interested in her family history since early childhood.

She has a Diploma of Family History from the University of Tasmania and is developing better skills in understanding DNA for family history.



Digitised records: now available online!

We have recently uploaded several newly digitised records to our online catalogue!

“OLD REGISTER” VOLUMES 1 TO 9

We are thrilled to announce the online publication of this iconic treasure from the State Archives Collection.

The Registers of Assignments and Other Legal Instruments from 1794 to 1824 — known colloquially as the “Old Register” — were inscribed on the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Register in 2009.

Representing some of the earliest colonial records in NSW, the Old Register is a nine-volume series of registers dating from 1802 to 1824 (backdated to 1794) that record private legal transactions and dealings between individuals and businesses.

They deal with a wide range of matters, including land transactions, marriages and separations, convict-master relationships, deeds, and sealing and shipping agreements.

These records offer fascinating insights into early colonial times, providing information about the details of social relationships as well as the demographics and values of the colony. This index was compiled by Lois Sabine and is published in collaboration with the Office of the Registrar General.

Search the index by name, subject or place:
<https://mhns.w.au/indexes/land/the-old-register/>

MINING PETITIONS INDEX

Compiled by the late Jean Little, a member of Forbes Family History Group, this online index lists 7,500+ names of signatories to petitions relating to mining in NSW during the 1860s.

Included in the index are several petitions relating to the Lambing Flat riots at Burrangong, NSW. Of note is one petition, signed in both Chinese and English. The petition states that Chinese miners who were driven off the goldfields sought compensation claims for property losses which were investigated and awarded, yet payment had not yet been received.

Also included are petitions in support of the Frontage System as a method to regulate mining claims and a petition from miners defined as “Aliens” (non-British subjects) under the *Goldfields Act of 1861*.

Index entries include the names of signatories, the date, locality in which the petition was created, and the occupation of the signatory (if given). Unfortunately, some of the signatures are indecipherable, as it appears some signatories could barely write.

Search for individuals by name, browse the images online or read the preamble to the petitions:

<https://mhns.w.au/indexes/land/mining-petitions/>



NRS-7933-1-[5/3673]-64/2663



NRS-4481-3-[7/15885]-M2693

NRS-19401 STAFF SERVICE CARDS NSW POLICE OFFICERS C. 1877–2001

The State Archives Collection holds multiple record series that can be useful for researching NSW police officers. One such example is the Staff service cards.

The records include personal details such as name, date of birth, height and weight on joining, eyes, hair, complexion, marital status and religion.

The records also provide key information about a police officer's career including service number, registered

number, whether mounted or foot, examinations and qualifications, record of punishments and court proceedings, special qualifications, special services, records of services and stations, and appointments.

Service cards are closed to public access for 30 years from an individual's date of exit from the service.

Please contact State Archives for assistance in locating records.

RECORDS OF 19TH CENTURY BLANKET LISTS & RETURNS OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLES

The 19th Century “blanket returns” are lists of Aboriginal peoples who received blankets from the colonial authorities. The returns provide detailed information about individuals and their movements. The records sometimes include both Indigenous and European names for each person, as well as their age.

There were two phases of annual blanket distribution:

1826–1844: Localities (or stations), where blankets were distributed and/or census data collected, are listed alphabetically. Lists are identified by region and county. The lists provide the numbers of blankets known to have been despatched there each year and the archival location of blanket distribution or census documents.

1847–1962: Distribution agents were left to maintain their own records of annual blanket distribution, with only a few submitting blanket lists on occasions to the government.

Members of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are respectfully advised that the records contain material which may be culturally sensitive.

Browse the lists: <https://mhnsww.au/guides/19th-century-blanket-lists-and-returns-of-aboriginal-people/>

The lists are arranged alphabetically by Indigenous Country, sourced from the **AIATSIS Map of Indigenous Australia**.



NRS-17420-2-29-889/005

Vital Records:

Tracing Births, Deaths and Marriages in NSW

7 August 2026

Western Sydney Records Centre

During Family History Month, we will be hosting a full-day seminar on the vital records that are key to all forms of historical research — births, deaths and marriages.

The seminar will feature talks by the NSW Registry of Births, Deaths & Marriages and by well-known experts Heather Garnsey OAM, Angela Phippen, and Laura Daaboul from Museums of History NSW.

The talks will present information and case studies on how to trace births, deaths and marriages in NSW.

There will also be an opportunity to take a behind-the-scenes tour of the Western Sydney Records Centre.

This is an event you will not want to miss!

Keep an eye out on our website for more information:

<https://mhnsww.au/whats-on/events/vital-records-tracing-births-deaths-marriages-nsw/>

2026 STATE ARCHIVES WEBINAR PROGRAM

Designing Your Local: Hotel Plans in the NSW State Archives Collection

Online, 26 June 2026



NRS-9590-1-[Plan62666]-[63]

Under the *Sale of Liquor Act 1881*, applications for liquor licences were submitted to the local licensing court for consideration. This Act required licensed premises to meet a minimum standard of accommodation.

Applications for new licensed houses, or for renovation of existing houses, were to be accompanied by a plan or sketch of the premises, including (in addition to the family's rooms) the provision of at least two sitting rooms, four sleeping rooms and two “places of convenience” (i.e. restrooms).

Join us for this webinar which will explore the beautiful plans of historic NSW pubs held in the State Archives Collection, including thousands of Sydney plans submitted to the Metropolitan Licensing Court.

Register online:

<https://mhnsww.au/whats-on/events/designing-your-local-hotel-plans-nsw-state-archives-collection/>

MORE UPCOMING WEBINARS

“Most came because their fare was paid for them”:

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OUR SAG COMMUNITY

SAG CEO Ruth Graham's farewell

Over the past six years, it has been one of the great opportunities of my professional life to serve as Executive Officer, then Chief Executive Officer of the Society of Australian Genealogists. As I conclude my paid contract with the Society, I have found myself reflecting not on projects completed or milestones reached, but on people and on the extraordinary transformations that occur when individuals are given the opportunity, encouragement and community to pursue family history.

