

A Drowning in Cundletown

Henry Cecil Blunden 1832 – 1878
Elizabeth Ellen Fowles 1834 – 1914

Brixton beginnings

Henry Cecil Blunden was born in Brixton, Surrey, England in 1832. He was the youngest of five children of **Emblin Curnow** and **George Blunden**, a tailor from Portsea, Hampshire. At this time Brixton was a small village in the district of Lambeth to the south of London and the Thames River. The area had been connected to London by the construction of the Vauxhall Bridge in 1816, and the opening of Brixton Prison in 1820 led to a boost in Brixton's economy. More and more people had migrated here from rural areas to improve their job prospects and numbers of small cottages began to cluster around this area.



View of St. Mary's Lambeth from Lower Fore Street c1860. Henry Blunden and Elizabeth Fowles married here in 1854. Source: Lambeth Landmark

In January 1841 when Henry was just 9 years old his mother died of consumption (tuberculosis). The family were living at 2 York Street Lambeth, and when the 1841 census was taken later that year in June, the family consisted of Henry, his father George, his three sisters and 25-year-old Mary Ann Blunden, possibly George's young second wife or another relative.

Henry is not at his father's address in 1851 when the next census was taken. There is a record that year of an 18-year-old Henry Blundell (a common misspelling of the name), baker from Clapham (in Lambeth) Surrey, lodging in Shrewsbury, Shropshire. Our Henry was a baker by trade, so this could be him travelling about, trying to make a living.

Elizabeth Ellen Fowles was born in 1834, also in Surrey either in Croydon or Brixton. Her father was **William Fowles**, a labourer from Croydon in Surrey, who became a carman (carter) and a shopkeeper. Elizabeth's mother was **Mary Ann Gatton** whose birthplace may have been Lewes in Sussex. Elizabeth was the fourth of eight children and had grown up around the Brixton Hill area of Lambeth. In 1841 she was living with her parents, older brother William, younger sister Alice and baby brother Henry at Retreat, Clapham. She is not with her family on the 1851 census and so would have been working and boarding elsewhere.

Henry's occupation was a baker when he married Elizabeth at St. Mary's Parish Church Lambeth on September 3rd 1854. The ceremony was conducted by C.L. Alexander the church curate, and the witnesses were Elizabeth's sister Alice Fowles and Charles Clapp, the husband of her eldest sister Sarah Ann.



St. Mary's with Lambeth Palace from the Thames c1866. Henry Blunden and Elizabeth Fowles married here in 1854. Source: Lambeth Landmark

The lure of gold

A few years earlier in 1849 Elizabeth's older brother William had emigrated to Australia with his wife Hannah and had settled in the Geelong area of Victoria. Perhaps this inspired Henry and Elizabeth, for within a week the newlyweds had travelled from London to Plymouth and embarked upon their journey to Australia. They travelled aboard the ship *Standard* arriving in Adelaide on December 17th 1854. This was one of many ships bringing passengers from England to South Australia under the assisted passage scheme. The voyage was three months duration, conditions were basic and 14 deaths occurred on the trip, mostly babies and children. A report stated 'The emigrants were well selected and were a very eligible class of persons.'¹

The cost of the passage was determined by the applicants' occupations so Henry and Elizabeth would have been placed in the second category of workers who had to pay £5 each. This fee included the provision of bedding and eating utensils for the journey. The fare from England was cheaper to South Australia than Victoria and emigrants were led to believe Adelaide was closer to the goldfields than was Melbourne. The ship's register lists Henry as a miner, so it is clear therefore he came for the gold. From Adelaide they travelled overland to settle at Geelong where at Sharp Street Chilwell on July 6th 1855 Elizabeth gave birth to their first son George Henry. Henry had to start somewhere to provide for his new family, so we find on baby George's birth registration that Henry's occupation is given as a painter.



