

G C WILLCOCKS AND WYNBERG

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The Willcocks family - especially the achievements of my Great Uncle, George Charles Willcocks - has been something of an enigma in Queensland's early pioneering history. All that remains these days in Brisbane, is his grave in the Toowong Cemetery.

Born in 1857 – the eldest son of George and Eliza Willcocks of Ashburton, England - George Charles Willcocks or 'GC' as he was known at the time, had two younger brothers: Henry, born in 1859 and Richard born in 1869.

GC started his working life as a boy of twelve; 'Boiling the Billies' for the men's tea on the building sites and early railway construction projects that abounded in England at the time. Having an eye for mathematics, GC was indentured as a Stonemason. The towns of Ashburton and Newton Abbott were noted for the Stonemasons produced from Devon.

In 1876, at the age of eighteen, GC made the decision that would affect the rest of his life. He decided to travel to South Africa and make his fortune – no doubt influenced by the adventures and stories of how a young man with enterprise could make a name for himself in the South African Colonies.

History records South Africa then as being in the grip of Diamond Fever. Whole ships' companies would desert; with the men dreaming of wealth and easy money; but the reality being a vicious cycle of hard work and hard drink. Diamond Fever became something that would ruin the lives of many young men; with families never hearing from their sons again.

Though still a teenager, the young GC was never affected by Diamond Fever. I think this is a pointer to the strong character and commitment to a job that GC would carry with him all his life.

Whilst working and travelling from job to job, GC gained steady employment with Laing and Company, one of South Africa's early Civil Engineering Contractors. In 1880, GC - with a reputation as a young man who stuck to his job and could be relied upon - was offered employment by George Laing, as his resident engineer.

After a mutually beneficial relationship, GC decided to strike out on his own and formed *George Willcocks and Company*. GC's first big break came in 1882 when he won the contract from the South African Government for the duplication of the Cape Town-to-Wynberg railway line. Keen to establish a reputation for his company, he completed the contract well ahead of time and this led to an additional contract to extend the duplication of the line to Kalk Bay.

As can be expected, this gave the young GC the opportunity to mix in the right circles in the halls of Government in Cape Town and led to his introduction to Cecil Rhodes. Here GC was able to obtain the contract to be Head of Construction on Rhodes' much dreamed about Cape Town-to-Cairo railway. All this was achieved by the age of twenty-five.

At this time GC had some 3 000 men working for him and was pushing the construction of the line through the Hex River Mountains to Victoria Road West. There are many sad stories of how cheap life was on the railway construction jobs; with drunkenness, gambling, robbery and murder close companions of the men. It was nothing to be paid their wages on a Saturday; be broke on the Sunday, and be ready to start laying tracks on the Monday; a life of real despair, in some cases. One can barely begin to understand how hard it was on the wives and children of the married men. In some instances there were full-scale battles fought between rival construction gangs of the contractors; with order being restored by the dispatch of mounted troops to quell the violence.

On 3 December 1883, GC married Mary Anne Craig, a young widow, who had been stranded in South Africa with her sister, due to the untimely death (from smallpox) of her Presbyterian missionary

husband, Robert Craig. GC met Mary Anne in the shop that the sisters had opened in Wynberg, to repair the workmen's clothes.

Depression hit South Africa and, in 1884, GC's contract was not renewed after he reached the Modder River. Although he had completed several important contracts in South Africa, it was time to go.

After a short stay in England, GC found that, with a recent £10 million loan procured by the Queensland Government, there was money to be made in Australia - where he arrived in November 1885. Taking up residence in Coorparoo, G. C. Willcocks began his new career move and was immediately successful in gaining several substantial civil engineering contracts in the Brisbane area. With these, he established his reputation as a man who got things done. GC was able to gain further contracts and had the confidence of the Queensland Government who considered him to be the 'Colony's Best Contractor'.

Following are the works completed by G. C. Willcocks and Company up until the time he purchased *Wynberg*:

- 1885 South Brisbane and Kangaroo Point drainage contracts.
 The Stratton Drain and the Ann Street section of the All Hallows' Girls School retaining wall.
- 1886 -1887 North Quay roadworks.
- 1887 -1888 Section 5 of the Gympie South Cooran railway.
- 1888 - 1889 The Cleveland railway line.
 No.2 section of the Mungarr to Gayndah railway.
- 1890 - 1891 No. 4 section from Cooran to Yandina..
- 1890 - 1891 Eagle Farm abattoirs.

By this time, GC had decided that it would be necessary to seek a suitable residence to befit his new-found wealth and position in Queensland Society. But where to live?