Genealogy is often described as a hobby, but anyone who has spent time among family historians knows it is far more than that. It is an intellectual pursuit, a creative endeavour, a form of social connection, and for many people, a deeply personal journey of identity and understanding. Over six years, I have watched countless members and friends experience moments of discovery that changed how they saw themselves and their families.

I have seen members uncover long-hidden stories of migration, institutionalisation, military service, adoption, loss and resilience. I have seen people discover siblings they never knew existed, identify the origins of family photographs sitting unnamed in drawers for decades, and reconstruct entire branches of families previously believed impossible to trace. Sometimes the breakthrough came through painstaking archival work; at other times, through the use of DNA evidence and collaboration across continents. Yet the emotional impact was often the same: astonishment, connection, and an overwhelming sense that the past had suddenly become tangible.

One of the remarkable things about the Society is that these breakthroughs rarely happen in isolation. They emerge because people share knowledge freely. A conversation in the library, a comment during a webinar, a suggestion from a research group participant, or a quiet recommendation from an experienced volunteer can unlock years of stalled research. The Society has always been a place where expertise circulates generously, and I believe that culture of generosity remains one of its greatest strengths.



Ruth Graham in centre with SAG President Philippa Shelley Jones and incoming CEO Mark Burdack.

The years of the pandemic also revealed something profound about what a genealogical community could become. Like many organisations, we faced uncertainty and disruption, yet out of that challenge came extraordinary opportunities. Our rapid expansion of online education and events allowed us to connect with audiences, presenters and institutions in ways that previously seemed unlikely. Suddenly, geographical boundaries mattered far less.

We welcomed guests whose participation might once have been impossible. To host the Consul General of Ireland in Sydney in discussions connected to Irish family history demonstrated the broader cultural importance of genealogical work and its continuing relevance to identity, migration and diaspora. Likewise, hearing from actor, author and science communicator, Stephen McGann, brought international perspectives and new audiences into our conversations about family, memory and historical storytelling. Those events reminded us that genealogy does not sit apart from the wider world; it intersects with literature, history, medicine, politics, migration and culture in deeply meaningful ways.



One of the greatest satisfactions of leadership is seeing other people realise their potential. I have had the privilege of watching educator Danielle Lautrec continue to grow further with the publication of *The Good Genealogist* and I look forward to its second edition. Equally rewarding has been seeing staff members and contractors embrace opportunities, expand their capabilities and contribute their own vision and expertise to the organisation. Vanessa Cassin, Gemma Beswick, Danielle Tebb, Nicole Brown, Alexandra Mountain, Lorraine Brothers and Charlotte Broun, along with other staff or contractors, have each brought unique strengths, professionalism and care to their work. In a small organisation, staff wear many hats, and what members see publicly is only a fraction of the effort, creativity and resilience required behind the scenes. Watching colleagues develop confidence, leadership and new professional skills has been one of the quiet joys of these years.

The Society has also continued to provide spaces where members themselves can grow. I have especially loved watching people begin their presentation journey through the Friday Hang Outs. For many, those sessions represented the first time they had ever spoken publicly about their research. Some arrived nervous and uncertain, convinced they had little to offer. Yet time and again, those same individuals discovered that their experiences, methods and family stories resonated deeply with others. Confidence grows when people feel safe to contribute, and the Friday Hang Outs became a wonderful example of peer learning and encouragement in action.

Volunteering remains another cornerstone of the Society's life. I have seen firsthand the rewards that volunteering brings, not only to the organisation, but to the volunteers themselves. Friendships are formed, skills are developed, and people discover renewed purpose and belonging. In an increasingly fragmented world, organisations like the Society continue to provide meaningful communities built around shared curiosity.

Perhaps nowhere is the long-term nature of genealogical work more visible than in the Diploma of Family Historical Studies. Supervising and co-supervising candidates over extended periods has been one of the most rewarding aspects of my role. Candidates such as Michelle Goldsmith, Sarah Hewitt, Jennifer Kapp, Sue Reid, Robyn Roylance, Charlotte Sale, Narelle Seivers and Belinda Tiffen have each demonstrated intellectual rigour and commitment to high-quality research.

The same can be said for the many Certificate in Genealogical Research students, research group participants and volunteer leads I have encountered along the way. Every one of them contributes to the living fabric of the Society. Together, they demonstrate that family history is not simply about recovering the past; it is about building communities of learning, empathy and connection in the present.

I extend my sincere thanks to the many authors, academics, facilitators, presenters and conference speakers who so generously gave their time, expertise and passion to educate and inspire others, often contributing countless unseen hours in preparation, simply for the love of sharing family history adjacent knowledge.

I am also grateful to the many Directors, volunteers, committee and group leads, far too many to name individually whose commitment have shaped the Society throughout these years, and especially to those I worked most closely alongside, including Philippa Shelley Jones, Melissa Hulbert, Cheryl Wright, Kerry Farmer, Jennie Fairs, Yvonne Masters, Boyd Robinson and Robyn O'Keefe, all of whom give countless hours in service to our community.

As I conclude this chapter, I do so with gratitude to the people I have been fortunate enough to meet, learn from and work alongside.



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Donations Account: BSB 032 100 Account: 114 052

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OUR SAG COMMUNITY

RootsTech 2026

by Ruth Graham & Vanessa Cassin

Having watched it from afar since the pandemic, our CEO and Education Manager travelled to Salt Lake City for the biggest family history conference in the world.

Attending RootsTech in person is something anyone working in the family history industry should do at least once, and this year it truly delivered. In what locals described as the warmest winter in many years, the city was welcoming, easy to navigate, and framed by striking snow-topped mountains that gave it a feel not unlike Canberra: compact and purposeful.

One of the biggest takeaways was the opportunity to connect in person with those we had been video calling over the past five years, with many of the names mentioned in this article having provided, or are set to provide, talks for the Society.

