

The Kinglake Saga

Three Carrucan immigrants Bridget [Coleman], Patrick and Peter Carrucan and their mother settled in Eltham into the life of the young colony of Victoria in the mid 1850s - 60s.

They became established and their families grew and flourished. Not for them the false lure of the goldfields, nor the ill-gotten riches of the entrepreneurial graziers of the Western District.

It is understandable that, as they partnered, the eyes of their children should turn afield, for settlement had caught up with the burgeoning village.

But where to? To the south and west lay the ever expanding metropolitan Melbourne, to the north and east the massive bulk of the Great Dividing Range; the Kinglake Ranges vary in height soaring from 1675 feet to 1930 feet [525 m to 610 m] above sea level.

It was to Kinglake that John McMahon, a Kinglake boy, bore his bride Margaret Mattie [née Carrucan] in 1911.

Today Kinglake comprises forest, farmland, a national park and a township, and is situated 48 miles [65 km] north east of Melbourne in the Kinglake Ranges. Kinglake is generally 3°C colder than Metropolitan Melbourne with the summers being very pleasant with heavy frosts and occasional snowfalls during winter.¹

Gold was discovered in 1861 on Mount Slide, to the east of the locality, at an area which became known as Mountain Rush. A Mountain Rush Post Office opened on 7th May 1862, but closed in January 1863 as the miners moved to other locations.

Kinglake township was established much later and was named after British historian Alexander William Kinglake whose eight volume history of the Crimean War had recently been completed. Kinglake Post Office opened on 14th May 1883. There was also an office at Kinglake East open from 1914 until 1950.

Kinglake ~ Diamond Valley Pioneer John McMahon²

The following account of the early days of Kinglake was published in the *Rosanna and Diamond Valley News*, July 1960, compiled from an interview with Mr John McMahon, one of the district's earliest settlers and a son-in-law of Peter Carrucan who migrated from Ireland in 1858.

Almost a century ago, a surveyor and historian, whose name was later to become famous in the Diamond Valley and Plenty Ranges, mapped out a hazardous road linking the small goldmining township of Queenstown to a mountain top settlement, which was later named in his honour.

He was **Alexander Kinglake, who mapped the way from Queenstown across the mountaintop to Glenburn** in 1870. Kinglake was the last of the Eltham district to be settled.

Today the small settlement has grown into a large agricultural area, noted for its high quality potatoes.

However, it was gold that brought the first settlers to the district, seeking their fortunes and following the creeks up the mountains from Smiths Gully, Queenstown and Yarra Glen. Some were successful, and it was reported that 1500 ounces of gold were taken from No. 1 Creek near East Kinglake.

As the gold petered out, the settlers turned to farming the land and found that gooseberries and raspberries flourished. Berry growing became widespread and was so successful that two preserving factories, Hoadley's and Peacock's, were operating at Kinglake by about 1895.

Prices ranged from £5 a ton, to a record £12, on one occasion. A bumper crop one year resulted in 115 tons from 1,600 acres of land.

To the east of Kinglake lay Castella and Muddy Creek, and wild rough country through which wound a track to Yarra Glen. To the west, settlers could follow the hazardous road down the mountain through Queenstown to Melbourne.

For a time Kinglake was isolated. Pioneers of the area battled with boggy tracks, snow in winter and primitive tools. Bullock teams were widely used. It was an

area of huge trees and dense, ferny gullies. Bullock teams dragged their way through mud up to the axles bringing produce down to Whittlesea. The pioneers waged a continual battle against rain sodden scrub.

One of the earliest pioneers of the district was an Irishman, named McMahon, who, with his wife, also Irish, built a house on a virgin block of forest land in Kinglake East in 1875.

Unfortunately the house was burnt in a bush fire and the couple returned to Melbourne where Mr McMahon drove a two horse bus at Fitzroy. **His son John, now 85, in this year of 1960, and a well known identity of Kinglake, was therefore born in Fitzroy.** ³

The family decided to return to Kinglake in 1880, making the forty mile journey from Melbourne in a spring cart.

