

## **Henry Packman – the Basketmaker of Howes Creek**

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Amongst the farmers, orchardists and labourers listed on the 1901 Electoral Roll for the Division of Wilberforce, one occupation stands out from all the others. Living at 'Fernleigh' Howes Creek at that time was Henry Packman and family, basketmakers, quite an uncommon trade in the Hawkesbury District at that time.

Henry Packman sailed for Australia with his wife, Elizabeth and five children, aboard the 'John Rennie' arriving in Moreton Bay (Queensland) in 1873. He left behind his successful basket shop in the High Street of the village of St Mary Cray, Kent, England in which he employed three men.

By 1877 he had travelled south and established a small basketmaking factory in Marrickville, NSW which prospered to the extent that by 1880 Henry had established several shops in Park Street, Sydney including a basketware shop and a fruit market. Later, in 1885 Henry leased a pair of shops further along Park Street at numbers 42 and 44 for his expanding business. Although altered over time these premises still survive today. Henry and Elizabeth's family was also expanding with a further five children being born to the couple in Sydney between 1875 and 1885.

The family now consisted of father Henry born Dartford Kent, England in 1841 who was the son of Thomas Packman and Eliza Best; mother Elizabeth Caroline Leigh born Bristol, Somerset, England in 1841 and their children Elizabeth Caroline born Kent 1856; Henry George born 1867; Charlotte born 1868; Walter born 1870; Ethel born 1872; Daniel Edward born NSW 1875; Lucy A born NSW 1877; Richard born NSW 1879; Sydney born 1881 NSW and May born 1885 NSW.

As a specialised and intricate craft, the Packmans were justifiably proud of their creations, being awarded several prizes for wicker furniture in the Centennial International Exhibition held in Melbourne in 1888 and the following year in the Melbourne Exhibition for making an innovative warehouse basket on wheels for easy manoeuvring around a factory floor.

In the mid 1890s Henry Packman and his son Walter looked for a suitable property on which to cultivate basket willows to supply raw materials for the family business. The Packman family selected on two blocks adjacent to Howes Creek in the Parish of Wilberforce in 1894. Portion 193 of 38 acres, south of the creek and portion 128 of 67 acres north of the creek near where the present Old East Kurrajong Road crosses the creek.

The NSW electoral roll of 1901 lists Henry and son Walter as basketmakers and son Richard as a farmer. Basket willows also known as osiers were planted and cultivated on the properties and the harvested canes were to be used in the manufacture of baskets, furniture and other wicker products sold in the Packman's shops in Sydney. They also planted a large orchard of fruit trees which included a variety of cherry imported from Japan.

The family were active members of the local community involving themselves in the fund-raising activities of local organisations such as the Freemans Reach Cricket Club and Currency Creek Public School. Henry Packman was a supporter of the protectionist movement which sought to secure tariffs on imported goods in order to protect Australian industries. To this end he supported local candidate Brinsley Hall in his (unsuccessful) campaign for election to NSW parliament in 1898. In support of the movement, Packman stated that he was no longer able to carry out his basketmaking business in Sydney due to (less costly) imports from countries such as China and Germany.

The area around the family properties was known locally as Packman's Creek and the road leading up the hill towards East Kurrajong (now Old East Kurrajong Road) – Packman's Hill. It was common for placenames at that time to be attributed to local landowners. The *Windsor and Richmond Gazette* of August 1900 noted the need for a bridge to be constructed over the creek. Many years later a low level timber bridge was constructed only to have it washed away during the floods of 1960 and never replaced.

By 1900 variable seasons had impacted upon the viability of the osier plantations. No remnants of this industry survive along Howes Creek today, however if it had been successful the spread of basket willows would have had significant impacts on the natural environment.

In 1906 at the age of only 65 years Henry Packman died at his home on Howes Creek in 1906 and was buried in Wilberforce Cemetery. Henry's wife Elizabeth died at 'Fernleigh' Drumalbyn Road, Woollahra in 1927 and was buried with her husband.

The name 'Fernleigh' appears to hold special significance. Perhaps it was the name of their family home in England? Their grave at Wilberforce may be described as a white marble sculptured scroll on a stepped white marble base surmounted by a spray of lilies and roses tied with a fringed ribbon. The monument was supplied by monumental mason, George Robertson of Windsor.

Branches of the Packman family may be found in New Zealand and Tasmania and occasionally visited the Hawkesbury to renew acquaintances with old friends and visit the graves of Henry and Elizabeth. Youngest daughter May accompanied by her nephew Mr Harvey of Andover, Tasmania journeyed to the district in February 1930. Reportedly it was over twenty five years since she resided in the district.