

THE WRAGGE BROTHERS - AUSTRALIAN PIONEERS

Meadow Lane at Chaddesden has changed greatly in the years since I first remember it. In the late 1960s one could walk down the lane, climb the slight incline over the hump-backed canal bridge, peer over its low parapet and pick out the course of the old Derby Canal below. Although by then the canal was mostly silted-up there were still a few rush-filled ponds and, with care, it was just possible to walk hesitantly along the line of the canal towpath westwards towards Derby, or eastwards towards Raynesway. When first constructed in the late eighteenth century, the canal had been enlarged on both sides of the Meadow Lane bridge, forming two sizeable basins that provided temporary mooring for barges while they loaded and unloaded their cargo. Immediately south of the canal bridge lay Meadow Farm (Fig. 1), a large, rambling building constructed around the year 1800 and first occupied by the White family. Had you visited the farm a few years after this date, you might have noticed a small girl playing in the farmyard - this was Maria White, the daughter of William and Patience White (nee Morledge), who were married at St. Mary's Church, Chaddesden, on 3 December 1782.

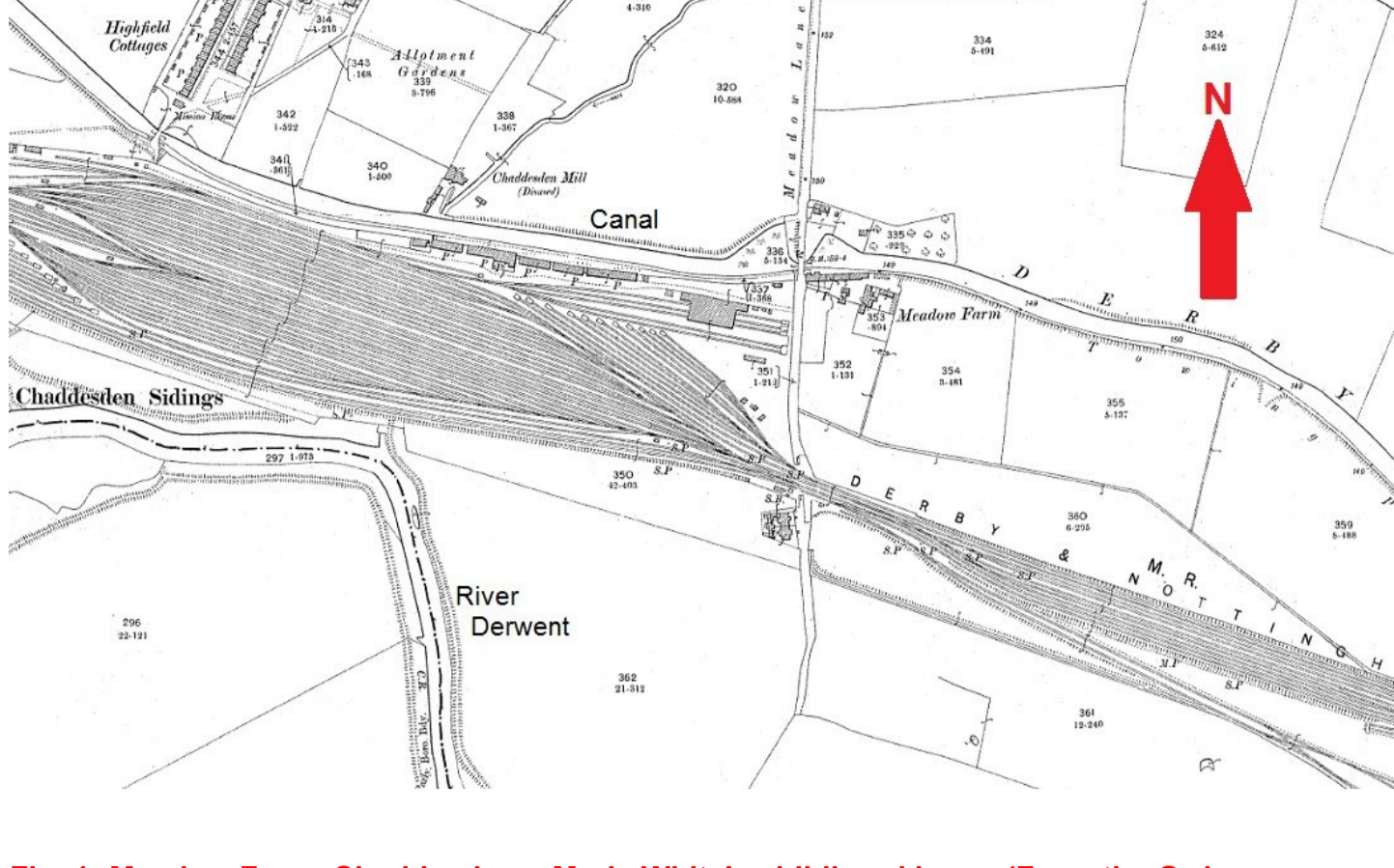


Fig. 1: Meadow Farm, Chaddesden – Maria White's childhood home (From the Ordnance Survey map of 1900)