We were fortunate to begin the conference with the Archives and Records Custodians (ARC) Symposium hosted by FamilySearch on Wednesday 4 March. This provided not only early access to the conference atmosphere but also a deeper appreciation of the scale and mission of the organisation. Throughout the week, our hosts from FamilySearch — Paul Bennalleck, Tom Nelson and Garrick Parr — enabled us to connect more deeply with their work and to witness firsthand the broader charitable activities undertaken as part of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This included visiting initiatives such as the Bishops' Central Storehouse. These experiences grounded the conference in a wider sense of service and community impact.

We were given a private tour of the Family History Library, which offered a remarkable behind-the-scenes view of one of the world's most significant genealogical collections. The scale, organisation, and commitment to free public access were deeply impressive, reinforcing the global role of FamilySearch in preserving and sharing family history resources. Their commitment to digitisation and quality control provided both inspiration and a benchmark for best practice as we bring these insights back to the Society.

It was particularly valuable to be part of an Oceania discussion group with colleagues from Papua New Guinea and the Philippines, where we gained insight into the challenges and emerging opportunities in accessing, preserving, and working with vital records across diverse archival and administrative contexts. The conference itself ran from 5–7 March at the Salt Palace Convention Center. A particular highlight of attending was reconnecting with colleagues from across the global genealogy community. It was a pleasure to spend time with Daniel Horowitz from MyHeritage, Jonny Perl from DNA Painter, Amy Harris from Brigham Young University, Geoff Rasmussen from Legacy Webinars, and Tahitia McCabe from the University of Strathclyde. These face-to-face opportunities reinforced the importance of international collaboration and

the shared momentum across the field.

The scale of RootsTech remains extraordinary.

We were told by Todd Knowles, Deputy Chief Genealogical Officer

and President of the International Society of British Genealogy and Family History, that over five million people had registered for the online experience, alongside approximately 30,000 attending in person. The hybrid model has fundamentally reshaped how we engage with conferences, and we made a deliberate decision to divide and conquer, attending sessions that benefited most from being experienced live, knowing the remainder could be accessed online later.

The expo hall itself was vast and energised, featuring organisations such as the National Archives and Records Administration, Findmypast, Legacy Family Tree Webinars, the Association of Professional Genealogists (APG), and the Board for Certification of Genealogists. It was a powerful reminder of the global ecosystem that supports genealogical research, education, and professionalisation.

Beyond the formal program, the week was rich in informal learning and inspiration. Conversations over lunch, chance encounters during sessions (including running into Brian Donovan from DC Thomson/Findmypast and Steve Little from the National Genealogical Society and AI Genealogy Insights), and shared reflections on emerging themes, particularly the growing influence of AI in genealogy, were as valuable as any formal presentation.

Some standout sessions we attended in person focused on ethical DNA interpretation, migration case studies, and innovative uses of digital tools. Others we have since revisited online, reinforcing the depth and quality of the program.

We rounded off the week with a performance by the Tabernacle Choir at Temple Square, a must-do for any visitor to the city.

Our flights and accommodation were self-funded, and overall, given our work within the sector, we both felt the experience was immensely worthwhile. RootsTech 2026 was not just a conference; it was a global gathering of purpose, generosity, and shared curiosity, one that will continue to shape our work long after returning home.

Everyone can still catch up with talks from Salt Lake City, as well as the broader online program, at:

<https://www.familysearch.org/en/rootstech/>



Vanessa and Ruth at RootsTech 2026.

EDUCATION@SAG

BY VANESSA CASSIN, EDUCATION MANAGER

As I sit here reflecting on the seasonal changes to the trees outside my study window I have been struck by the realisation that we are already halfway through another year. As clichéd as it sounds, I really do find time seems to move faster as I get older.

We speak a lot about resolutions and goals at the start of each new year, so midway through seems an appropriate time to take stock of our achievements in 2026 to date.

Recently cohorts have completed our Certificate in Genealogical Research program and our Genealogy Research Methods course. Congratulations to all those involved on your dedication and determination. Names of successful Certificate candidates will be published in the next issue of *Descent*.

The Society also has cohorts working their way through our Beginners Introduction to Family History, Making the Most of Ancestry (Level 1), Life Stories Essentials, Show & Tell series, Share Your Family Stories with PowerPoint, Family Tree Maker and WeAre.XYZ courses. These participants are all learning new skills for working with their family tree data and artifacts and presenting their stories. Is it time you updated your skills or learnt how to use a new platform? Visit our website www.sag.org.au/events regularly to see what is coming up.

Since the last issue of *Descent*, the Society has faced some significant changes. We have farewelled our CEO, Ruth Graham, who contributed significantly to the success of our education and events program during her tenure. Her successor, Mark Burdack, has been appointed, and the staff, Board and volunteers look forward to hearing more about his ideas for continuing the traditions of the Society, while acknowledging that we must continually evolve to meet the challenges of the world we operate in.

In the education and events area of the Society there has also been a significant change in one of our volunteer roles, the Chair of the Diploma & Certificate Committee. Dr Yvonne Masters has graciously agreed to step into the role of Chair of this important committee. Many of you will already be familiar with Yvonne through her volunteer work with the Society, as an event presenter, hang out host and as co-lead of our One Place Focus and AI & Tech groups. Yvonne has already been very involved behind the scenes as a member of the Diploma & Certificate Committee. Welcome and thank you to Yvonne for all you do.

The appointment of a new Committee Chair means that another volunteer has stepped back from that role. Jennie Fairs has been a stalwart of the Diploma & Certificate Committee for many years, first as a committee member, and then as the Chair. Jennie — on behalf of all the members of the Society, thank you for the tireless work you have put into volunteering with the various education and events committees over the years. Your wise counsel will be missed greatly. We do, however, look forward to still seeing you as a volunteer in other capacities. Thank you, but not farewell, Jennie!

Thank you

I would like to acknowledge all the people and organisations who have presented at an event between February 2026 and April 2026, the vast majority on a voluntary basis. Those assisting since the end of April will be acknowledged in the next issue of *Descent*. We could not bring our busy schedule of events to members without their contributions. Any omissions from this list are purely accidental.

