

## JOHN AND VAIR ARMSTRONG and Family

In January 1841, Mr. George Read, who had a property in partnership with Norman McLeod near Meredith north of Geelong and was to become one of the regular visitors to Boronggoop, found for Anne Drysdale 'a very respectable couple called Armstrong who had been 18 months in the colony from Scotland. They have six children ... wages 90 pounds, I to find food for all'. They were employed as a family, 'he to plough or shepherd, she to cook, wash, etc and their eldest son to shepherd'.<sup>1</sup> The relationship which developed between Anne Drysdale and John Armstrong was mutually beneficial.

Anne's support combined with John's hard work and farming skills allowed the Armstrong family to become successful graziers. John's sheep management skills were instrumental to the success of the Drysdale - Newcomb business partnership in running Boronggoop. His story demonstrates how someone from a humble background could succeed in the Colony, not a common occurrence, and tells us something of the life of pioneer women and children's labour in the earliest days of Victoria's history.

The Armstrong family came from Buccleuch in the Scottish Borders, a small rural area south west of Selkirk. The area is of course associated with the 'Duke of Buccleuch', the Scott family and novelist Sir Walter Scott. John's wife known as Vair, was Veronica Scott and had family connections with the area. The area was good sheep country and John brought with him an excellent knowledge of sheep husbandry which he adapted to the new conditions. The family emigrated as bounty immigrants on the *Palmyra* arriving in November 1839. Aged 30, John was listed as a shepherd but his sheep farming skills were far in excess of this. He was accompanied by his wife and five children aged from 10 to 2.<sup>2</sup> A sixth child, Peter Brown Palmyra (1840-1882) was born on the voyage. At Boronggoop, they initially lived in the room intended for the Clarks but by October 1842 they moved to a new hut which John built to accommodate his family.<sup>3</sup> John Armstrong was closely involved with the establishment of the Presbyterian Church in Geelong and became an Elder on 12 March 1843.<sup>4</sup>

After her experience with Mr. Clark, Anne retained overall management of their properties and recorded daily activities in her Diaries, which became more of a day book of the farm work. By September 1841, John Armstrong appeared regularly in these accounts and took on a broad range of tasks and increasing responsibility. In 1841-42, he functioned as a general labourer as well as ploughing, planting and shepherding. However, by 1843 he had taken a supervisory role with sheep management overseeing the work of the shepherds, while Anne became more involved with agricultural activities around the home hut and the horse stud. It

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Drysdale Diary, diary entry, 9 January 1841 in Roberts, *Miss D & Miss N*, p. 80.

<sup>2</sup> Assisted Immigrants 1839 - 1871, *Palmyra* 1839, Public Records Office Victoria.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Drysdale Diary, diary entry, 3 October 1842, Online edition, State Library of Victoria.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Drysdale Diary, diary entry, 13 March 1843.

was John Armstrong who went to Corio to bid for the license for Steel's Station (Coriyule).<sup>5</sup> He was also responsible for protecting their flocks from attack by wild dogs (dingos) and managing straying animals from neighbours' flocks to avoid the introduction of scab on Boronggoop and Coriyule in an era of unfenced grazing. By 1844, the horse stud had become a major element of their business and Armstrong along with a specialist employee appropriately named Clydesdale spent more time involved in horse management. Another valued employee, Robert Gilmore was employed as the dray driver and was responsible for constructing a range of buildings on site including a flour mill and dairy. In November 1843, Gilmore and John Armstrong made major improvements to Anne and Caroline's hut including changing the storeroom into a third bedroom to accommodate the constant stream of visitors.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, John Armstrong was developing his own business interests. Vair had bought their dairy cows with them and ran the dairy as well as being cook. Other women were employed to do the household tasks. In January 1842, John brought his own flock of sheep onto Boronggoop.<sup>7</sup> He also began breeding rams, initially for Anne but later on his own behalf *'Pure merino, he intends to breed rams for sale'*.<sup>8</sup> By mid 1844, he was clearly looking to acquire his own property and attended a number of sales to buy equipment. Initially, he considered a property in Buninyong near Ballarat.<sup>9</sup> However, he eventually agreed with Dr Thomson to take over one of his licenses - *'Armstrong went to Corio to settle with Dr Thomson'* and *'Vair went off with all her things, Betty took round her cattle & they all went across in the boat'*.<sup>10</sup> These are the only entries in the diaries regarding John Armstrong's departure and there is no commentary regarding her feelings about losing such an essential employee. Nevertheless, Anne clearly cared about him and there are daily entries about his condition when John became very ill during March and April 1844.

