

The Anglican Historical Society of New Zealand *Te Rōpu Hītori o te Hāhi Mīhinare ki Aotearoa* *1850: Why Emigrate? Why New Zealand? Why Canterbury?*

Author: Brian Carrell

(AHS Newsletter 26, October 2003)

Family History Research



Delving into family history can yield as many questions as it does answers. Two lines of my personal family history research converged to yield some tantalising possibilities.¹

Tracing family origins and connections intersected with an interest in the Canterbury Association and its membership. The outcome was a likely explanation of one couple's decision to migrate that, in the absence of family diaries, letters or other written records, made more and better sense as it was pursued and tested. The answer may not be conclusive, but it is convincing.

Once the obligatory 'family tree' has been more or less constructed, curiosity turns to matters of the 'Why?' and the 'How?'

Why, for example, did our first New Zealand forebears decide to emigrate? What drove them to uproot a sometimes sizeable family and migrate to the other side of the world? Then how did they come to choose New Zealand when the closer and, from several perspectives, more attractive land of liberty in North America held out welcoming arms to them? And finally, for my

own maternal forebears, why determine on the unproven and undeveloped new Canterbury settlement in the antipodes?

George and Mary Cooper

George (36) and Mary (31) Cooper of Worcestershire, together with their six children, the eldest aged only 11, embarked on the *Travancore* on 2 December 1850. The *Travancore* was the seventh of the series of 25 chartered ships engaged in taking settlers to Canterbury over a period of two years, 1850-52. The *Travancore* was already two weeks out from Gravesend when the first four of those ships reached Port Cooper (Lyttelton) with the initial wave of pilgrims.

Eventually George and Mary would bring into the world a total of 21 children, settle consecutively in Port Levy (1851-54), Head of the Bay (Teddington, 1854-68), and at Woodside (Coopers Creek, Oxford, 1868-82), and finally retire to Leeston (Ellesmere, 1882-1904).

In each location, over this period of more than 50 years, they and their family would be instrumental in establishing Anglican worship, building a local church, or serving in every lay capacity from vestry member to Sunday school superintendent. As a family of assisted steerage migrants, they represent not the more prominent landed elite but that largely invisible Anglican backbone out of which the Diocese of Christchurch was created one hundred and fifty years ago.

But how did George and Mary Cooper come to

settle on Canterbury in New Zealand as the destination for their hopes of a better life?

It may have had a lot to do with George and Mary's connection with the Parish of Stoulton in Worcestershire, where their home had been before emigrating.

The Somers Cocks of Worcestershire

Mary's family, the Reeves, had lived within the bounds of Stoulton Parish since about 1750. In 1774, Mary's grandfather was the 'tenant' (i.e., steward or farm manager) of one of several large estates belonging to a wealthy landed Worcestershire family, the Somers Cocks.² This estate was known as Windmill Hill, a 126-acre farm on the Pershore side of Stoulton, where Mary grew up as a girl from the year of her birth in 1819 until she moved into Worcester to work as a straw bonnet maker, about 1835.

The landlord of Windmill Hill estate at that time was the second Earl Somers, John Somers Cocks, who lived some distance away, though still in Worcestershire, at Eastnor. For a brief period, from 1826-29, his brother James also happened to be Vicar of Stoulton. Mary would then have been a young child aged 7-10, an impressionable age, taking part in the life of the parish along with her strongly committed Anglican parents and family. Following this time at Stoulton, the Rev. James Somers Cocks on March 13th, 1829, was instituted to a Canonry of nearby Worcester Cathedral. So, he was never far away from his Stoulton and Windmill Hill family landholdings, and the families he had come to know well who lived on them.

In 1837, at the age of eighteen, Mary married George Cooper, who hailed from the Gloucestershire town of Moreton-in-Marsh.

Times were hard. The potato blight and famine devastated Ireland from 1846 onwards. Work was difficult to obtain. Prospects locally for young families without land of their own were dim. It was in this climate that several proposals

for planting settlements overseas were being entertained in Britain. In 1848, one such scheme began to take shape that would have special appeal to Mary and George - the Canterbury Association proposal to establish an Anglican settlement in New Zealand.

Family links within the Canterbury Association

It so happened that there was a strong web of family interconnection tightly woven within the Canterbury Association that could well have eventually drawn Mary and George into its net. Five of the Association's leading members were closely related to the Somers-Cocks family.³ Lord Lyttelton, who was the Association's Chairman and Lord Lieutenant of Worcestershire, was also a relative of Thomas Somers-Cocks,⁴ the banker and treasurer of the Association, and a cousin of another Association member, W. H. Pole Carew.⁵ Pole Carew in turn was a close friend from college days of John Robert Godley.