Presenters: Webinars, Book Club, Knowledge Night

Kathryn Barrett, Fiona Brooker (Memories in Time), Judith Charlton, Kerry Farmer, Vicki Hails, Peter Homan, Daniel Horowitz (MyHeritage), Melissa Hulbert, Rachel Watson, Christine Woodlands

Presenters & Assistants: Courses

Judith Charlton, Jennie Fairs, John Heath, Pamela Heather, Melissa Hulbert, Jane Hutcheon, Danielle Lautrec, Jeffrey Madsen, Yvonne Masters, Louise Miller-Hoffmann, Dr Betty O'Neill, Peter Reading (VicGUM), Andrew Redfern

Conferences/Mini Conferences

Gemma Beswick, Christine Hingerty, Danielle Lautrec, Jeffrey Madsen, Christine Woodlands

Past In Practice: NSW Records Masterclass

Our collaboration partner:

Cathie Sherwood, Family History Academy

Alana Canceri (MHNSW), Gemma Evans (State Library NSW), Melissa Jackson (State Library NSW), Martyn Killion (MHNSW), Dr Carol Liston, Jeffrey Madsen, Brianna Mifsud (MHNSW), Coleen Milicevic (MHNSW), Angela Phippen, Andrew Redfern, Dr Richard Reid, Fiona Sullivan (MHNSW), Bonnie Wildie (MHNSW), Christine Yeats

Presenters & Leads: Groups

Gemma Beswick, Catherine Bishop, Lee Boehm, Sienna Brown, Sally Byatt, Elizabeth Capelin, Judith Charlton, Rachel Croucher, Larry Czarnik, John Denlay, Dr Damian Gleeson, Elizabeth Gordon, Kathleen Hackett, Alistair Henderson, Lyn Hudson-Williamson, Danielle Lautrec, Lorraine Luks, Brian Maclachlan, Dr Hilda Maclean, Bronwyn MacLeod, Rosslyn Macphail, Yvonne Masters, Melanie Middleton (NZSG), Stephen Miller, (Friends of Beckett Street Cemetery), Kristine Newton, Diana Pecar, Sandy Pullen, Emily Purser, Linda Radulovitch, Andrew Redfern, Sharon Shelley, Sally Skulte, Maureen Trotter, Annesley Watson, Pauline Weeks, Dr Michael Williams, Stephanie Woods

Lattes & Lineages Hosts

Elizabeth Capelin & Ailsa Dee

DNA CORNER

BY CHRISTINE WOODLANDS

DNA to the rescue?

Reflections on what is really changing family history research

Earlier this year, I had the pleasure of speaking with a group of family historians about the growing role of DNA evidence in genealogical research. The session was titled *DNA to the rescue*. At first glance, that might sound slightly dramatic, but for many researchers it genuinely feels that way.

For generations, family history research relied almost entirely on documentary records. Civil registration, parish registers, census returns, probate records, newspapers and local histories formed the backbone of reconstructing earlier families. Yet the search rarely began in an archive. More often, it began around a kitchen table — with stories passed down through generations, a Bible inscription, a faded photograph or a bundle of letters tied carefully with ribbon.

Traditional records remain the foundation of good genealogy. DNA has not replaced them. But over the past decade, DNA has fundamentally changed the way many genealogists approach difficult problems. In my view, its greatest strength is not that it magically “solves” family mysteries. Rather, DNA reorganises the search space. It helps us identify which family networks deserve closer attention and, equally importantly, which do not.

That distinction matters.

The changing landscape of DNA research

When autosomal DNA testing first became widely available to genealogists a decade ago, many researchers approached it cautiously. Match lists were relatively small, trees were often incomplete, and the tools available for analysing relationships were comparatively limited.

Today, the landscape is very different.

Large databases — particularly at AncestryDNA — now contain millions of testers, creating unprecedented opportunities for identifying family connections. For Australian researchers especially, the scale of these databases has become enormously important because of the strong representation of British and Irish ancestry within them.

But the real transformation has not simply been the size of the databases. It has been the increasing ability to analyse networks of matches rather than isolated individuals.

In recent years, tools such as Enhanced Shared Matching at AncestryDNA, clustering systems and access to additional match lists have significantly changed how experienced researchers work with DNA evidence. The emphasis has shifted from looking at single

matches to understanding broader relationship structures. That shift is profound.

The real breakthrough is structure

One of the strongest messages I tried to convey during the session was that successful DNA analysis depends less on finding a spectacular match and more on establishing a reliable analytical structure.

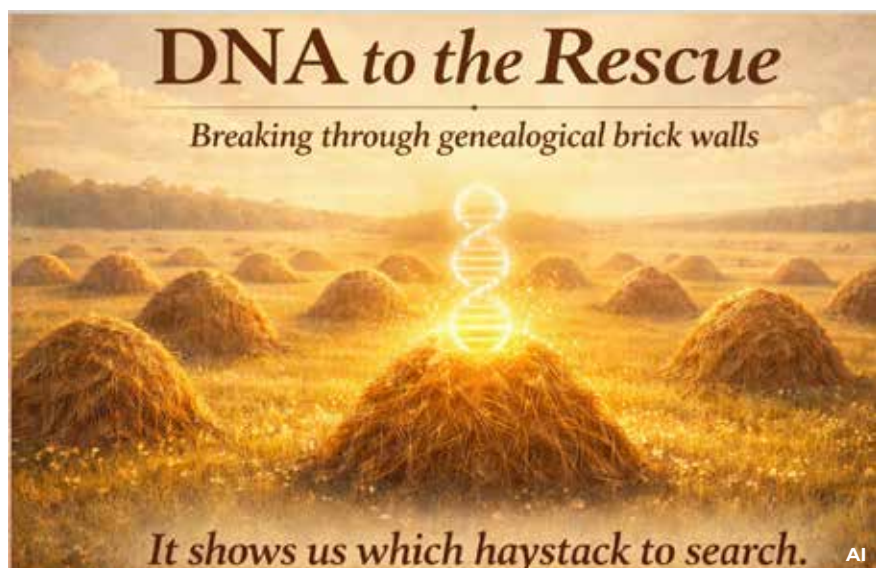
Again and again, I see researchers enthusiastically working with DNA results before first establishing which line of their family they are actually analysing. The consequences are often predictable:

- capable researchers,
- serious effort,
- thoughtful use of increasingly sophisticated tools,
- careful analysis of individual matches,
- and substantial investments of time and money,

but all built on uncertain foundations. And that can lead to an extraordinary amount of time, energy and money being invested in solving the wrong problem.