There are only a few entries on Vair Armstrong's activities but what there are illustrates the strengths required of working women on colonial properties. She was employed to *'cook and wash'*. Her cooking catered for the whole household involving her own family, Anne and Caroline and up to fourteen visitors as well as seasonal shearers and possibly other workers. The Armstrong's had six children when they arrived and a further two were born while they were on Boronggoop. *'We had all along been afraid that Vere[sic], Armstrong's wife, would be confined before the shearing was over which would have been unfortunate as she is cook for the whole establishment, but she continued quite well & active the whole time until yesterday*

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<sup>5</sup> Anne Drysdale Diary, diary entry, 1 April 1843.

<sup>6</sup> Anne Drysdale Diary, diary entry, 15 - 24 November 1843.

<sup>7</sup> Anne Drysdale Diary, diary entry, 10 January 1842, 22 January 1842.

<sup>8</sup> Anne Drysdale Diary, diary entry, 27 November 1841.

<sup>9</sup> Anne Drysdale Diary, diary entry, 1 August 1844.

<sup>10</sup> Anne Drysdale Diary, diary entry, 20 November 1844, 23 December 1844.

*afternoon when she took ill*' and later delivered her seventh child.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, this baby, Adam, died within a month from erysipelas (a bacterial infection of the skin which can be caused by birth complications), the only one of their eleven children not to reach adulthood. A year later Vair was again 'ill' and had another son again called Adam (1842-1884).<sup>12</sup> Vair also managed the dairy and basically ran the household while caring for her own growing family. She did have some help. Caroline Newcomb undertook many specialist kitchen duties regularly making jam, ketchup, sausages, haggis, candles, brewed beer and salted meats. One day Caroline baked 14 pies and 13 loaves of bread to test a new oven.<sup>13</sup> From March 1842 until September 1844, a young woman, Biddy Trainer, was employed to do the washing. After she left to be married, other women were employed including two young Aboriginal women, Maryanne and Kitty Scott, whose stories will be told later.

It was common for children to work on grazing properties. The Armstrong boys began working at a very early age. In the 1841 Census, Anne listed all six children as labourers although the youngest was only two at the time.<sup>14</sup> The four oldest boys all worked on Boronggoop. These children were employed as part of the family wage, although boys were entitled to paid employment when aged twelve. Willie [William] the oldest boy worked as a shepherd from when they arrived aged eleven and had shepherded for Read before that.<sup>15</sup> The next boy, Bobby [Robert Grieve], worked as a cattle stockman from age eleven.<sup>16</sup> The third son, Thomas, was working as a shepherd in January 1842 aged six, but having lost part of his flock was demoted to hut-keeper.<sup>17</sup> The fourth son known as Little John or Little Jackie was working at Leep Leep in June 1842 during the lambing season when he would only have been five, although he did let four lambs die.<sup>18</sup> The comment '*as soon as they could toddle children became shepherds*' was validated on Boronggoop.<sup>19</sup> This lad generated one of the few lines of wry humour in the Diaries - '*little Jacky drove over the rams as they were using ill the wethers*'.<sup>20</sup> There is little mention of their oldest daughter Jemima working except one time when she helped her mother in the kitchen during another confinement.<sup>21</sup> She was

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<sup>11</sup> Anne Drysdale Diary, diary entry, 5 November 1841, in Roberts, *Miss D & Miss N*, pp. 105-6.