The youngest of seven children, Maria was baptised at Chaddesden on 22 November 1798 and some of her formative years would be spent living at Meadow Farm. Perhaps she attended the little village school in Chaddesden churchyard - if so, she would certainly have known the schoolmaster, for it was none other than her grandfather, another William White. It is tempting to think that perhaps it was here that she first encountered a globe, turning it round, saw the vast, largely unknown land mass of Australia ... little could she have imagined that half a century later, four of her own sons would have made their home on that huge continent. Maria's father, William White, was a busy man, for not only was he a farmer and a surveyor, but he also acted as land-agent to the Wilmot family of Chaddesden Hall, a post he would hold for over 50 years. Evidently his business interests prospered, for sometime before 1813 he and most of his family moved from Chaddesden to Alton Hall, about three miles south of Wirksworth, leaving his oldest son, William Morledge White, to continue the farming business at Meadow Farm.

In December 1824, Maria, now a young woman of 26, married George Wragge of Sutton-cum-Duckmanton (between Chesterfield and Bolsover) in Wirksworth parish church. Maria's new husband was also a farmer and by the 1850s the couple were settled on their farm at Toton in Nottinghamshire with a family of six sons and one daughter. As far as the Wragge household was concerned, the years 1851 and 1852 would prove to be particularly momentous. Events seem to have begun in the summer of 1851, when their fourth son, Thomas, announced that now he had reached the age of 21 he was leaving home to make his fortune in Australia as a sheep-farmer ... he duly arrived in the new colony of Victoria that November. The next year, Maria's entrepreneurial husband (presumably prompted by favourable reports from Thomas) invested in a new business venture, exporting three tons of cheese to Australia and, more importantly still, her two oldest sons decided to emulate their younger brother by departing on the long sea voyage to the colony to start a new life. On 31 July 1852, George Wragge jnr (then aged 27) and his brother, William (25), left their Nottinghamshire home seemingly bound for Gravesend in order to embark on the ship *Northumberland*, under the command of Captain Gill. *Lloyd's Register of British & Foreign Shipping* for 1852 indicates that this Rangoon-built vessel was then 14 years old and owned by Richard Green, a respected shipowner and philanthropist, who operated a monthly service to Australia. It is interesting to read that on its inward journey to England in June 1852, the *Northumberland* brought with it some 17,000 ounces of gold from the new Australian gold-fields, including a single lump of gold weighing in the region of 27 pounds. The two Wragge brothers, George and William, travelled as "Unassisted Passengers", indicating they had paid their own fares. On 2 August the ship left Gravesend then sailed around the south coast, docking at Plymouth a couple of days later in order to allow more emigrants to embark. With all its passengers on board, the *Northumberland* finally departed on 14 August, and after a journey of some 92 days sailed into Port Phillip Bay at Melbourne on 14 November 1852.

Whilst in England, George Wragge jnr had trained as a chemist and druggist in Nottingham, and quickly went into the same line of business at premises in Collins Street, Melbourne. At this point in time, Melbourne was on the cusp of a massive expansion which resulted in it becoming the fastest growing city in Australia. Although Melbourne was only granted city status in 1847, the Australian Gold Rush which had begun in 1851 would see Melbourne's population of around 25,000 people rise to nearly 80,000 in 1854 and 140,000 in 1861. Furthermore, Victoria, formerly a part of New South Wales, had become a colony in its own right in 1851, with Melbourne as its capital. George Wragge was an industrious individual and evidently keen to embrace new ideas, for in late 1857 he was using his chemist's shop to exhibit samples of dugong ("sea-cow") oil, which it was thought the medical profession might adopt as an effective alternative to cod-liver oil. Wragge's standing in his local community was such that just eight years after his arrival in Australia, he was elected to Melbourne City Council as a councillor for La Trobe ward.



Fig. 2: George Wragge, Mayor of Melbourne, Australia, 1864/5, the son of George and Maria Wragge of Chaddesden, Derbyshire.

Meanwhile in Nottinghamshire, George Wragge snr and his wife Maria had decided to retire from the business of running their large farm at Toton, and in March 1857 notices of their impending farm-stock sale began to appear in the local press advising potential purchasers as to the quality of their 51 cattle, 144 sheep, 10 horses, pigs, poultry, etc. Once the sale was concluded, the Wragges were at last able to move to their new home in Derbyshire, a six acre smallholding back in Chaddesden, the place Maria knew well from her childhood.

