

Dover's Little Known Export

Part I

—Peter W Sherred—

What connection does Dover have with the purchase of an 80 acre area of land in the former colony of South Australia in the mid nineteenth century? What activity was pioneered on it and what did it develop into, and how? Such questions were answered in part by Michael Portillo, former Conservative MP and Cabinet Minister, when he took his Great Train Journeys television series to Australia. Last year a particular episode of Michael Portillo's Great Australian Rail Journeys found him in Adelaide as part of his cross continent rail experience and those of us who picked up the programme on 9th November 2019 will have seen the presenter, famous for his flamboyant coloured jackets and trousers, take a diversion south of Adelaide to the site of South Australia's first vineyards where viewers were informed that a pioneer from Snargate Street in Dover had established a vineyard whose grape crop was to provide domestic wines. The modest origins of this enterprise would develop into a highly successful and expanding industry over the decades to follow, currently run by a sixth generation of the family group that

had taken the chance to emigrate to Australia and settle in what was to become a unique state. South Australia was not colonised by criminals deported from Great Britain, unlike New South Wales for example, and additionally it established a democratic framework of government that was ahead of its time.

Curiosity aroused by the information provided in the programme led to a fascinating investigation into the origin of the founder of the now hugely successful wine business 'Leconfield' and 'Richard Hamilton' Wines, known as 'The First Family of Wine', on the one hand and to how this fledgling wine enterprise developed from such modest and challenging origins on the other.

On 27th July 1837 the barque Katherine Stewart Forbes sailed from London and Gravesend for Australia where she arrived at Holdfast Bay South Australia on 17th October 1837 bringing with her just under some 200 passengers and the proclamation of Queen Victoria's accession to the throne following the death of King William IV. The barque had been built in Northfleet Kent and had been used for travel and trade between Great Britain and India but had previously carried convicts to Australia. Now it was carrying free settlers to their new lives in the Colony. Among the passengers was a certain Richard Hamilton, his wife Ann and nine children, one of whom, William, was a crew member. Richard was the eldest son of his father (also called Richard Hamilton) who had become a Freeman of Dover on 1st August 1788 while Richard junior was also to become a Freeman. His brother, John,



Richard Hamilton playing part of his great great grandfather on DVD

became a solicitor and was appointed to the Dover Corporation in the 1820s and he was to remain in Dover. En route from Gravesend to Australia, the Hamilton family on board, the Katherine Stewart Forbes sailed past Dover where a boatload of friends and neighbours bade them a fond farewell. Richard and Ann were never to return.

Richard, the emigrant to Australia with his family, was born in February 1792 in Dover and his wife, Ann Holmes, was born at Dover Castle in 1789 (the year of the French Revolution). They clearly enjoyed connections with St Mary's Church in Cannon Street for it appears all their children were baptised there. Richard was a tailor with an address in Snargate Street (no 119) and his name was listed as part of the Petty Jury for local court trials on 21st December 1830. Why he, at the age of 45, and his family opted to emigrate is unknown although it has been reliably suggested he may have been involved with smuggling wine from Bordeaux and the Revenue Officers may have been closing in on him!

He was clearly sufficiently in funds and solvent enough not to apply for an assisted passage and paid the cost of the family group passage to Australia. Maybe he was simply a restless soul disillusioned with his lot in Dover which at that time was not the most appealing of places. His son, William, had returned from South Australia having sailed there with the first fleet on the Duke of York barque and it is possible he had given a good account of what he had found on the Southern Continent. What we do know is that on June 7th 1837 a Land Order (Number 449) had been signed in London where Richard had paid for an 80 acre plot of land at £1 per acre, the exact location of which would be determined by the surveyor to the Resident

Commissioner of Public Lands of the colony of South Australia.

Once identified the lot was to be granted to Richard Hamilton and his heirs in perpetuity. Australia may not have been the original destination of first choice of the family as it has been suggested Richard may have visited America first and owned property on Long Island which was sold when he became disappointed with his choice of America for emigration. The proceeds may have been appropriated towards the land purchase in South Australia. On his application to emigrate, of 5th July 1837, Richard gave his occupation as "agricultural labourer." An explanation for this has been suggested namely that this was more likely to receive approval by the authorities than his actual occupation of tailor that he had followed in Dover, having qualified as such after years of being indentured in training for the skills of a tailor.

Having made landfall on 17th October 1837 the family disembarked from the barque at Holdfast Bay where they found there was a delay in identifying their land as the surveying was running behind schedule so initially the family lived in tents on the banks of the River Torrens. An inauspicious start to a new life and for some time Richard had to dip into his dwindling savings to support his family. However, a stroke of luck occurred because one of his sons, John, became an assistant to the Surveyor General Colonel William Light's surveying party and it was he who identified an excellent plot of land, number 148, which straddled the Sturt River near Glenelg in Marion District. The plot had excellent soil and was well drained but comprised grassland with eucalyptus or gum trees. Richard and the family took possession of this plot in 1838, finally completing its transfer in 1840.