<sup>12</sup> Anne Drysdale Diary, diary entry, 31 December 1842, in Roberts, *Miss D & Miss N*, pp. 153-54.

<sup>13</sup> Anne Drysdale Diary, diary entry, 4 September 1844.

<sup>14</sup> Anne Drysdale Diary, diary entry, 27 August 1841, in Roberts, *Miss D & Miss N*, p. 92.

<sup>15</sup> Anne Drysdale Diary, diary entry, 16 January 1841, in Roberts, *Miss D & Miss N*, p. 80.

<sup>16</sup> Anne Drysdale Diary, diary entry, 28 February 1842, in Roberts, *Miss D & Miss N*, p. 121.

<sup>17</sup> Anne Drysdale Diary, diary entry, 27 January 1842, in Roberts, *Miss D & Miss N*, p. 117.

<sup>18</sup> Anne Drysdale Diary, diary entry, 24 June 1842 in Roberts, *Miss D & Miss N*, p. 132.

<sup>19</sup> John Pickard, 'Shepherding in Colonial Australia', *Rural History*, vol. 19, issue 1, 2008, p. 70.

<sup>20</sup> Anne Drysdale Diary, diary entry, 27 May 1844.

<sup>21</sup> Anne Drysdale Diary, diary entry, 25 November 1842.

probably kept at home to look after the younger children while her mother worked for Drysdale and Newcomb.

John Armstrong moved to his own property in December 1844. It was known as Bush Station or River Station, however surviving records have failed to identify its exact boundaries. Some accounts claim that it stretched along the western side of the Barwon River across to Mt. Duneed, and may have included the area between what is now Waurin Ponds Creek and Armstrong Creek. His knowledge of sheep management made him one of the more successful pioneer pastoralists and he was recognised as a sheep master throughout Victoria. He was one of the first to adopt dipping sheep to cure scab and other insect pests. In 1846, part of Bush Station north Mt. Duneed along the 'Waurin Chain of Ponds' was resumed for suburban development in the growing town of Geelong.<sup>22</sup> John Armstrong, in return, gained grazing rights at Black Forest formally Werribee Plains in 1850.<sup>23</sup> He also held rights to Allanvale near Great Western of 80,000 acres between 1854 and 1857 and had a partnership with Silas Harding (formally of Geelong) in Linlithgow Plains Station near Dunkeld of 44,256 acres in 1853. All these properties were held on annual squatter licences rather than freehold which greatly reduced the capital requirements. The pastoral licences for runs in the Conewarre Parish including those occupied by Bush / River Station was resumed in 1853 and the land surveyed and offered for freehold sale. Squatters were given a presumptive right to claim part of their runs prior to them being offered for sale. The map Figure 5 below suggests at least three pastoral leases covered this area, River Station by John Armstrong,

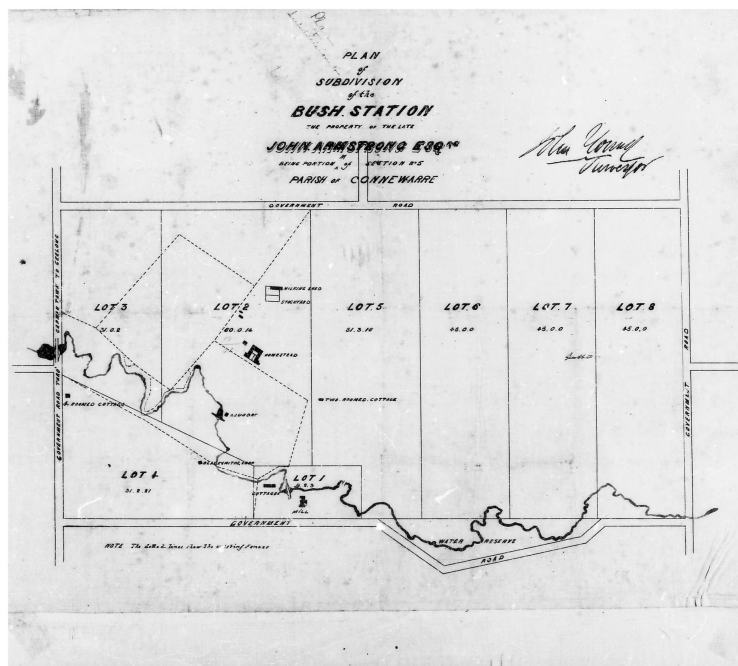


Fig 5 Parish of Conewarre, PROC36, Public Records Office Victoria, VPRS8168, n.d.