The suburb of New Farm had attracted GC's attention and a property on Brunswick Street seemed to fit the bill. In the late 19th Century, New Farm had – along with Ascot and Hamilton - become one of the more sought-after addresses with which to be associated. Sir Samuel Griffith, one of Australia's great jurists, lived in New Farm in his house called *Merthyr*. A close business associate of G. C. Willcocks, Thomas Welsby, who was known for his beautiful history of Moreton Bay, also lived there. However, I digress.

Wynberg – or the plot of land where it now stands – was originally owned by a gentleman named George Raff who purchased twelve acres in 1854 for the price of £63. During this time, the twelve acres was subdivided and a Mr John Abraham is thought to have built the first house on what is now known as the *Wynberg* property. Up until 1890 there were several owners and tenants. In the 1880s, Mr Charles Fisher, a retired squatter, resided in the house. During this time a substantial brick dwelling was constructed and its architecture embodied all the hallmarks of a typical Queensland home; built with a view to coping with the summer heat. Rooms branched off a central hallway through the house, which had wide verandahs with various trees and shrubs to accentuate its colonial heritage. GC fell in love with the house and it fitted his needs perfectly. The purchase price was reputed to be some £7 000.

Fr Denis Martin wrote in 1998, that G. C. Willcocks was the man who gave this house its character and – most importantly – its name: *Wynberg*. No truer statement about GC has ever been made. The word 'Wynberg' is a Dutch name meaning 'vineyard'. In his South African railway-building days, GC kept a small house in Wynberg, Cape Town. This pleasant memory of South Africa stayed with him and it seemed the perfect name for his new purchase.

Soon after taking up residence at *Wynberg*, GC sought the assistance of Architects, McCredie Brothers and Chambers, to design and carry out some £2 000 worth of alterations and improvements. This

involved the addition of a new two-storied extension built at a 90-degree angle to the existing main body of the house. Whilst this extension changed the external appearance of the house, work was also begun to improve the livability of the house's interior. Several new heads were placed and several walls were demolished to enlarge several rooms. Interior decorating was modelled upon contemporary Victorian styles with the installation of marble fireplaces. Western Red Cedar was also liberally used as were polished brass fittings. Plaster cornices and decorations were also used to obtain the 'British' effect.

Other touches were the intricate painted glass fanlights and sidelights around the main doors. This work also included GC's personal signature 'GCW' and small likenesses of Mary Anne and daughters (Katie, Ethel and Hazel).

Not contented with the works on the house, GC also put his mind to *Wynberg's* gardens and grounds. A new circular driveway, built to accommodate horses and carriages, was laid out. The new driveway contained a centralised garden bed. Further landscaping included well laid-out native trees, shrubs and palm trees. Both sides of the house had terraced lawns running down to the stables and coach house. This whole environment made for stylish garden parties and further alterations were made in 1902 to cope with the many parties and festive occasions that GC hosted. These alterations included a small ballroom, wrought iron Corinthian columns, decorated arches and a new staircase, which gave added splendour to the house.

The guest lists were a 'Who's Who' of Queensland political social pages. Sir Robert Philip, as well as many other Federal, State and Local Politicians and members of Queensland's business fraternity, were regular attendees at these functions.

Life at *Wynberg* – as well as GC's contracting business - seemed almost perfect. After 1902, GC varied his business interests and embarked upon a career as a mining magnate. In partnership with Archeron Overend, GC became involved with John Moffat (of 'Irvinebank' fame) and the Mt Garnet Copper mine. It would be fair to say this was not one of his best deals; with considerable sums of

money being lost. However, like most great men, GC bounced back with the OK Copper Mine that proved to be a mountain of copper and was to be the first mine in Queensland history - up to that time - to pay a dividend to its shareholders.

GC's contracting business still returned a good profit and the early 1900s were a time of consolidation. However 1902 was to be another year to bring change to the Willcocks family.

Richard, GC's younger brother, married Mary Ellen Carmody, a young Irish Catholic girl from Mackay. Richard had met her when he was a foreman for his brother on the Fitzroy River Railway Bridge job in Rockhampton. Mary Ellen was readily accepted by GC but was to endure the scorn and dislike of his wife, Mary Anne. She was a staunch Presbyterian who thought it proper that Sundays should be spent with windows, curtains and doors closed - no matter what time of year - reading the Bible; and **Catholics were not tolerated**. However, Mary Ellen had the love and support of her husband and nine children and that was all that mattered!

For several years it was to be a happy time for GC, his brother Richard, and George Henderson (the company secretary). Many a time was spent at the races, enjoying a few drinks – something tolerated by Mary Ellen and loathed by Mary Anne.

During this period, the effects of diabetes started to show in GC; beginning a struggle that he was not to win.