In my own work, the first priority is almost always to separate matches into coherent maternal and paternal networks. Until that has been done with confidence, it is very difficult to know what any individual match actually represents.

This is one reason why shared-match analysis has become so important. Shared-match networks help researchers move beyond isolated relationships and begin to see how groups of people connect to one another through common ancestral lines. That network structure usually matters more than the precise amount of DNA shared by any single match.



Indeed, one of the risks I see is that researchers can become highly focused on chromosome-level precision while still lacking confidence about the broader family structure they are analysing.

Precision and accuracy are not always the same thing. A researcher can work with great technical precision — examining chromosome segments, triangulated groups and predicted relationships in considerable detail — yet still be heading in the wrong direction if they have not first established which side of the family they are actually analysing.

In that situation, the tools may be operating with precision, but the overall research may still lack accuracy.

To me, this is one of the great strengths of shared-match analysis. It helps establish the broader family structure first, before researchers move into more detailed forms of DNA interpretation.

DNA does not lie. But DNA evidence can certainly be misinterpreted.

DNA and the paper trail

Importantly, none of this diminishes the value of traditional documentary research. The strongest genealogical conclusions continue to emerge from the careful integration of records and DNA evidence together.

DNA may suggest where to look. Records explain what actually happened.

The two forms of evidence work best when they operate together.

In many cases, DNA helps narrow a field of possibilities that would otherwise remain impossibly broad. Rather than searching blindly across thousands of potential families, researchers can begin concentrating on a much smaller number of interconnected family groups.

I often describe this as moving from searching for a needle in the world's haystacks to searching within the right haystack.

That is a very different task.

Proving pedigree before moving further

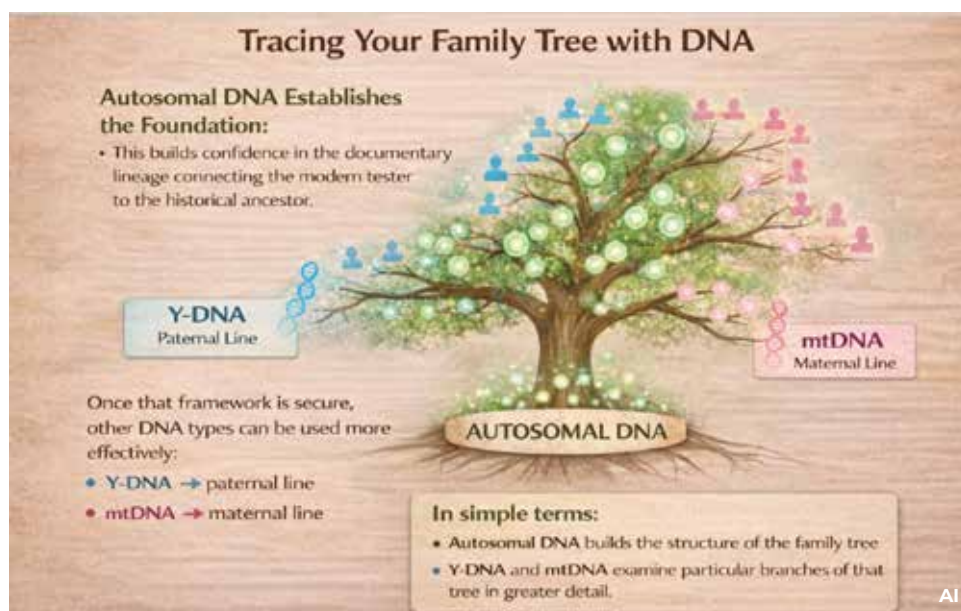
In my view, establishing a reliable autosomal DNA framework before moving into more specialised forms of testing such as Y-DNA or mitochondrial DNA is simply sound genealogical practice.

Too often, researchers are tempted to move quickly toward lineage testing before first establishing the broader pedigree with confidence.

Autosomal DNA is particularly powerful because it allows researchers to analyse relationship networks across multiple descendant lines. Shared matches, clustering and carefully constructed research trees can often demonstrate whether a proposed family connection is plausible long before more specialised testing is considered.

To me, autosomal DNA is fundamentally about proving the pedigree first. Y-DNA and mitochondrial DNA are then at their most valuable when used to address narrower paternal or maternal questions within that already established framework.

That sequence matters.



Documentation & transparency

Another important change in recent years has been the growing recognition that DNA analysis needs to be documented carefully and transparently. It is no longer enough simply to say that “the DNA supports it”. Researchers increasingly need to explain:

- which matches were considered,
- how groups were identified,
- what hypotheses were tested,
- and why particular conclusions were reached.

For that reason, I have found myself documenting my own work more formally than I once did — not only through research reports, but also through blog posts that attempt to explain both the reasoning process and the limitations of the evidence. DNA evidence can be persuasive. But genealogy still requires interpretation, judgement and careful reasoning. Good conclusions rarely emerge from DNA alone.