Chilwell, Geelong from Newton Hill, where Henry and Elizabeth Blunden lived in 1855. Photo: J. Norton 1866. Source: State Library of Victoria

The Blundens seem to have soon moved from Geelong but exactly where and when is difficult to say for sure. There is no birth registration found of their second child Alice Charlotte whose marriage and death certificates state she was born in 1857 at Kyneton. According to a petition² to the government made in 1857 the family were living in Denis Street Kyneton when Elizabeth was a signatory (on behalf of her husband) on this petition. The Kyneton Historical Society has found there to be no Denis Street today in the town and no record of the Blundens. So where was Henry when Elizabeth signed the petition? Another record of 1857 is from St. Leonard's, a small town on the Bellarine Peninsular near Geelong, which gives the name Blunden amongst the names of landowners who 'bought up big' in this town.

Following the diggings

In 1858, Elizabeth would have received word from England that her father had died. The next year her second daughter Mary Ann (Marion) was born at Ararat in 1859 and this is at the time of the Pleasant Creek (Stawell) gold rush near Ararat. Henry's occupation is a baker on Mary Ann's birth certificate but maybe he was also trying to find gold as well as profit from the influx of miners. However, things may not have worked out as there is a Geelong Court record reported in the Government Gazette, of a Henry Blunden, a farmer of Bellarine being insolvent in June 1861. Could this be our Henry?

If this is our Henry, he obviously had made a decision to try his luck elsewhere as their fourth child Emblin Georgina was born at Craigie (near Maryborough in the central goldfields) in 1861. The next children were born in this district, possibly whilst living at the same place. The name of the registration district changed several times – Craigie, McCallum's Creek and Majorca being the one area at the time. Ellen (Helen) Elizabeth was born in 1863 at McCallum's Creek³; and those born or registered at Majorca were Frederick William in 1865, **Frances Annie** in 1867 and Hester Jane in 1869. Henry's occupation is given as a miner on the birth certificate of his daughter Frances.



A main street of Majorca where the Blundens lived in the 1860s. Photo: W. Hardegen c1866.
Source: State Library of Victoria

Clunes and back to baking

Perhaps Henry had some mining success as by 1869-70 the family had moved to nearby Clunes, a growing gold mining town near Maryborough. Here Henry returned to his original trade and opened a bakery. An advertisement in the *Clunes Guardian and Gazette* of November 1st 1869 reads:

H. BLUNDEN,
Bread and Biscuit Baker,
RESPECTFULLY announces that he has
COMMENCED BUSINESS in those
Premises lately occupied by
MR R. HARVEY,
NEXT WASHINGTON HOTEL,
Fraser-street, Clunes.
And solicits a share of public patronage.

Daughter Hester is listed in the Clunes vaccination records for 1870 and Henry is shown in the rate books as renting from George B. Pearce, a shop and dwelling in Fraser Street, the commercial centre of Clunes. In 1871 he is also renting a house, bakery and land in Camp Street from John Davies. In June of 1872 another advertisement appears in the *Clunes Guardian and Gazette*, this time from Elizabeth:

PORT PHILLIP BAKERY,
CAMP HILL.
ELIZABETH BLUNDEN
DEALS to inform the public of Clunes that the business at the above premise w
carried on as usual by her, who will be
Grateful for a Share of Public Patronage.
Remember the Address—
PORT PHILLIP BAKERY,
CAMP HILL, CLUNES

And later in September that year:

MRS BLUNDEN,
BAKER & PASTRYCOOK
TOP OF CAMP HILL.
PARTIES Supplied. Patronage respect-
fully solicited.

The rate books of 1872 show Elizabeth renting a house, bakery and land on Talbot Road, also from John Davies. There appear to be no records of rateable property showing the Blundens for 1873, and this was the year their last child Benjamin John was born. However, the Victorian Government Gazette shows Henry had a contract to provide rations for the prison in June that year. The last mention of Henry in Clunes' records is the rate books of 1874 that show he was still renting the house, land and bakery in Camp Street.



The Port Philip Gold Mining Company's Claim and the Township of Clunes c1869 showing Lower Fraser Street where the Blundens rented in the 1870s. Source: Clunes Historical Society

Fatal fall at the Manning River

Sometime around 1875 Henry decided to search for work elsewhere and went alone to New South Wales - rumour has it to avoid paying some debts. For in this year Elizabeth, still a baker, was renting a shop and land from Esther Martin in Creswick Road Clunes. The 1876 voters' roll does not show Henry, but shows Elizabeth, no occupation given, with rateable property – a house and land in Angus Street.