Godley, as well as being a member of the Association, would go out early to Canterbury as the Association's agent to prepare for the first settlers. In turn he was a brother-in-law to Thomas Somers Cocks (they had married two sisters.⁶ Furthermore, Charlotte, John Godley's wife, had a brother, Charles Wynne, who was also a Canterbury Association member. Lyttelton, Somers Cocks, Godley and Wynne at one stage served together on the Management Committee, effectively the engine room of the Association's project.

Unfulfilled Aspirations

By 1850, the year the new settlement was to be founded, the Association entertained hopes of widespread popular interest in the scheme, and expectations of a flood of inquiries from prospective applicants. There was a need for both moneyed settlers in a position to purchase land, and farm labourers of good standing, character and Anglican faith able to provide the work force to develop the land. But neither was forthcoming in the numbers required to make

the scheme financially sound. Special efforts of persuasion and recruitment to find and entice people to migrate had to be employed in the months immediately leading up to the planned departure of the first four ships.

Thomas Somers Cocks, as banker to both Godley and the Association, had even more of an investment than the others in seeing that the project was a success. Along with Lord Lyttelton and another member, Sir John Simeon, he had personally guaranteed a credit to the Association from the Union Bank of Australia for the sum of £10,000. This was to enable the 'road to the Plains' (the present Evans Pass Road leading to Sumner) to be built in readiness for the arrival of the first settlers. (In the end, this was not completed in time.)

It is not difficult to see pressure being applied to family connections, urging them to look out for likely recruits from within their various circles of influence. Though the Rev. James Somers Cocks was no longer Vicar of Stoulton, or George Reeve (Mary Cooper's father) the tenant of Windmill Hill farm, the Somers Cocks family would be well aware that still living on or near that estate were the extended Reeve family. They would be aware that this family over several generations had proved themselves to be both good workers and loyal church members. They would also know

that, with their numerous Reeve offspring, coping with the rural economic downturn at that time must have been proving a great difficulty.

Is this the way that George and Mary came to hear of the Canterbury proposal, and warmed to the opportunity? Not through their own enterprise and inquiries, but as a result of suggestions persuasively put to them by a member of the Somers Cocks family or one of their agents.⁷ And were there other couples who similarly had their hearts and hopes turned towards Canterbury through the personal efforts of Association members?

Who can tell for sure, but something significant led the Coopers to risk all and, with their six young children, travel to the other side of the world. Possibly through this same Stoulton and Somers Cocks connection, Mary's husband, George, would be appointed one of the ship's constables for the journey out to Port Cooper on the *Travancore* when it left Gravesend in early December 1850. A receipt for £2.2.6 for services rendered in this capacity, signed by J. R. Godley and countersigned by George Cooper, is now held in the National Archives in Christchurch. It may be a mute witness to this kind of interplay of English families and fortunes that sometimes lay behind the settlement of Canterbury.

Endnotes

¹ A phenomenon of the last two decades has been the way many older *Pakeha* have set themselves to discover more about their own *whakapapa*. Retirement also can provide greater opportunity to discover more about the origins of the place where we live and the various factors which have given it shape. Previous generations may have been too preoccupied with surviving first a depression and then a major world war, followed by post-war reconstruction, to have had the interest, leisure or opportunity to undertake such searches. Also, their closer proximity in time to those who were the pioneer generation may have reduced a sense of the importance of such efforts. The difficulties at those times of gaining ready access to reliable records, whether in this country or overseas, may also have dampened any earlier ardour for such pursuits.

² By double coincidence, not only did one member of the Somers Cocks family later migrate to Canterbury, but a century later a further Somers Cocks became Vicar of Hororata parish in the Diocese of Christchurch, where the writer of this article had earlier been Vicar. The Revd Michael Dearden Somers Cocks now lives in retirement at Whitecliffs, in the parish of Hororata.

³ See Michael Blain, " *The Canterbury Association - a study of its members' connections*" 2000, Occasional Paper No. 4 of The Archives Committee, Diocese of Christchurch; also, a review of this paper by Brian Carrell in the Anglican Historical Society Newsletter 18, December 2000.

⁴ George Lyttelton's mother was Agneta Pole-Carew, 5th daughter of Sir Reginald Pole-Carew of Antony, Cornwall, and sister to Reginald. (Reginald was the father of Association member, WH (William) Pole-Carew.)

⁵ Pole Carew's mother was the Hon. Caroline Anne Lyttelton, daughter of William Henry Lyttelton (3rd Baron Lyttelton) and aunt to George William Lyttelton of Hagley Hall. Lord Lyttelton and Thomas were therefore 1st cousins.

⁶ Thomas had married Sarah Louisa Wynne, 5th daughter of Charles Wynne Griffith-Wynne, on 24 May 1842. Godley had married Charlotte Griffith-Wynne, Sarah's sister, on 29 September 1846.

⁷ The fact that they were not in the first wave of settlers who had left Plymouth in September 1850, but embarked some three months later, suggests that their decision to emigrate was made late rather than early. It could thus be interpreted more likely as a decision made in response to the prompting of others than as a proposal entirely of their own initiative.