John, then five years old, can recall how the cart capsized on tire rutty road between Kangaroo Ground and Panton Hill, and how a bystander, a Mrs Coutie, consoled him with caraway cake and homemade cordial.

On arrival at Kinglake, after a hazardous trip through the cutting from Queenstown, this family settled on a block of land which Mr McMahon had cleared. To keep his family until his farm was established, he worked at a mine with a whim horse.

The land boom affected property on the mountain in the late 1880's. Mr McMahon sold to a speculator in 1892, but the land market suddenly collapsed that year and the sale fell through. As a result, the McMahons remained in Kinglake.

The first landowners in the district were, at East Kinglake, the McMahons, Lawreys, Ellesons, Beckwiths and the Cohens. Each was granted 50 acres when the Lands Department opened 250 acres of country.

At the time, one of the well known Chaffey brothers who also owned land in the district, left to settle in Mildura.

East Kinglake was also the home of early nurserymen, Messrs Tom Russell, Lawrey and William Grey, who supplied the Diamond Valley with apple, peach

and plum trees.

The market for the fruit trees increased as the gold supplies diminished, and settlers planted the valley with fruit trees from Greensborough to the foot of the mountains, making a glorious display of blossom in the spring.

Young John McMahon, at his mountain top home, naturally became an expert axeman, taking part in wood chop competitions at sports meetings. He won his first chop when he was eighteen, and his last, from scratch, forty years later.

He was in his top form in his early thirties and won all the competitions he entered, travelling throughout the Diamond Valley. He married a Kinglake girl, Maggie Carrucan and they had two sons and a daughter. One son, John, a flight-sergeant in the R.A.A.F died in World War II, and the second son, James, married a Kinglake girl, Bess Exlon. They live on an adjoining farm. Mr McMahon's daughter Agnes is the wife of Stan Reeves, a Kinglake potato farmer.

After the death of his wife, John McMahon married Miss Rinehan of Kangaroo Ground.

John was a well known figure for 29 years at the Royal Melbourne Show Grounds where he supplied all the logs and blocks for wood chops, selecting, culling and dressing each one himself at Kinglake, before trucking them to Yarra Glen, where they were loaded on to a goods train and delivered at the show grounds under his personal supervision.

For the centenary show he prepared and delivered 300 logs. Due to the foresight of John McMahon and two other settlers, East Kinglake received a township grant of seventy-five acres for a sports oval and other facilities.

Today, Kinglake is serviced by all weather roads. A few giant trees stand, but little of the original forest land remains.

Kinglake, as distinct from Kinglake East, followed a similar pattern of development. Mrs McMinn, daughter of Harry Thomson (one of the early settlers in this area) and Mr H. Coller, the postmaster of Pheasant Creek,

continue this history of Kinglake:

The first settlers dug for gold and there are still traces of alluvial gold in some small mountain streams. A few mine holes remain in some of the gullies, but most have been filled in since the land was cultivated. In the early days it was not unusual for a drover to see some of his herd disappear down one of these grass-covered holes and even his own horse might go from under him.

A gold-buyer for this area, named Cookson, was found murdered on the Old Kinglake - St Andrews Road and over seventy years ago a would-be bushranger called 'French Joe' was shot by a police officer near Kinglake.

The first post office was run by Mr Staff on the Mt Slide road. Later, Harry Thomson was appointed postmaster and the post office was moved to 'The Oaks' on the main road. Harry Thomson married Elizabeth Harris, daughter of the school teacher at Queenstown and she took over its management until her death in 1941. The post office was in the Thomson family for seventy-two years and is still conducted on their property. Mail deliveries came at first on horseback, twice a week from Queenstown, later by horse and buggy three times a week from Steele's Creek, then daily from Yarra Glen. More recently it came from Hurstbridge by car; now it comes from both Eltham and Whittlesea daily and most residents have their mail before noon.⁴ The first telephone ...