A changing future for family history

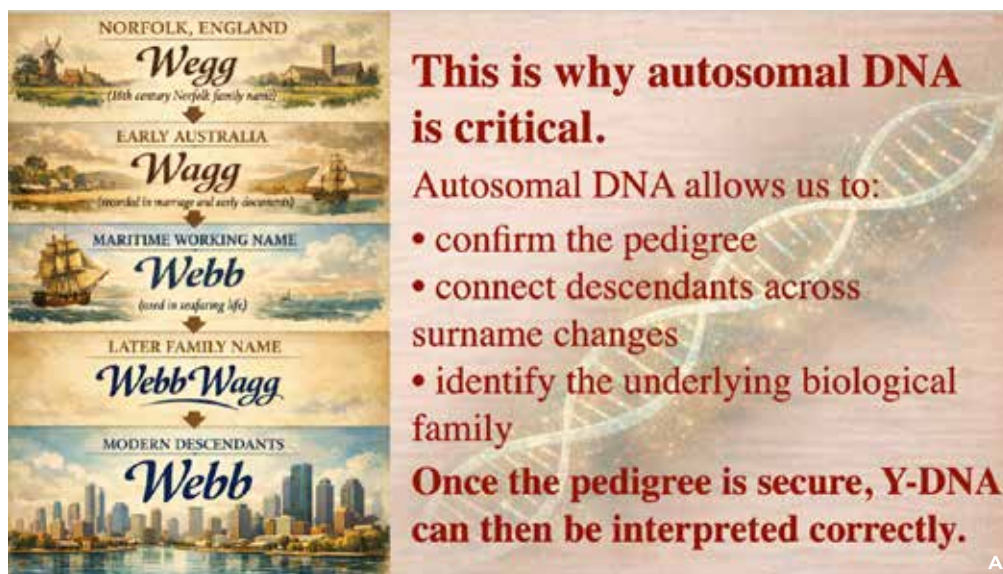
What struck me most in preparing the session was how rapidly family history research is changing.

Many of the problems that once seemed permanently beyond reach are now becoming approachable through combinations of documentary research, shared-match analysis, clustering methods and increasingly sophisticated tools.

Yet the fundamentals remain surprisingly familiar. Good genealogy still depends on:

- careful analysis,
- sound methodology,
- scepticism,
- documentation,
- and the willingness to reconsider assumptions when the evidence changes.

DNA has not removed those responsibilities. If anything, it has made them even more important. What DNA has done is provide family historians with an entirely new category of evidence — one capable of reopening questions that earlier generations of researchers often had no realistic way of approaching.



DNA in practice: the William Webb Wagg investigation

Much of my own thinking about DNA methodology has emerged through a long-running investigation into the origins of my great-great-grandfather, William Webb Wagg. Like many nineteenth-century research problems, the investigation began with uncertainty, conflicting records and incomplete family stories. Traditional documentary research provided important clues, but many questions remained unresolved for years.

It was DNA that fundamentally changed the structure of the investigation. By working carefully with shared-match networks, separating maternal and paternal groups, and progressively building clusters of interconnected matches, it became possible to narrow the field of enquiry to a much smaller group of related families in Norfolk, England.

Importantly, the DNA did not replace the records. Rather, it directed attention back toward the most promising documentary pathways.

Over time, the investigation has drawn together:

- autosomal DNA evidence,
- traditional records,
- shared-match analysis,
- descendant reconstruction,
- and, more recently, Y-DNA testing.

One of the clearest lessons for me personally has been the importance of first establishing the pedigree through autosomal DNA before moving to lineage-based Y-DNA analysis. The Y-DNA work became meaningful precisely because the broader documentary and autosomal framework had first been established with reasonable confidence.

The investigation remains ongoing, but it has profoundly shaped the way I now think about DNA and family history research more generally.

In many ways, that investigation has reinforced the central theme of this article:

DNA does not replace genealogy. But it can fundamentally change how we approach it.

For readers interested in exploring these ideas further, a fuller reflection arising from the original session can be found at: DNA to the rescue? Reflections after the session

<https://mossiesmusings.blogspot.com>

I am also documenting the William Webb Wagg investigation through a dedicated research series, which follows the ongoing integration of documentary research, autosomal DNA analysis and Y-DNA evidence: The William Webb Wagg Investigation <https://webbwagg.blogspot.com>

For readers interested in learning more about using DNA in your family history research, I would also encourage you to explore the Society's growing range of DNA-related presentations, workshops and discussion groups through the Society's events and programs tab on the website:

Society of Australian Genealogists Events

Whether you are just beginning to work with DNA or are already using it regularly in your research, these sessions provide valuable opportunities to develop both practical skills and methodological understanding.

Christine Woodland is an enthusiastic amateur genetic genealogist and family historian based in Sydney. She has been actively involved in DNA-based family history research for almost a decade and is particularly interested in the integration of documentary research and autosomal DNA analysis to address complex genealogical problems.

Christine is a member of the Society of Australian Genealogists DNA Research Group and presents regularly on DNA methodology, shared-match analysis and genetic genealogy research practices, with a particular focus on working effectively with AncestryDNA.

She writes regularly about family history research, DNA methodology and the changing role of technology in genealogy through her blog: Mossie's Musings <https://mossiesmusings.blogspot.com>



AFFHO CONGRESS 2027:

Immerse yourself in the forefront of genealogical discovery

by Pauline Weeks

Genealogist, Jill Ball, has been a member of the Society for about 20 years, and served on the Society's Education Committee for eight years. She is a member of the Society of Genealogists (SoG) and is a past-president of the Lake Macquarie Family History Group.

Jill has had a personal involvement with the past five congresses and says, "the opportunities for informal learning and socialising for we who indulge in what is often a solitary pursuit cannot be underestimated."

Meeting up with new and old friends — "genimates" — is a highlight of the Congress.

The other benefit is that "attendees can combine Congress attendance with research or tourist activities including visiting local libraries, societies, archives and sites of significant historical interest."

At the 2012 Congress in Adelaide and the 2015 one in Canberra, Jill was an "official blogger" for the events. In Canberra, together with Pauleen Cass and Shauna Hicks, they shared a number of posts including interviews with presenters.

In Sydney in 2018, together with Pauleen Cass, she set up a Facebook Group for those interested in attending which had several hundred members. At the same Congress she also presented on two topics close to her heart: Blogging and Frugal Genealogy. She is still passionate about blogging as a way to share and preserve our family stories.

She was an ambassador for New South Wales and again presented at the 2025 Congress in Brisbane. She is particularly interested in future proofing family history for future generations. Jill hopes to be at the 2027 Congress in Wellington and recommends everyone take a "deep dive" into genealogy at Congress across the ditch.

