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LOOKING BACK

From a story held by the Katanning Historical Society and written by John Battersby circa 1965.

John Battersby was a tall, well built man of great physical strength and intelligence, who migrated from England in the late twenties and, through hard work and good business sense, went from practically nothing to owning the prestigious "Cheviot Hills" property acquired in 1962.

When Jack left England in 1927, the great depression had taken hold, exacerbated by the big coal strike of 1926. Widespread unemployment and resultant poverty among the working class made even the price of potatoes beyond their means, and this left agriculture in the doldrums; a deciding factor in Jack's rather momentous decision to leave. (Battersby's had lived and stayed in West Derby outside Liverpool for centuries).

Until then he had worked for his grandfather, a man who firmly believed that a person should work to the limit of his capacity, with the result that a slim young Jack was working up to fourteen hours a day and kept in the pink of physical condition.

The farm, 90 hectares in area, was held on a leasehold basis on the Knowsley Estate of Lord Derby, (whose vast

estates at one time yielded ~~three hundred thousand pounds~~ £300,000 (Approx $9,000,000). ~~($600 000.)~~ per annum in rents. Although small by Australian standards, the farm was highly productive, the main crop being potatoes. Other root crops were grown as well, together with clover, wheat, oats and barley. The cereal yields averaged 80 bushels per acre (5.5 ~~tonnes per hectare~~ t/ha) of wheat. Stock consisted of a few beef and dairy cattle and the heavy draught horses required to work the land.

Potato production required two wagons constantly engaged in carting 3 tonne loads to Liverpool City and backloading cow manure from the dairies there. This was applied at the rate of 20 tons to the acre (50 ~~tonnes~~/ha). The cow manure plus 12cwt (1.5 ~~tonnes~~/ha) of chemical fertilizer (superphosphate, sulphate of ammonia, potash, etc.) accounted for the excellent results. The total annual value of the crops at 1960's prices would have been about ~~thirty thousand pounds~~ £30,000 (Approx $300,000). ~~($60 000.)~~ This shows the enormous contrast between the agriculture Jack left and what he encountered in the partially developed agriculture of Western Australia in the late twenties.

Jack took passage on the S.S. 'Berina' on the 7th July, 1927 and arrived in Fremantle on the 15th August, after a rough and unpleasant voyage, chiefly remembered for the atrocious food. Feeling much out of condition from

a month at sea, he quickly sought work from the Immigration Authorities and was directed to a property at Coyrecup - a "suburb" of Katanning - and some 25 kilometres to the east.

That same afternoon he caught the passenger train to Katanning and lamented the rough sleepless 400 kilometre 12 hour journey in such contrast with the smooth 2 hour 200 kilometre trip from Liverpool to London that had started his travels: but there was worse to come. Arriving in Katanning at 5 a.m. he explored the town (whose dirt streets and peculiar buildings were "reminiscent of a Wild West town in America") and later in the morning caught the train to Coyrecup. In Jack's words - "If I thought the first train was slow, it was a veritable Flying Scotsman compared with this. Not only was it slow, but the crew stopped the train to gather sticks to boil the billy!"

Eventually the train arrived at Coyrecup Siding, which was a small shed beside the track. Jack was directed "somewhere over there" through several hundred hectares of bush to his prospective employer. Shouldering his cases he set off on foot, and guided by smoke rising above the trees, came to a small clearing in which stood a shed about 15 feet (4.5 ~~metres~~ m) square.

His mounting misgivings were confirmed as he approached the squalid hut. A large dog made to attack him, but a well placed boot disposed of the menace. An old man greeted him and invited him to eat, which offer he declined. The dwelling, made of rusty corrugated iron with a dirt floor, was utterly revolting, being home to six cats and the dog as well as his employer. The general filth and smell were appalling. (This was not uncommon in the bush in those days. Jack said that later he heard of a man sitting in the dark eating his evening meal who, on being asked why, said the meat was a bit off colour and he didn't want to see what he was eating.)

Having no alternative, Jack stayed there for about six weeks until he found another job at Kwobrup, twenty-five kilometres further east and into the mallee country. Jack recorded that his new employer "was a very poor type", able to tell every farmer how to run his business, but hopeless with his own. The machinery was left out in the open and the stable so leaky it was impossible to keep the harness dry.

Living conditions were better though, and although the food was poor, Jack was happy enough. The climate was good after the gloom of England, and he was able to ride horses often, and particularly enjoyed a good kangaroo chase.

As seeding time approached, his job was to pick up mallee roots "lying as thick as currants on a cake", using a horse and dray. He was very pleased with the appearance of the paddocks after he'd finished, but was later shocked that after ploughing they seemed as thick as before - a feature of the mallee country one had to become used to.