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Nevertheless, Mr Mankey protested to the Education Department about the conditions under which he and the children had to work in summer and described the school as an 'oven': and ill-ventilated. It is this miserable building that I am compelled, during the course of the day's duties, to withdraw from in order to obtain fresh air and permit the pupils to do the same.

I requested a school that would take 40 pupils. Finally in September 1890, one acre, part of Allotment 2 Section 9 Parish of Nillumbik, costing £ 20 was purchased from W. West for Kinglake, as distinct from Kinglake East. At this time the attendance was 28: 16 boys and 12 girls.

Many different names have been given to Research and the area around it, some of which include Swipers Gully and Wallaby Town. Legend has it that the name Research originated when Morris's grandfather told tales of how he found a valuable trace of ***, then searched and researched for it. The name *** 'Town' was probably used before the gold mining days. In a letter to the Education Department from Mr Mankey dated ****⁵ puts forward the suggestion that Research Gully School be as Research School. By 30 June 1891 a State-owned wooden building with a room measuring 24 feet by 18 feet providing for 45 children, was built and became Research State School No. 2959. From 2 June 1891 until 5 October 1903 Henry James Col*** was in charge. Evidently the first sewing mistress to be appointed was Miss *** Rodda, who was also at the school from 26 October 1891 to March 1897 and who became Mrs Cole in 1894. This head devoted much time to the landscaping of the school grounds, planting trees and erecting a paling fence. The shelter-shed erected then **is still there** today.

An elderly resident, Mrs Reynolds, reports that the early school was the only public building in Research and was used for functions, including church. If a piano was needed for entertainment, one was carried across from the Research Hotel. Later additions made to the original room make it exactly as it is today. Due to development and the increase in population following World War **it has been added to** at three different intervals and extra land has been acquired. By 1970 there was a staff of **1 head teacher and 8 teachers**, with a gross attendance of 247 pupils.

Family Tales from Agnes Reeves

Agnes Reeves is the daughter of John and Maggie McMahon and the granddaughter of Peter and Hannah Carrucan.

Sloan née Carrucan Wedding

This is a funny story told by my father many years ago. It happened, I think, at Bill and Hannah Sloan's place at Warrandyte, Victoria. It was before June 1911 which was my parent's wedding date.

My father, John McMahon was walking to Warrandyte from Kinglake to a Sloan daughter's wedding. During the walk his foot became sore so he took off his sock and popped it into his pocket. And he journeyed on. At the reception, he was called upon to "...say a few words". He stood up wiping his face with what he thought was his handkerchief. Alas! To his horror it was his sock! Which must have caused some merriment.

I only think it must have been Hannah Sloan and Mick O'Brien's wedding as their family Mollie (a nun), Bernie and Kevin were just a bit older than ours. Guess we'll never know!

The strength of our pioneers

I remember my mother (Margaret McMahon) taking washing to the creek so it must have been a drought year. Brother Jim must have been too small to come with us, probably sleeping.

On the way back, I remember thinking that the hill was very steep. Makes me remember how wonderful our pioneers were

Several years later my brother's, John, killed in the war and Jim still going pretty well and self sailed down that hill on home made sleds, on the dry summer grass. But by that time, sadly, Mum had lost her life.

Making their own fun

Towards the nineteen thirties, Uncle Mick Carrucan and Auntie Maggie and others used to visit Kinglake. Dad would play his accordion and Uncle Mick would dance the Irish Jig, or some such. If there was enough of us, sometimes we'd have the Alberts. It was such fun.

My father was good at finding wild honey. One day we and our neighbours went by truck to the Muddy Creek Bridge (now the Yea River) to look for bee trees. Dad took his accordion. We had a picnic too. Then Dad played on his accordion and we danced the Alberts on the road, to the amusement of one or two cars, which came by. Nice memories

Maggie Carrucan adds to Agnes's Stories

Maggie Carrucan was the second daughter of Peter and Hanna, born in 1879 in Eltham. She grew up with many brothers and possibly did her share of work around the house. She went to school at Eltham.

She met and married Jack McMahon on 8th June 1911, at Eltham.