AFFHO is the peak body representing family history societies throughout Australia and New Zealand. Since its establishment in 1978, the organisation has provided coordination, support and advocacy for groups dedicated to family history, genealogy, heraldry, and related fields.

The organisation's mission is to promote, preserve and foster the study of family history, genealogy, and related subjects throughout Australia and New Zealand. It achieves this by supporting member organisations with resources, networking opportunities, and educational programs.



Jill Ball

AFFHO also advocates on behalf of the family history community and strives to raise public awareness about the value of genealogy. Among AFFHO's most significant activities is its Congress.

See the AFFHO Congress website: <https://affhocongress.org/> for more information on attending, speaking or exhibiting.

The two platinum sponsors are Ancestry and FINDEX.



FINDEX

Our next theme is:

The Future of Genealogy

Submissions are due 13 July 2026 for the September issue of *Descent*.

For more information about submitting an article to *Descent*, visit:

www.sag.org.au/Our-Magazine-Descent

Photo by June Hansen on Unsplash



TECH TALK

TOOLS & TIPS

BY ANDREW REDFERN

Your Digital Toolkit: Passwords, Accessibility & AI Photo Restoration

As family historians, we spend a great deal of time uncovering the past, but it's worth pausing occasionally to make sure the digital tools we use every day are working as well as they could. This article covers three practical improvements you can make right now: strengthening your passwords, getting more from your phone's built-in accessibility features, and using AI to breathe new life into damaged historical photographs.

The strongest passwords are longer than you think

If you've been told to make your passwords complex by mixing uppercase letters, numbers, and symbols, you're not wrong, but length matters far more than complexity. A short, complicated password like *T7@kP2!* is actually easier for a computer to crack than a long, simple phrase like *sunshine-library-1952-kangaroo*.

The reason is straightforward: every extra character multiplies the number of combinations an attacker must try. A 16-character password is exponentially harder to crack than an 8-character one, regardless of how many symbols it contains. For genealogists, this is particularly important. Your accounts on your devices, websites and online platforms hold years of irreplaceable research. Protecting them properly matters.

A few practical guidelines:

- Aim for at least 16 characters in any password.
- Use a passphrase: three or four unrelated words joined by a symbol or number, rather than a single word with substitutions.
- Never reuse the same password across multiple sites.
- Consider a password manager to generate and store strong passwords securely. You then only need to remember one master passphrase.

The goal is a password that's easy for you to remember, but practically impossible for a machine to guess.

Accessibility settings: Hidden features worth knowing

Both iPhones and Android phones include a dedicated Accessibility section in their settings, and it's well worth spending ten minutes exploring what's there. On an iPhone, go to *Settings > Accessibility*. On Android, look under *Settings > Accessibility* or *Settings > Display*. Many of these features were designed for people with specific needs, but a number are genuinely useful for anyone who spends time reading small text, working in poor lighting, or listening to audio while researching.

A few worth highlighting:

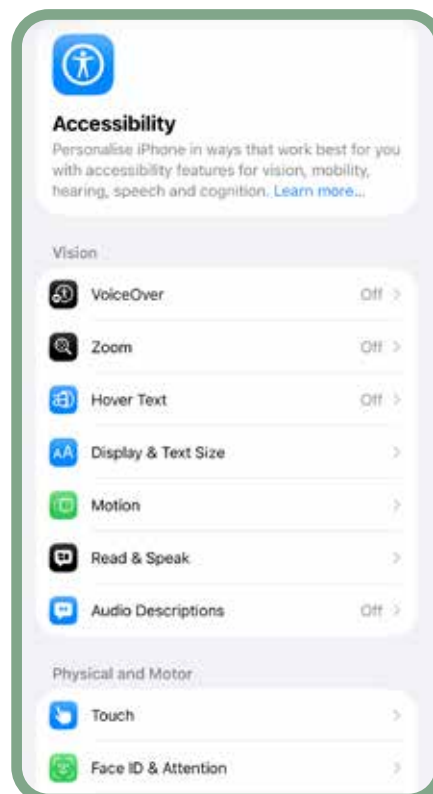
Display & Text Size (iPhone) or **Font Size & Display** (Android) lets you increase text size across all your apps in one place. If you find yourself squinting at your phone while reviewing a document or email, this is the quickest fix.

Zoom (iPhone) or **Magnification** (Android) enlarges a portion of your screen, which is particularly handy when reviewing scanned documents or small-print records.

Speak Screen (iPhone) or **Select to Speak** (Android) has your phone read text aloud, a helpful option when you want to listen to an article or

document rather than read it on screen.

These are just a starting point. The full accessibility menu on most phones contains far more than most people realise, and the right feature can make a genuine difference to how comfortably you use your device every day.



Accessibility: Accessibility features
on iOS Version 26.5



*AI enhanced image: Original image from *The Leatherworker in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg* by Thomas K. Ford: a Project Gutenberg eBook, enhanced using Google Gemini.*
<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/58293/pg58293-images.html>

Restoring damaged family photographs with Google Gemini

One of the most moving applications of AI for family historians is the restoration of old, damaged photographs. Google Gemini — available free at gemini.google.com or through the Gemini app on your phone — can take a scratched, faded or torn photograph and produce a cleaned, restored version with impressive results.

The key to getting a good outcome is giving Gemini a detailed, specific prompt. Here is one I have been using with strong results. Replace the section in brackets at the start with a description of your own photograph, including the image type and era where known:

This is a [describe your photograph, e.g. photocopied photograph from the late 1800s, faded studio portrait from around 1920, newspaper photograph of unknown date].

Restore this image to its original quality while maintaining complete faithfulness to the original context and historical authenticity. Remove all physical damage including scratches, tears, creases, dust spots, stains, and missing sections. Repair fading and discoloration by restoring original colours and tones without over-saturation. Enhance clarity and sharpness by reconstructing blurry details into accurate physical details based on surrounding context. Apply natural lighting correction with proper shadows and highlights. Add authentic surface textures including natural skin pores, fabric properties, and material accuracy where damaged areas need reconstruction. Preserve all original composition, poses, expressions, and historical characteristics. Use proper depth of field and realistic colour grading that matches the original time period. Output should appear as a clean, well-preserved version of the original photograph with all damage repaired and quality improved while remaining completely true to the source image at maximum resolution.