Initially called "Curtis Farm", it was the foundation land for the subsequent expanded enterprise. It required much labour-intensive work to transform it from its natural state to farmland and this took quite some time. By 1841 only 25 acres were cleared and farmed for a variety of crops.

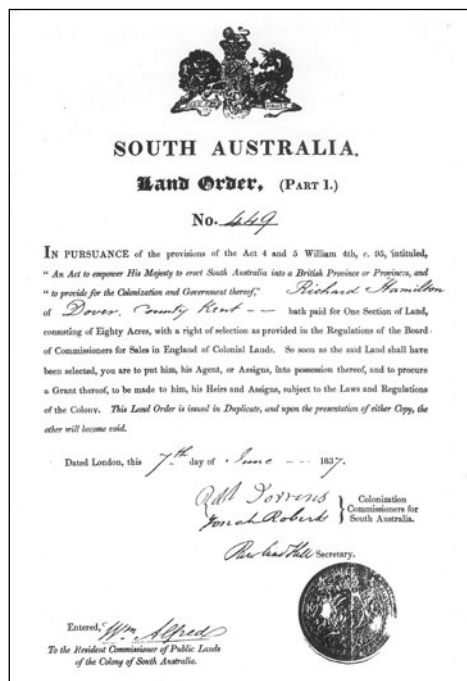
In 1838 vines were planted on "Curtis Farm" in rich red-brown soil (along with other crops) but from where did the vines come? It seems that during the delay over the allocation of land (as his cash reserves were shrinking) Richard wrote to a friend in the Cape Province requesting vines or cuttings to be sent to him. The vines were planted in the winter of 1838 and were harvested in due time in enough quantity as Shiraz and Grenache with the first wine

being produced in 1841 mainly for family consumption but with some for local trade. The enterprise was launched! Such were the origins of the Hamilton Dynasty which became celebrated and well known as vigneron, people who cultivate vines for wine production. Richard Hamilton's farm was located some two miles from Holdfast Bay where the family had landed and some six miles south of Adelaide.

Richard Hamilton died prematurely in August 1852. This man, who had his origins in Dover, had achieved much in his lifetime. Happily married and father to ten children he was a free pioneer settler sufficiently well-endowed to pay his own way on emigration and who, through hard work and graft, had established a successful farm and the colony's first vineyard in South Australia before his death. The early vines planted by him were low in height and with the absence of trellis support probably resulted in challenging harvesting work.

While, through his Will, all of Richard's children inherited a part of the farm, it was his fourth son, Henry, who was in charge for the benefit of his siblings and who developed the vine growing and wine making and in so doing building the enterprise up into a significant business. Henry was born in 1826 in Dover (or possibly Temple Ewell) and had arrived in Australia from England in 1841 having stayed back to be educated in Christ's Hospital Blue Coat School in London between 1835 and 1841; whilst Richard, Ann and the other children set sail for South Australia. Admission to the school, founded in 1552 by Edward VI, was much sought after and no other siblings of his were as fortunate as Henry in this regard.

In 1852 Henry bought 47 acres of land of his own to expand "Curtis Farm" and



Land Order 7th June 1837

named it 'Ewell Vineyard'. It was located across Oaklands Road from his father's original plot and it was to provide the nucleus of Hamilton's 'Ewell Vineyards and Winery' at Marion District which was to exist until the late 1970's when it went into decline, was sold then closed down. Henry married Mary Bell who was the daughter of a neighbour.

Why was the name 'Ewell' included? Well, as with much of this history, two strands of thought arise – was it included because of a family connection with Ewell in Surrey or was it included after Temple Ewell, the then small and old village on the outskirts of Dover beyond the suburb of River? As Henry was possibly born in Temple Ewell it would be good to think the latter for the purpose of this history! To Henry is attributed the fact of having put the business firmly on the map by planting more vineyards and establishing cellars as well as winning a prestigious prize awarded by the Royal Agricultural and Horticultural Society. Henry died in 1907, by which time Port, Muscat, Sherries and sweet white wine were being produced, but from 1890 in fact his fourth son, Frank, had been managing the business.

Frank, who was born in 1859, was married to Violet Ayliffe and it was during his time in control that his entrepreneurial spirit enabled the business to develop further. He was serendipitously aided by a young man referred to as "The Swiss" who was a winemaker from Europe who had jumped ship in Adelaide and was given protection by Frank and his family. He was called "The Swiss" because his actual surname



Ewell Vineyard

was impossible to pronounce! During this period of growth a large underground cellar was dug at the recommendation of "The Swiss". This was unusual in Australia at the time and was an early example of the innovative approach to wine-making which became characteristic of the Hamilton family, and often as a result of fortuitous contact with experienced European wine-makers.

Tragedy struck in 1913 when, quite unexpectedly, at the relatively young age of 54, Frank died from pneumonia, caught whilst visiting family in Kangaroo Island. His heirs, eldest sons Eric and Sydney Hamilton, were only 17 and 14 respectively at the time and, of course, the world was soon plunged into chaos through the outbreak of World War I. Eric enlisted and saw action in both Gallipoli and the Western Front and was severely gassed on at least two occasions, necessitating his repatriation to England for treatment.

Part II will appear in the next newsletter - Editor