After the opening rains in April, the horses were rounded up out of the bush for seeding. They were wild and difficult after months of freedom. A nondescript lot, they varied in size and temperament and the badly broken ones were particularly hard to handle. The harness was about as good as the horses, being worn and patched and held together with wire. A far cry from the spick and span gear Jack was able to take such a pride in back in England.

> In relation to the harness Jack said, "I heard of a man who went to work for an outback farmer and was told by the farmer to take the horse out of the cart. After gazing at the dilapidated and wired up harness for a while, he asked for the pliers. The boss, suspecting him of sarcasm, sacked him on the spot."

They managed to get the eight horses harnessed and hitched to the plough. Having never driven more than four well broken horses before, Jack's experience was about to be rapidly expanded. At first only three horses moved off quietly, the rest proceeded to go forward two paces and back three, finishing in a tangle on the front of the plough. Eventually he got them all going in the same direction and proceeded to lap the paddock in a fair imitation of a chariot race from Ben Hur, grimly sticking to the bucking seat and with the jump arms clattering over the mallee stumps. After a couple of laps the team quietened down and became more amenable to discipline.

Jack cropped 550 acres (220 ha) ~~hectares~~ that year and the horses were so poor at the end they could hardly walk because the owner was too mean to provide sufficient food. He was also too mean to provide sufficient superphosphate, considering 50 kilograms per hectare enough. The resultant crop failed, for which he blamed everything but his own poor management.

Jack had been warned by neighbours to make sure his wages were assured because of the poor reputation of his employer, but took little notice. Eventually, put off because of lack of money, he was owed £65 ($2,055) ~~$130~~. which couldn't be paid until after harvest. This had been earned at the rate of £1.10.0 ($47) ~~$3~~. per week.

It was during this period that Jack was in hospital having treatment for an abcessed leg when he met Selma Beeck whom he later married.

His next employer was Mr. Sam Kemble, brother-in-law of his previous boss, but a completely different man. He treated his men well and the food was "the best I had had since England". He was also given plenty of opportunities to visit Marracoonda and see Selma, and altogether considered it one of the best times of his life.

At that time farm product prices were good, wool bringing about ~~61~~ 2/8d a pound ~~a kilogram~~ (approx 31¢ cents a kg) and wheat ~~$18.50 per~~ about 5/- a bushel (approx $28 at tonne) tonne, loan money was readily available and Australia was generally fairly prosperous. However, Jack's experience prior to leaving England and his interest and observation of economics and world affairs lead him to believe that Australia would soon join the world depression, already bad in England, and rapidly overtaking America. (This happened the following year and wool fell to below 22 a kg. and wheat to less than ~~$7.50 a tonne.~~ 2/- a bushell (approx $128 a tonne) 1/- a pound. (approx 38¢ cents a kg)

Jack was very anxious about his own situation, realising how precarious it could become in the event of a bad depression. He had saved well, his needs

being small, and had limited his visits to Katanning, at one stage having gone six months between trips. He was quite proud of this and his ready adaption from a place where "I had spent most of my life within ten miles of a city of over a million people".

He was persuaded to take a job at "Orange Grove" owned by Mouritz Beeck, the father of four sons and five daughters, including his fiancee. Jack says "Mr. Beeck was a simple minded, good living man, a good farmer and a good stockman". He took a great delight in feeding his stock because of his experiences during droughts in South Australia, when it was sometimes necessary to feed the straw thatching from the roofs of buildings to keep the horses alive. Jack was very happy here, but only stayed a few weeks because there were six men there already and he wasn't really needed. He took the offer of a job with a near neighbour, Mr. Alex Prosser, owner of "Happy Valley".

As the coming depression became more evident, Jack tried to impress on his future father-in-law the seriousness of the coming situation and to persuade him to transfer his account from the Primary Producers Bank to a larger and more stable institution. However he was unimpressed. Later, when the Primary Producers Bank closed its doors, he had great difficulty in getting another bank to take over his affairs.

Jack's wages were ~~$3.~~ £1.10.0 ($46) a week at "Happy Valley" and he counted himself fortunate, as the deepening depression saw many men walking the roads looking for non-existent work. Mr. Prosser, his sons Cliff and Rex, and Jack put in nearly (400 ~~hectares~~ 1000 acres / ha.) of crop with horses, finishing in July when the ground became too boggy. It was quite a happy time in the Marracoonda district, with steady work and good company, although Jack records that he became fed up with the perpetual talk of hard times after church on Sundays.

At the end of that year he wondered if he would still have a job after harvest. Mr. Prosser had "made the mistake" of buying a large adjoining property a couple of years before, and the interest bill was ~~$1 400.~~ £700 ($21,600) a year. The woolclip only brought ~~$2 000.~~ £1,000 ($31,000) and the bank manager had told him to sack Jack. However, this he would not do, not being able to run the property without help.