<sup>22</sup> Annotated map Parish of Duneed, 1842, <https://images.prov.vic.gov.au/manifests/4174256177/imagesmanifest.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> R.V. Billis and A.S. Kenyon, Pastoral Pioneers of Port Phillip, Image 20, Trove, National Library of Australia.

Beach Station occupied by John McVean, his son-in-law who married John's daughter Jemima, and Elias Harding's Salt Creek Station.



Bush Station formed part of the land on which the major urban development of Armstrong Creek is being built south-west of Geelong. Figure 6 shows the River Station Freehold bounded by Bevilles Road, Barwon Heads Road, Stewarts Rd (now Waralilly Boulevard) and Torquay Rd. It is now being developed as Armstrong Grove within the Armstrong Creek development. John also purchased two blocks to the south and south-east of this and four blocks north of

Fig 6 Bush Station (aka River Station) subdivision, Bush Station Folio 19 193.pdf, Source: Geelong Heritage Centre

John McVean's Beach Station on Barwon Heads Road.

John Armstrong died suddenly on the 17 October 1856 aged 46 years after a small operation from complications with diabetes.<sup>24</sup> A subsequent sale of livestock at Bush Station involved 17 pairs of bullocks, thirty dairy cows, two cart stallions one of which was previously owned



Fig 7 Memorial to John Armstrong, Geelong Eastern Cemetery. Source: Mount Duneed History Group

<sup>24</sup> 'Local Intelligence', Age (Melbourne), 25 October 1856, p. 5.

by Anne Drysdale, plus draught horses, brood mares, colts, fillies and foals.<sup>25</sup> Vair Armstrong died on the 13 June 1877 aged 68 years at Garden Street, Geelong.

The four oldest boys who had been trained on Boronggoop also became graziers. The oldest, William (1829 - 1895) worked with his father on Allanvale and Linlithgow Plains. In 1846 he took up Avon Plains with Dr. Alexander Thomson and in 1851 he bought Hexham Park with freehold of 23,000 acres where he bred Lincoln sheep. He acquired Shadwell Park of 4,000 acres and Pirron Yalloak of 5,400 acres in the Mortlake area. He owned several properties in NSW with his brothers. He was a member of the Victorian Pastoralists Association and of the Mortlake Shire Council between 1864 and 1871. Robert Grieve (1833 - 1886) also farmed in the Mortlake area at North Station and Salt Creek Station, Woorndoo. He was a member of the Mortlake Council between 1864 and 1886, and an Elder of the Woorndoo Presbyterian church. He had thirteen children. Thomas (1835 - 1886) settled in NSW and bought East Charlton Station and Noorong Station of 75,000 acres at Moulamein near Deniliquin. He helped found the Australian Sheep Breeders Association and had twelve children. John (1837 - 1899) managed Gunbar Station near Hillston, owned with his brothers, where he raised horses, sheep and cattle.<sup>26</sup> In addition to the children already mentioned, John and Vair Armstrong had five more children born while they were at Bush Station: Alexander (1845-1885); Elizabeth Euphemia born 1847, married William Watson 1872; Hiue Ziegler (1852-1919); James Forbes (1855-1895) and Vair born around 1849, married Joseph Watson 1867. Peter Brown and Alexander moved to Queensland while Huie Ziegler moved to Orange, NSW.

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<sup>25</sup> 'Geelong Live Stock Market', *Star* (Ballarat), 5 May 1857, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> J. Ann Hone, 'Armstrong, John (1837 - 1899)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 3, 1969.