Blunden descendants with the last remnants of the old pier from which Henry Blunden fell at the Manning River Cundletown NSW
Photo: Euan McGillivray 2013

Henry found his way to Cundletown (near Taree, NSW) where he set himself up again as a baker. However, it was reported in the *Maitland Mercury* that on January 19th 1878 whilst fishing at the Manning River at Cundletown, Henry slipped off the wharf and drowned. Another story is that his creditors caught up with him and a fight ensued during which Henry fell into the river. The inquest verdict was 'accidentally drowned'. The newspaper stated that Henry, a baker, had only been in the town a few months and that nobody knew where his relatives were. Several people tried to rescue him however he had been in the water about half an hour. His death certificate gives his name as both Blunden and Blundell. A few weeks later Henry's wife Elizabeth had been contacted and his death registered. He was only 46 years old when he died and is buried in the Cundletown cemetery, Wesleyan section. Over the years, river flooding has washed away many of the old graves such as Henry's.

Widow and laundress

Elizabeth, now in her mid-forties, was left to carry on. Five of her children were under the age of 15, the youngest being five years old. The next record of Elizabeth at Clunes is in 1879 in the rate books where we find her listed as renting a house and land in Templeton Street from Sarah Smith. Elizabeth's occupation is now a laundress. This year Elizabeth first became a grandmother with the birth of Cecil George Blunden (son of George Henry and Amelia) at Stawell, in Victoria.

Melbourne and marriages

Not long after Henry's death, Elizabeth and her children made their way to Melbourne. In 1881 her daughter Alice Charlotte married Charles Robinson Townley, a brewer from Castlemaine, at St Matthew's Church in Prahran, and the marriage certificate states Alice was living with her parents in Windsor. Even though her father had been deceased for 3 years, he is named on the certificate and his occupation is given as a confectioner. The witnesses were Alice's eldest brother George Henry, and her sister Marion (Mary Ann).



The woman seated on the left is believed to be Elizabeth Blunden visiting the Townley family in 1893. Her daughter Alice is the young woman seated second from the right next to her husband Charles Townley. Source: Cathy Hawkins

A few years later many weddings followed: In 1887 Elizabeth's daughter Ellen (Helen) Elizabeth a dressmaker, was married by a Baptist minister to George Sidderfin Freat, a carpenter, at Elizabeth's home at 22 Alexandra Street South Yarra. The witnesses were the bride's sister Emblin and William Fowles (either the bride's uncle or cousin). In 1888 daughter Emblin Georgina, also a dressmaker, was married by a Presbyterian minister to Neil Henry Gibson, a carter, at Kensington Road South Yarra and her address was 124 Punt Road South Yarra. Frances Annie, the bride's sister, was a witness along with their brother Frederick William. The *Sand's and McDougall's Directory* also has Elizabeth at this address in 1889 and also as a grocer there in 1890, but the rate books of 1889 have her address as Alexandra Street South Yarra which is also where her daughter Frances Annie, a dressmaker, married **Ernest George Henry Box**, a painter and decorator. Emblin was a witness to this marriage as

was the groom's sister Rosina Box. The couple were married by a Presbyterian minister at Elizabeth's home.

In 1890 another of Elizabeth's daughters, Hester, also a dressmaker, married Hugh Paul McConville at 'the residence of Mrs. Blunden, Alexandra Street South Yarra'⁴. This ceremony was conducted by a Baptist minister and the witnesses were the bride's brother-in-law Neil Gibson and the bride's sister Ellen (Helen).

Son seeks utopia

In 1893 Elizabeth farewelled her eldest son George, his wife and family of five children as they set off for Paraguay to be part of an experimental utopian commune known as New Australia. George and his family would return in 1896 and live in Fitzroy/Carlton where his wife Amelia set up a confectionary business and gave birth to five more children.



