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FROM STAPLEHURST TO WELLINGTON

SIX PAUPER FAMILIES FROM STAPLEHURST WHO EMIGRATED TO
WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND, IN 1839

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(This paper is an extract from a dissertation submitted to the University of Kent in May 1991 for a Diploma of Local History. Copies of the full text will be lodged in the University Library in Canterbury, U.K., and in the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, N.Z.)

The Reverend Thomas Waldron Hornbuckle, Rector of Staplehurst 1826–48, was a noted philanthropist. He was a leading advocate of the Allotments for Labourers movement, opened a leather workshop in the village and masterminded a road-building programme to soak up the excessive rural unemployment of that time. One of his more controversial exploits, however, was to arrange the emigration of six pauper families to New Zealand in 1839 in the face of opposition from the Colonial Office and the Poor Law Commissioners.

The fact that these families were the only parish assisted emigrants from Staplehurst to New Zealand suggests that there was something exceptional about the group. Research in New Zealand certainly suggests that, as descendants of these pauperised, labouring families became mayors, prime ministers and millionaires in their new-found land of opportunity, Hornbuckle's bending of the rules was justified.

The 1830s were hungry times for the Weald of Kent. The cold grey clay of the region is notoriously reluctant to yield a living. The woollen manufactures industry had failed in the seventeenth century, as had iron smelting and timber extraction in the eighteenth. Over-production of hops, the advent of threshing machines and the removal of tariff barriers on imported French fruit only made things worse. Even the 'Owlers' (smugglers), who moved their goods from the tiny coves of the south coast to London on the mirey and unpoliced tracks of the Weald, found their living jeopardised by the end of the Napoleonic wars and the free trade policies of the Liberal

government. There were many parishes where at least a third of the work force was unemployed.¹ Since 1834 and the reform of the Poor Law, the only remedy was the workhouse. This iniquitous system did indeed discourage scroungers as intended, but it was an insult to the dignity of the honest labourer who could not provide for a large family and for whom there was simply no employment available. It was also a serious drain on the resources of the parish.

Not a few Kentish parishes resorted to emigration to reduce excess labour.² In the autumn of 1839, the New Zealand Company, working on the theories of Edward Gibbon Wakefield, finally launched their emigration drive. Wakefield's plan was to purchase large tracts of land in the Antipodes at cheap prices and offer these acres to speculators. The money thus raised would subsidise the passage and settlement of labourers to work the land and develop a replica of British society at the other end of the world. However, the company was disappointed by the government's refusal to grant acceptable monopoly status. Worse still, the government, under the urgings of the Church Missionary Society, seemed poised to declare a protectorate in New Zealand. This would mean that land purchase would only be through a Crown monopoly and nowhere near as cheap as if purchased direct from the native Maori.

Captain Hobson, R.N., had been recalled from India to be sent off to New Zealand to negotiate British sovereignty with the Maori chiefs. So the company had to act fast. The only problem was that when unemployment is high, the labourer in work does not want to throw up his job for a wild scheme at the opposite ends of the earth. The person who wants a job is the man who is unemployed. The New Zealand Company could afford to pay the passage of those who could work, but not their children. And who was going to pay for the would-be emigrants kitting out or their passage to the ship at Deptford or Gravesend? The company agents, in desperation, looked to the workhouses for their emigrants and to the parish for subsidy.

An application by the Maidstone Union on behalf of Staplehurst parish to the Poor Law Commissioners to allow the subsidy of the emigration of paupers from that parish evoked the following correspondence:

¹ E.J. Hobsbawm and G. Rudé, *Captain Swing*, Harmondsworth, 1973.

² *The Maidstone Gazette & Kentish Courier* in *Hints on Emigration* (1st September, 1839), lists the numbers of emigrants sent out from Kent with parochial assistance in the previous year, which in turn is extracted from the last report of The Poor Law Commissioners. There were twenty-two parishes, who raised over £1000 to assist the emigration of almost 300 men, women and children.

Letter from the Poor Law Commissioners to the Colonial Office, 30th October, 1839.³

'Applications have been made from several parishes to the Poor Law Commissioners to sanction emigration to New Zealand. They have hitherto refused, not considering that Colony to be sufficiently advanced to receive pauper emigrants, consisting in many instances of women and children. An application for raising a considerable sum for the emigration of about forty persons from a parish in Kent has lately come up and the Assistant Commissioner recommends that it be granted. The Commissioners hesitate and would be glad to receive Mr Stephen's [Colonial Secretary] reply.'

The reply from W.G. Lumley of the Colonial Office came back by return:

'There is no British Colony at New Zealand nor is it yet clear that such a Colony will ever be established. The Government has repeatedly and distinctly refused to recognise any of the Companies or Associations which have been formed for sending Settlers to those islands. Capt. Hobson has been accredited to the Native Chiefs as H.M.'s Consul and has been authorised to negotiate for the surrender to H.M. of the Sovereignty of such parts of New Zealand as he may think best adapted as a British Colony. Until the result of this negotiation is known, the Government must consider New Zealand as a foreign country of which Great Britain has acknowledged the independence and National flag.'

The Poor Law Commissioners sent regrets to the Maidstone Union that they were unable to sanction the loan, recommending instead that the emigrants be sent to a more established colony.

