

TWO STARKLY DIFFERENT TYPES OF COLONIST

Charles Newman was the first settler to arrive in the Middle-Yarra district in 1837 and he established a run along Mullum-Mullum Creek. Newman had joined the Indian Army in 1801 and achieved the rank of Major before coming to Tasmania in 1834 with his Indian wife and four children. He was the epitome of the British Raj. A harsh and cantankerous man, he was well known for his poor treatment of convict workers and anyone of a lower class.

After Batman's bogus treaty in 1835, many settlers began flowing into Port Phillip from Tasmania, including Newman, who from 1837 travelled back and forth, ferrying livestock to his run. By 1838, he had taken up permanent residence there, but his wife and children did not join him until April 1840.

In the meantime, Newman's 17 year-old step-daughter, Maria, had begun a relationship with a young blacksmith, Tom Cunningham. Tom, being the son of a convict, Newman vehemently objected to the relationship, so Maria and Tom eloped to Melbourne in 1838. Newman then promptly disinherited her.

Newman's military training was obvious in the site and construction of the turf-block house he built. The river, creek and steep escarpment effectively blocked approach from north, east and south. The western wall had narrow slit windows, enabling the Major to shoot at any natives approaching from the west.

Aboriginal people quickly figured out it was no use ducking when you heard a gun go bang, because the bullet is faster than the sound. With their sharp eyesight, they quickly saw that a puff of smoke from the barrel of the gun preceded the bullet. This gave rise to them playing a very dangerous game.

Murrangurk's Law prevented the Kulin from killing a white man, but they were still able to wage an economic war against settlers like the Major. So, whilst one group occupied the Major busily shooting from his window, another group would break down his fences, set fire to his paddocks and drive off his stock.

The men in the first group would each stand next to a tree, attract the Major's attention and at the sight of a puff of smoke, would jump back behind the tree. Then, before the Major had time to pick up and fire his next musket, they would jump back into the open, swing around and bare their buttocks at him before jumping back behind cover.

With the Major's wife and children having joined him in April 1840, he decided he did not want convict workers around his family, and so he began looking to hire free settlers. The Major was therefore dockside when my great-great grandparents, John and Mary-Anne Chivers, arrived by boat from England. John was a strongly built, haulier and ex-bareknuckle fighter, so the Major hired him as a tree-feller at 25 Pounds a year. He also hired Mary-Anne as a governess to home-school his children at 15 Pounds a year.

John and Mary- Anne could scarcely believe their luck at finding jobs before they had even got off the ship. They packed their belongings in the Major's wagon and headed off to the Stringybark forest past Heidelberg. As they trundled along, the Major began regaling them with stories about 'the damned Blacks' and their allegedly murderous ways. He said that John would need a gun for protection and pressed an old flintlock pistol, gunpowder and a bag of shot on him.

The Major dropped them off at a shepherd's hut near present day Petty's Orchard in Templestowe, and John began the task of clearing the land. Every morning, Mary-Anne would insist on John taking the pistol with him while he worked in the forest. One day soon after arriving, John was working and heard voices, but it was not English. He stopped work, peered round and saw half a dozen spear-carrying natives slowly surrounding the clearing. John quickly loaded the pistol, but did not want to point it at anyone, so instead bent his knees and pointed it at the ground. By this time, he was surrounded and so, he pulled the trigger, hoping the report would scare them away.

Instead, the tribesmen fell around laughing, fit to bust. One of the men patted John on the back and wiping away tears of laughter, explained that it looked and sounded like the greatest fart in human history. John threw the pistol away and invited them all back to his hut for a cup of tea, to which they readily agreed. Mary-Anne must have nearly fainted when she saw her husband emerge from the forest with a band of spear-bearing natives, but it was the start of many generations of friendships for our family.

After their contracted year, John and Mary-Anne ceased working for the Major and he entered into a partnership making wagon wheels from River Red Gums on Westerfolds. It would have enraged the Major had he found out that John's new business partner was his rejected son-in-law, young Tom Cunningham.