George Wragge jnr continued to prosper in Australia. In 1862 he was appointed President of the Pharmaceutical Society of Victoria. Two years later, in October 1864 he wrote to his parents in Chaddesden to tell them that he had just been elected "Right Worshipful the Mayor of Melbourne" and enclosed a photograph of himself "which you had better get a Photographer in Derby to mount". He went on to say, "this office [of Mayor] I have obtained by industry and straightforward honesty, and I think it is something even for parents to be proud of, when their son obtains such a position as I have done, especially as I arrived in the Colony with so small a capital to start with." To give his parents some idea of the financial importance of Melbourne, he told them the corporate revenues of his adopted city amounted to between £70,000 and £80,000 per annum. George was duly installed as mayor at a ceremony on 9 November at which he formally took the oath of office and was inducted to the mayoral chair by his predecessor (Fig. 2). As it would be a few years before the establishment of a reliable telegraphic link between Australia and England, George's letter home travelled by sea and didn't arrive in Chaddesden until Christmas-time when, no doubt, it quickly became the talk of the village.

One of George Wragge's first duties was to inspect the state of Melbourne's boundaries. This involved a horseback journey of some 23 miles which was begun by the outgoing mayor and his officials at the end of October 1864 and concluded by George Wragge (officially acting as mayor-elect since it was just prior to his formal installation) a few days later in early November. The Melbourne Incorporation Act of 1842 specified that in order for the boundaries of the various wards to be known and maintained, the corporation "shall cause to be set up ... permanent and conspicuous boundary marks of iron, wood, stone, or other durable material" and furthermore that every three years "a circuit of perambulation of the metes and bounds of the said town and of the several wards into which the same is divided shall be made by the Mayor accompanied by the Town Clerk", the latter noting any changes in a special Boundary Book. Should a Mayor or Town Clerk neglect to perform the prescribed duties they were to forfeit the sum of twenty pounds. Does the current Lord Mayor of Melbourne still continue this triennial inspection, I wonder?

The 1850s witnessed at least five members of the Wragge family making the move to Australia in search of a more prosperous life. We have already seen how first Thomas, and then his brothers, George and William, departed for the southern hemisphere. Their brother, Henry, who had passed his Royal Veterinary College exam in 1851 while living in Nottinghamshire, also emigrated and as a veterinary surgeon was involved in examining the colony of Victoria's first-ever case of bovine pleuropneumonia near Melbourne in 1858, shortly after arriving in the continent. He died in August 1898. After settling in Australia, William journeyed back to England, where he married his wife at St. Luke's Church, Derby, in 1878 and then returned to Australia, where he died in July 1895. Thomas Wragge married his bride in Melbourne in August 1861 and probably made the greatest financial success of all the brothers; as a sheep-grazier he acquired significant areas of land at Yallambie, near Heidelberg, Victoria, and Deniliquin in New South Wales. After his death in May 1910, his estates in Victoria and New South Wales were valued for probate purposes at £107,741 and £188,673 respectively ... Clearly Thomas had done very well for himself! Maria Wragge's own brother, William Morledge White, also married into the Wragge family, and in October 1852 his son (Maria's nephew), William White, who was then farming Meadow Farm at Chaddesden, decided to sell up and move to Australia, where he worked (like his grandfather) as a surveyor ... a later Australian newspaper recording the fact that he married in Richmond (a Melbourne suburb) in 1862. He died in North Brighton, Victoria, in May 1885, aged 57.

George Wragge jnr certainly left his mark on an ever-expanding Melbourne, for he was instrumental in the construction of a new town hall, reducing the cost of lighting the city, and carrying out various sanitary reforms. In August 1870, a presentation was made to him of a purse of 210 sovereigns and a handsome silver claret jug with its front embossed in gold with a depiction of the town hall, which had been subscribed by the people of Melbourne in recognition of the efforts he had made on their behalf. When he died in May 1889, aged 64, George Wragge, the former Mayor of Melbourne, had been twice married (his first wife died in 1862) and left a large family.



Fig. 3: Wragge family memorial, St. Mary's Churchyard, Chaddesden, Derbyshire.

Much of the village of Chaddesden known to George and Maria Wragge, the parents of the four pioneering brothers who emigrated to Australia, is now long gone. Meadow Farm where Maria spent some of her childhood years was demolished after 1973 and the new A52 Nottingham Road diversion constructed along the line of the old canal, but a memorial stone (Fig. 3) to the Wragge family remains to this day in St. Mary's churchyard, recording the deaths of George and Maria (in 1873 and 1887 respectively), and their three children who stayed behind in England, sons John (1891) and Charles (1874), and daughter Maria (1891).

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