Later, knowing Jack wished to marry, he offered him the use of a small dilapidated cottage on the farm. Jack worked energetically to improve it, and in April, 1931 he and his bride moved in. Wages were still only ~~$3.~~ £1.10.0 ($57) a week, but they had a cow and poultry and managed very well.

In 1932 Jack was offered the lease of a 240 ~~hectare~~ 600 ace (ha) farm at Woodanilling. With some savings and a loan on an insurance policy, he bought some horses and other necessities and went farming. He put in 40 ~~hectares~~ 100 acres of wheat and 16 ~~hectares~~ 40 acres (ha) of oats, but a very wet season limited the yield to 200 kg per hectare 9 bushels per acre which returned a total of ~~$184.~~ £92 ($3760) Returns from sidelines were also meagre. On one occasion they sold 36 dozen eggs for ~~$1.20.~~ 12/- ($24.50) Prime butchered mutton sold at 6.5 a kilogram, 4 pence a pound ($1.80 a kg) until the neighbour undercut the price to 5.5. 3 pence a pound ($1.35 a kg) However, he managed to get a few jobs in the district and "kept his head above water".

Three years later when that lease expired, he purchased a farm close to Katanning on the southern town boundary; for $8.90 a ~~hectare~~ £2 16s an acre ($108 per ha) on very good terms. As there was no house on it, he proceeded to build one, 9M x 4.5M 30' x 15', and divided into two rooms, using mud bricks he made himself. Later two more rooms were added using asbestos. [The house is still in use in 1986. Ed.]

There were only about 200 ha 500 acres cleared. Jack cleared another 160 ha 400 acres over the next few years, using an axe. By this time the second world war had started. Superphosphate was rationed according to the average used over a past number of years, which meant Jack's quota was very small. This was a source of great frustration, because experience in England had taught

him "that to get anything out of the ground it is necessary to put something in".

Things went reasonably well until 1944. He had good expectations that an average crop yield from extra newly cleared land would clear a number of debts. Alas, it was not to be. The season was very dry and the crop was a complete failure. Faced with debts impossible to pay, he was strongly advised to relinquish the farm and get a job. However, a person of Jack's strength of character does not give in easily, and he took a job at the Flour Mill working night shifts (midnight to 8 a.m.) as a fireman stoking the boilers. This enabled him to work the farm during the day.

The Mill was at that time working three shifts a day, and presumably making good profits for the owners. This was not reflected in the working conditions however, which certainly would not have been tolerated in later years. There were no showers for men doing extremely hard work, and some of the white gum logs used to fire the boilers were excessively big and heavy, taxing even Jack's great strength. [That he was above average in strength I saw demonstrated one day in the Illareen shearing shed when he carried a full bale of wool out on to the carrier's truck, completely unaided. This was about 1949 or 1950. Ed.]

Jack was able to keep this up for some time, but eventually he collapsed and was in a weakened state for a long time. His doctor advised him that to continue working so hard could prove fatal, so, as he had paid off most of his debts, he devoted himself solely to the farm.

By this time he had a good team of horses acquired by shrewd dealing, retaining the good ones and disposing of inferior animals. Not being able to afford the best, he had had more than his fair share of difficult and vicous brutes and considered himself lucky not to have been injured by some of them.

He agreed to contract some dam sinking (for stock water) for his neighbour, using the team. The venture was so profitable he decided to continue, and at the end of twelve months was able to purchase a tractor. As he says "from that first dam I never looked back". After dam sinking he did a lot of share cropping with neighbouring farmers, and as prices improved each year, soon found himself in a sound financial position.

In 1952 he sold the farm and moved to a better one at Moojebing named "Alyesbury". After ten successful years there he bought "Cheviot Hills" in the Carrolup area from Mr. Paul Benneke, and his son, Keith, still farms it today.

Some people told Jack he was lucky to own such a fine property, and maybe luck played some part in it, but by far the greater portion was hard work and intelligence. Certainly no one would begrudge him his success and his pleasure in being able to give his wife and family some of the material comforts of life he was unable to afford during the early years.

In his latter years he became a very keen clay target shooter, owning a very nice B2 grade Browning U/O shot gun and travelling over much of the State to various shoots. He collapsed and died at Narrogin in 1969 while attending a shoot there. His passing was mourned by a very wide circle of friends who had come to like and respect him over the years.

FOOTNOTE: Jack and Selma had two children, Keith, born 1933 who married Audrey Bailey (they have four children: Peter, Michael, Anne and Colin); and Ruth born 1936, who married Arnold Kowald (they have five children: Penelope, Wanda, Valerie, Geoffrey and Howard).