Though several important contracts were yet to be won and completed, GC's star was waning. The declaration of World War I was to be another contributing factor. Public infrastructure projects dried up and Australia put into force a full war economy. The young men joined the AIF and the once available workforce disappeared only to return broken and affected by the horrors of trench warfare.

Diabetes ran its full course with GC and eventually he was confined to bed in the front room of his beloved *Wynberg*; attended day and night by two nurses with a doctor calling daily. Sadly it was reported there was no hope and G. C. Willcocks departed this life for a better world on 9 October 1916.

A large funeral procession left from *Wynberg* and proceeded to the Towong Cemetery. GC's brother, Richard Willcocks, was the chief mourner as Mary Anne was too distraught to attend.

The postwar years saw *G. C. Willcocks and Company* cease to trade and the close family members made a comfortable living off the earnings of GC's careful investments.

The family members maintained reasonably close links until 1931 when Richard's wife, Mary Ellen, died – aged 46 – from cancer. Her final wish to her husband, Richard, was that he promise to have their nine children baptised Catholic. Richard, a man who had a strong sense of duty and what was right, kept his promise to his wife. Betty Ball, Richard's daughter, who is here tonight, remembers the day when we were all marched up to St Bridget's and baptised *en masse*. This proved all too much for Mary Anne who had tolerated Richard's children whilst they were Church of England. However becoming Catholic was the end and there was a catastrophic split in the family that would not be fixed until 2002.

All this links in nicely with Mary Anne's sale of *Wynberg* to the Catholic Church.

Archbishop Duhig had first become interested *Wynberg* in 1916, the very year GC was to die. Discreet enquiries were made and the Archbishop established that GC had invested about £16 000 in the house and its grounds. An approach was made in June of 1916 with an amount of £10 000 being offered. This was naturally refused under the existing circumstances.

A further nine years were to pass and the Archbishop still maintained his interest in the house. An offer of £12 500 was made on the basis that Mary Anne Willcocks live there with her daughter, Katie; the house was simply too big for an elderly widow to maintain. To a certain degree this was a guess on the part of the Archbishop as Mary Anne had been left the house along with an annuity of £650 a year from her husband's estate.

Archbishop Duhig visited *Wynberg* and made a personal offer to Mary Anne Willcocks. Whatever was said will never be known but

the sale of this house was not to be one in the normal sense. Archbishop Duhig negotiated an arrangement where he would take possession of the house and grounds but only pay the principle amount off in monthly instalments. No mention of interest was made. That was August 1925. In anyone's words, it was a shrewd deal if one compares it with today's real-estate market.

To those who knew Mary Anne Willcocks, it was a paradox as it was widely known that she hated Catholics and what they stood for.

Evidence collected by surviving family members and held by the church, notes that Archbishop Duhig was continually late making his monthly payments. In these instances Mary Anne had no hesitation in engaging solicitors to press the Archbishop to pay his back-payments.

Robert Willcocks, GC's second son and a man known for his reputation as being another fine gentleman, would often be on the receiving end of his mother's tirades against the Archbishop and the Catholic Church. Each time she said: 'They're late again, I think we should foreclose on those Catholics', Bob would patiently explain that one could not foreclose on the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Brisbane. I think it's fair to say that the Church owes a debt of gratitude to Robert Willcocks who saved it from expensive litigation.

So what is G. C. Willcocks' legacy?

He was considered the best contractor in the Queensland Colony before Federation and had a reputation of always completing his work ahead of the contracted time. He undertook; and successfully completed a multitude of railway construction contracts and civil engineering works that – in their own way – are important to the history of this country.

But there are no monuments or memorials to him and any essay on a Queensland historical identity, such as John Moffat or Robert Philip, mentions George Willcocks merely as an interested party or as a name in a footnote. He is one of the unsung heroes of Queensland's early mining history.

So, in one way, it's fair to say that, as a tangible object that still stands, George Willcock's home - *Wynberg* - is a memorial to him.

I would like to acknowledge the assistance I have received with information from Ruth Kerr, John Kerr, Fr Denis Martin, Tony Hallam, Wendy Willcocks, Marjorie Campbell, George Henderson, *The A and B Journal of Queensland: 1924*, *The Sunday Mail*, Brisbane: 1928.

Peter Ball is the grandson of Richard Willcocks and the great-nephew of George Charles Willcocks.

Having always had a strong interest in history, he realized that there was a story to be told about the Willcocks family, who were the former owners of 'Wynberg' at New Farm, and in 2000 began writing a book about it.

He also has in preparation, another book concerning the Australian Army in the Southwest Pacific from 1944-45. Titled 'March towards the Northern Sun', it deals with Australia's 3rd, 5th and 11th Infantry Divisions.

Peter is currently employed by the Department of Industrial Relations, Division of Workplace Health and Safety as a senior inspector for plant and machinery safety.