They built a house in Kinglake near his relations but further into the bush from her family. The house was later burnt in a bush fire. Life was not easy for the young couple. They had 200 acres and, as this was thick bushland, there was clearing to be done, veggies and fruit to nurture, cows to milk and very soon there was a baby on the way.

They were very unlucky and it must have broken her heart but the first child (Alfred?) who was born at home died very soon after, and the next was stillborn. The nearest doctor lived at Whittlesea. One was buried at Yarra Glen and another at Kinglake. This must have been a great blow for the young couple but they soldiered on. Then John came along followed by Agnes then James. Alfred died as a young baby.

They had great times together splashing around in the mud in their bare feet to direct the water off the path or putting ants on a mud island and watching to see if they could swim to dryer land, saving the rooster from being separated

from his head by hiding it in the old wicker pram. John being the oldest had to separate the milk from the cream before he ran off to school. The cream was sold to the Moran & Cato Butter-factory.

Jim rode the Shetland pony- when Agnes rode it, it shot under a wire fence, Wham!! But she also rode the calves on occasions.

When Agnes was preparing for her First Communion, Maggie was very sick and was expecting again. She tried to make the frock but was too weak so asked Violet McMahon who made it. Maggie was taken to the Women's Hospital with peritonitis and she and the baby died 1923 or 4.

What a blow for the little family- Jim was sent to Eltham to Frank and Molly (McMahon) Carrucan's and was a mate for their Ken. Kate McMahon looked after John and Agnes for a time as they were going to school at Kinglake. Kate would give them things to take to Grandma but they were scared of the dog so they hid behind a log/stump and return home. How long before this was sorted out?

Jim then started school at Eltham with his new friend and cousin Harry Burgoyne. They had the post office (and one became a magistrate.)

By the beginning of the next year Jack had organised for their great friend Sarah Renahan to care for the children and the house. (Later they were married and Frank was best man.) Jim found it hard to settle back at home without his mother so when Frank and Molly shifted to Kinglake Jim would run down the creek to his other family.

Frank had 10 chain on Bridge St or was 10 chain down the creek?

There were about 17 or 23 in the little one-teacher (Colin Amery) school and half of these were related. They sat 3 or 5 to a bench and used slates to write. But the first thing the boys learnt was to make the pencil squeak across the slate!

They were confirmed together in about 1927, even though Jim was very young, because Archbishop Mannix was coming to bless the new church and maybe would not be back for years. They were all scared the bishop would ask difficult questions.

The last church had burnt down in a bush fire, and the first was built on public land without any permissions. So when questions were asked, Mr. Finnigan bought the property and donated it to the church. They had mass at Murphy's while waiting for the church to be rebuilt.

You should see the trophies – Jim played cricket for Kinglake and football for Diamond Creek. Agnes played tennis for Kinglake, Kinglake West then with Whittlesea.

John had joined the police force, then felt he should do his duty by his country and joined the air force in the WW2 .As a pilot he was sent to England, was billeted with a family and was bombed before he saw any action. He left behind a wife and two children.

Agnes met Stan Reeves at a dance. They married and have two children, John and Mary. Mary has a son married to a Brazilian and living in Brazil.

Agnes was active in the church, teaching religion in the state school at Kinglake to the Catholics, then to all the students. She is now involved in Probus and keeping up with grandchildren.

Jim met Bessie at a dance and they now [2010, Ed.], after 63 happy years of marriage, have 6 children 17 grandchildren and one great grandchild. When Jim left school his dad gave him some seed potatoes and some ground and they have built up a great farm with 100 acres from the original farm 50 acres of bush and another 50 more acres of bush from. It is beautiful virgin bush with some stringy barks and with trees more than 200 years old.

There is a lovely understorey of wattles and many native grasses and wildflowers. There is a creek running through it with a dam/waterhole. Many native birds and animals find it a haven.

Bushfires

In his account of the history of the district, John McMahon spoke of the times when the ravages of bushfire destroyed farms, homes and enterprise.