To use it, open Gemini, start a new conversation, upload your photograph using the image icon, paste the prompt, and fill in your description at the start. The results won't always be perfect, as AI can occasionally misinterpret a detail, but for photographs that are otherwise unusable the improvement can be remarkable.

This is also a wonderful project to try with other family members. Restoring a photograph of a shared ancestor and presenting it to relatives can be a genuinely moving experience.

Small changes, real rewards

None of these three steps requires significant time or technical skill. A stronger password protects years of research. A better-configured phone makes your daily work easier. And a restored photograph reconnects you and your family with faces that might otherwise be lost to time.

RETRO RESEARCH ...

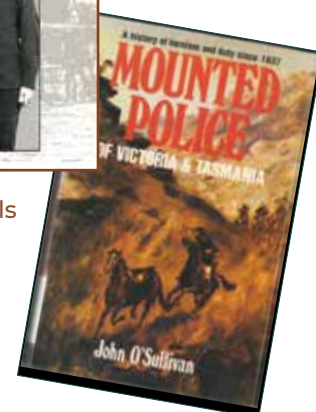
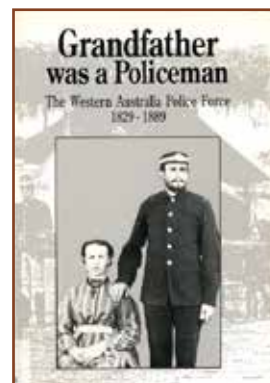
that never goes out of style!

BY DANIELLE TEBB



Police and Law Enforcement

Every family has had interactions with police and law enforcement, sometimes on the criminal side, sometimes on the law enforcement side and, across the generations, undoubtedly on both sides. Agents of law enforcement, in their many guises, have had a significant presence in Australia, from the early days of the colony when they guarded convicts, through the Rum Rebellion, protecting gold transports, chasing down bushrangers and so much more. Unfortunately, this sometimes extended to working outside the moral framework of the law, if not the actual law. Tracing these individuals can send us down untold rabbit holes. In this issue we highlight library resources that help demystify the law enforcement experience, reveal the range of activities undertaken by the participants and celebrate the enduring service undertaken by individuals.



AUSTRALIA

The Australian police forces by G. M. O'Brien. A3/83/1 (Book)

Police in Australia by R. J. Unstead and W. F. Henderson. A3/83/9 (Book)

Police of the pastoral frontier: native police 1849–59 by L. E. Skinner. A3/83/10 (Book)

Mounted police of Victoria & Tasmania by John O'Sullivan. A3/83/12 (Book)

The story of Daniel Brien 1769–1837, the first constable of police for the district of Seven Hills, 1810; and his little wife Ann Parker 1789–1865 by William J. Cuthill. A6/BRI/CD.1 (CD ROM)

Thomas Edwards of Beverley: immigrant, policeman, settler by Mollie Bentley. A6/EDW/1 (Book)

Policeman Grieve, 1836–1916 by Alan Clark. A6/GRI/Pam.2 (Pamphlet)

James Smith, Police magistrate, 1815–1875 by Greta Lucas. A6/SMI/Pam.6 (Pamphlet)

Only one police force in Australia. The Northern Territory: Charles Edward "Tim" Tisdell (1926–1987) by Catherine Tisdell. A6/TIS/3 (Book)

Notes on Henry John Wooldridge – Vol. III – Police magistrate matters by Simon Wooldridge. A6/WOO/Pam.6c (Pamphlet)

The note issues of the Colonial Police Fund of New South Wales, 1810–1824 by W. J. Mira. B1/60/Pam.51 (Pamphlet)

Index to the Bench of Magistrates Returns New South Wales 1830–1831: court records of cases heard at Police Station and Magistrates Court, George Street, Sydney compiled by Shirley Doolan. B3/3/Pam.2a (Pamphlet)

A centenary history of the New South Wales Police Force, 1862–1962. B3/61/7 (Book)

Mounted Police in New South Wales:

a history of heroism and duty since 1821

by John Stephen O'Sullivan. B3/83/10 (Book)

The thin red and blue lines: a history of the military police presence in the Blue Mountains between the Nepean and the Cox River 1814–2005 by Peter Chinn. B3/83/11 (Book)

True blue: 150 years of service and sacrifice of the NSW police force by Patrick Lindsay. B3/83/24 (Book)

Index to police returns NSW: (including some Brisbane and Port Phillip records) compiled by Kaye Vernon & Billie Jacobsen. B3/83/CD.1a (CD ROM)

Police heritage: New South Wales: 1788–2008 by Phil Patterson. B3/83/CD.4 (CD ROM)

A history of NSW police from 1788: Vol. 1 by Collinridge Rivett. B3/83/Pam.1 (Pamphlet)

Documents on police in New South Wales, 1789–1879 compiled by Richard Hammond. B3/83/Pam.12 (Pamphlet)

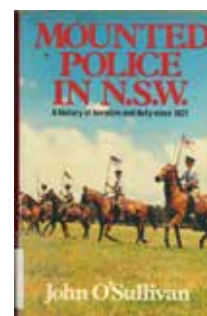
The Wollombi/MacDonald police district: maintaining law and order compiled by Carl Hoipo. B4.325/24/Pam.1 (Pamphlet)

Establishment and development of the police force in Port Macquarie by Jean Crawley. B4.444/83/Pam.2 (Pamphlet)

Leaving the Barracks: a record of Windsor Police Station 1862–2010 by Heather Smith. B4.756/20/3 (Book)

Protecting the community: police in Wellington New South Wales 1830s to 1950s by Dorothy Blake. B4.820/83/Pam.1 (Pamphlet)

Beyond courage: the circumstances of New South Wales police officers who have lost their lives by Danny Webster. B5/90/44 (Book)



ABOUT US



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