Above: Elizabeth's eldest son George and his family were among these passengers aboard the *Royal Tar* in 1893, leaving for Paraguay to establish 'New Australia'. Source: State Library of NSW

Below: Elizabeth's youngest son Benjamin Blunden (1873-1964)
Source: Shirley Rawlings



Elizabeth's two youngest sons married later: Frederick William, a farmer, married Rose Beatrice Linda Simpson in 1897 at St. Alban's Church of England, Armadale. Ernest Box was a witness as well as Frederick Simpson, probably the bride's brother. Frederick and Rose lived in Gippsland and started the Blunden Pastoral Company.

Benjamin John, Elizabeth's youngest child was a bit of a wanderer turning his hand to many ways of earning a living, including boat builder, carpenter, blacksmith, gardener and baker. He married Amelia Constance Shaw (her second marriage) in 1905 and they lived in a mudbrick house he built at Amphitheatre in the Pyrenees area of Victoria. His step-granddaughter Joan Dwyer, who grew up as his step-daughter, mentions him fondly in her memoirs *A Sense of Belonging*.



From his step-granddaughter's description, I believe this to be the mudbrick house built by Benjamin Blunden at Amphitheatre Victoria. The mudbricks covered over with fibrocement sheeting at a later date, apart from the out building to the left. Photo: Euan McGillivray 2021

A life of hard work

A life of hard work and instability, Elizabeth's experience must have been typical of many migrant women of her time: she and Henry made the long voyage across the world leaving their parents and birthplace to begin a new life. They made the difficult journey overland from Adelaide to Geelong and then moved around Victoria through the rough and primitive goldfields rearing a large family and making an unpredictable living. Then Elizabeth had to cope with the tragedy of Henry's premature death and providing for her family alone. Finally, she came to the suburbs of Melbourne where many of her children married and raised their families.

Elizabeth died at the age of 80, an old age pensioner, on June 11th 1914 at *Waikola* Truganini Road, Carnegie. The cause of death was heart failure. She was survived by all nine of her children and is buried at St. Kilda Cemetery. In her grave is also a two-week-old baby, Jack Gibb, her grandson who died in 1893, child of her daughter Mary Ann (Marion). Her daughter Frances Annie Box and the ashes of her grandson Leonard Box were later buried with her.

St. Kilda Cemetery - The grave of Elizabeth Ellen Blunden, her daughter Frances Annie Box, and the ashes of her grandson Leonard Box. Also in this grave, 2 week old Jack Gibb, Elizabeth's grandson, son of her daughter Marion Gibb (nee Blunden). Photo: Ann Hurley 2008



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2020

See my story **Crafts and Trades** for more about their daughter Frances Annie Blunden.

See my story **Utopian Dreamer** for more about their son George Henry Blunden.

hurleyskidmorehistory.com.au

Notes:

¹ South Australian Government Gazette 1855.

<http://www.theshipslist.com/ships/australia/standard1854.shtml>

² 1857 petition from Kyneton residents to the Government of Victoria to proclaim Kyneton as a Municipal District (*Victoria Government Gazette* No. 107 Friday September 18th 1857)

³ information from Bob Blunden, descendant

⁴ Victorian Marriage certificate for Hester Jane Blunden

Other resources:

Birth Death and Marriage certificates - General Register Office England

Blunden, Bob - Vic., Blunden descendant

Brixton history <http://www.urban75.org/brixton/history/history.html>

Clunes Historical Society Vic.

Dwyer, Joan - *A Sense of Belonging* (date unknown)

England and Wales Census Records (Ancestry.com)

Hawkins, Cathy - Tas. Australia, Blunden descendant

History of Lambeth www.ideal-homes.org.uk/lambeth

Kyneton Historical Society Vic.

Lambeth history and information www.landmark.lambeth.gov.uk

Molong Historical Society NSW

Rawlins, Shirley - Australia, Blunden descendant

Souter, Gavin *A Peculiar People - The Australians in Paraguay* (1981)

Trove (National Library of Australia)

Victorian Birth, Death and Marriage certificates

Victorian Digger-Pioneer Index

Victorian Government Gazette