Kinglake has a long history of bushfires when extreme weather conditions occur. There were severe bushfires at the end of January 2006 into early February 2006, when fires burnt out over 1,500 hectares (3,700 acres). The firefighters managed to bring the fire to a halt. Fires also occurred in the 1982–1983 season the Ash Wednesday fires and during the 1960s. The major fires of 1939 also placed the community at risk with a major ignition point being nearby. In 1926 major fires in the area caused significant losses; the Post Office being the only building left standing.

The Black Saturday bushfires ⁶

In his 90th year, Jim McMahon and his wife Bessie were to have their brush with disaster when the Black Saturday bushfires of Saturday 7th February 2009 stormed through their area, leaving 42 people confirmed dead in Kinglake and Kinglake West, and more than 500 homes destroyed.

Overall, the bushfires that ignited vast areas of bushland and farmland across the State of Victoria on and around Saturday 7 February, 2009 were the most devastating ever recorded, leaving 173 people dead and 414 injured.

Just before midday on 7th February 2009, high winds felled a 2 km section of power lines, sparking a fire in open grasslands adjoining pine plantations. The fire was fanned by extreme north-westerly winds, and travelled 50 km south-east in a narrow fire front into Kinglake National Park. A wind change on the evening of 7th February which passed through the area around 5:30pm, bringing strong south-westerly winds, turned the initial long and narrow fire band into a wide fire front moving in a north-east direction through Kinglake and beyond.

The Melbourne Herald Sun of 16th February 2009 carried the headline **Bessie saves the day** ⁷ and read as follows:

If anyone knows what to do in the face of a firestorm, it is 83-year-old Bessie McMahon.

Up to 35 terrified Kinglake neighbours, relatives and strangers sheltered in her house while she fought spot fires with her bare hands during the inferno.

"I've been in Kinglake all my life and I know how to handle fire," she said.

"When you've lived on a farm all of your life you have your little techniques."

Miraculously Bessie, husband Jim, 89, and their family in the area survived, with their homes.

Mrs McMahon said the fire had an intensity she had never seen.

"It came so rapidly. It came from St Andrews. It came in from Kilmore way. It came in every way. It sort of came over and it came down on top of us so hard."

As dozens of people poured into her house - including son Anthony, his wife Marie and their four children - Bessie stood tall.

"The fire did start up the carport - I managed to put the fire out," she said.

"To start with, I did it with my hands and my feet.

"None of us got hurt. I can't believe it."

Bessie's amazing story came to light after Casey Butler, of Mill Park, emailed the Herald Sun to thank the McMahons for saving her partner Cameron Dalloway, 26, and his brother Mitch Robinson, 17.

"To the McMahon family . . . thank you for keeping Cameron and Mitch safe," she wrote.

"Thanks to you and your family we are lucky to have the boys safe and well. You all are true heroes to myself and Cam and Mitch's family. Thank you so much."

Mrs McMahon yesterday played down her role.

"I went out to a church service this morning in Kinglake. None of us can even work out how we survived. It's a miracle."

Mr and Mrs McMahon have refused to leave their 80ha property since the firestorm, using a generator while they provide shelter and support to locals.

"We haven't left the house, no way. We're staying here," she said. "We've got people in the house all the time. If anybody wanted a bed they've never been turned away."

The McMahons also saved their 40 cows.

Two of their six children, and seven of their 17 grandchildren, live in fire-ravaged areas.

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- ¹ Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kinglake,_Victoria#Location
 - ² *Rosanna and Diamond Valley News*, July 1960, gives an account of the early days of Kinglake, compiled from interview with Mr John McMahon, one of the district's earliest settlers
 - ³ John Joseph McMahon, born in 1874 in Fitzroy, died at Kinglake in 1961
 - ⁴ Page missing? The following page indistinct on left hand margin
 - ⁵ The manuscript is damaged and difficult to interpret
 - ⁶ Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Saturday_bushfires
 - ⁷ This article, written by Cheryl Critchley Melbourne Herald Sun of 16th February 2009 carried the headline "Bessie saves the day"