Yet, according to a contemporary accounts book,⁴ the 47 emigrants, men, women and children were helped by Staplehurst parish. A letter from George Whiting,⁵ the New Zealand Company agent for the area and editor of the *Maidstone Gazette and Kentish Courier*, may well be referring to this incident when he mentions parochial officers '*smuggling* the expenses of outfit and conveyance of many highly desirable persons' in defiance of the Poor Law Commissioners. The cost to the parish was £118. 17s. 2½d.

The New Zealand Company accepted promissory notes from the emigrants themselves to repay the cost of their children's passage after their arrival in New Zealand. It is not yet clear whether the company recouped the money or simply absolved their debt, but it

³ MH 12 5196, *Maidstone Union Poor Law Records 1838-1840*, Public Records Office, Kew.

⁴ P347/12/27, *1830-45 Expenses of Paupers from Staplehurst*, Kent Archives Office, Maidstone.

⁵ CO 208/8, *Bundle of Letters (misc.) of the New Zealand Company, Letter from Mr G. Whiting to Mr J. Alston, 22nd Sept. 1840*. Public Records Office, Kew.

certainly implies confidence that there would be employment available and that the emigrants would prosper.

But why should Hornbuckle and his Parish Council have chosen to ignore the express wishes of the Commissioners?

It may be that they were caught up in the enthusiasm of Whiting and the Duppa family of Hollingbourne⁶ or it may have been the enthusiasm of the families themselves.⁷ But part of the answer must have been the quality of the families, the Averys, the Farmers, the Hunts, the Nashes, the Peckhams and the Relfs. Apart from the Nashes who came from Sandhurst, none of the heads of families were young, and all had large families. For most of them, the previous winter had been the first time they had been in the workhouse and, for all, the future looked bleak.

They were certainly of good cheer as they left the country on *The Bolton*, in company with some thirty other assisted emigrants from the area, as reported in the *Maidstone Gazette* of 5th November, 1839. The voyage took five months, the Farmers lost a daughter, the Hunts gained one and young Norman Nash was miraculously kept afloat by air trapped in his jacket when he was washed overboard.

The Avery family had a background of higher expectations. Previous generations had been physicians and yeomen. They soon exploited the New Zealand Company's guarantees of constant and well paid work. Almost certainly it is the Avery family which is described by a fellow emigrant William Bannister:

'There is a poor man close to me that came out with us; I am very partial to him; he comes out of Kent; has a wife and eight children and told me when he landed he had only 6d. in the world; he has now got £60 in gold, and has bought a piece of land to put a house on, which cost £90; he is a labourer, and his lads the same; his wife washes for hire'.⁸

⁶ The Duppas were minor aristocrats, active in the promotion of good agricultural practice, allotments for labourers and migration to New Zealand. Members of the family and Rev. T.W. Hornbuckle appear on several philanthropic committees. Unlike so many land speculators attracted by the New Zealand Company's scheme, George Duppa actually migrated and developed the land the family had purchased.

⁷ An original handbill is preserved in CO 208 291/295, *Scrapbook of Newspaper Cuttings, Pamphlets and Posters of the New Zealand Co. 1839 onwards*, in the Public Records Office, Kew. The handbill publicises a visit by a Gentleman from the New Zealand Company's office in London to Harrietsham, Headcorn, Staplehurst and Goudhurst on 22nd October, 1839. By this time the harvest would have been garnered and many labourers would have nothing to look forward to, but a return to the workhouse for them and their families for the winter.

⁸ William Bannister, *Letter*, (14th April, 1841), quoted in *The New Zealand Journal*, (1841), 298. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington.

In 1882, *The Return of Freeholders of New Zealand* reported that the Avery family now owned almost £2000 worth of property.

In 1875, George Peckham, jnr., owned 41 acres of land on the Old Porirua Road just outside Wellington.⁹

The Hunts, Farmers and Relfs remained labourers. Younger members of the Hunts and the Relfs intermarried and may have owned property in Thames whence they migrated, probably during the Coromandel gold rush in the 1860s.

James Henry Nash became a noted local Methodist Lay Preacher, moved out of Wellington and set up his own ropewalk and flax dressing business in Foxton on the banks of the Manawatu river. He wrote back to William Barnes in Staplehurst in 1843:

'When we arrived here we had only three halfpence and now I am worth one hundred pounds in property. 500 pounds would not tempt me to return at least because I have fought through all the difficulties incident to a new Colony and have good prospects before me. I take this opportunity of returning my sincere thanks to the parish of Staplehurst for the very handsome manner in which we were treated when leaving England. I have conversed with many people who were sent out by their parishes but I cannot find any that were treated so kindly as were the people sent out by the parish of Staplehurst especially as regards their outfit and other favours. And I trust Sir that you will allow me to express through you my gratitude to the parish for every favour that I received from them.'¹⁰

One of James Henry Nash's grandsons became mayor and M.P. for Palmerston North, another, proprietor and editor of the *Manawatu Evening Standard*. The Averys were even more spectacularly successful, producing in the present generation, the Rt. Hon. Mike Moore, the last Prime Minister of New Zealand and the millionaire Sir Frank Renouf. Perhaps Rev. T.W. Hornbuckle and the Staplehurst Parish Council saw beyond these families' pauperism and felt they deserved a chance. It is good to see how their faith was justified.

⁹ A.H. Carman, *Tawa Flat and the Old Porirua Road 1840-1870*, Wellington, 1950.

¹⁰ James Henry Nash, *Letter to Wm. Barnes of Staplehurst*, (September 19th, 1842), copy held by Mrs. Anita Thompson of Staplehurst.