CHAPTER 3 – LIVING IN EARLY CANTERBURY

Life in Canterbury

The Pannett’s first views of Canterbury must have been very similar to those portrayed in James Fitzgerald’s 1852 watercolour of the Plains and Christchurch from the top of the Port Hills. That painting is supplemented by ‘Pilgrim’’s early description:

I now go on to our first view of the Plains of Canterbury. A party of us made up our minds to climb to the top of the Bridal-Path; the track lay up what might fairly be called a mountain, so after a stiff walk, we were glad to stop, and admire the view; in fact the admiration of the landscape (behind us) necessitated our stopping so often that our leader said, “Come this will not do, we shall never get to the top at this rate, let us take a good rest, and start again.” We were all thankful to do so, and sat and lay down in various comfortable attitudes. Some amongst us offered a sacrifice to St. Nicotina, and others did a little sketching. After a short rest, we soon reached the top of the hill, and had our first view of the Canterbury Plains, and our future home. How shall I describe them? In the far distance lay an Amphitheatre of snow-capped mountains, and a vast yellowish plain without the smallest apparent inequality on its surface, lay stretched between them and the sea; there were also several dark patches, which proved to be Riccarton, Papanui, Rangiora, Ohoka, and the Oxford Bushes, and also some rivers which, from their flowing in deep channels, made but a small show in the distance. From one point we could see the pretty bay of Port Cooper on one side, and on the other the grand Plains, with forty miles of surfy beach, the whole backed up by our glorious Southern Alps.

The first view of the Plains was rather disappointing to English eyes, that is, we missed the greenness which the growth of grass in a country long cultivated exhibits, but soon we grew to like our yellow tussocks, when we found what feed it made for cattle and sheep; and only the other day I was talking to a friend who told me, that the hares that were found on the Plains where the tussock still grows, were stronger and more vigorous than those fed on English grass, and gave better sport for coursing. 1

Mary Pannett-Richards recounted in old age her parents’ decision to climb over the Port Hills by the Bridle Path:

“…The two oldest boys Henry and Tom were big enough to do the climbing and to help with the younger children. Bedding for immediate use had to be carried as well as the eighteen month old baby. We must remember this was a perfectly new land quite without civilisation. Therefore there was nothing to be had for use but what they had brought with them…

Mother had told us of taking the older boys with her the first Sunday afternoon and climbing to a hill top to get their first glimpse of what was to be their new home. All they could see from there were the forest trees and pools of water as in that hemisphere September is a spring month. There were also a few huts which were inhabited. We can imagine how the little mother’s heart must have quailed as she would think of the good, well-to-do home of her girlhood.” 2

Besides the uncertainties about where they were to live, how the native inhabitants, the Maori, would treat them was also a concern. Mary found them not nearly as fierce as they looked and a family tale of one Solomon is recounted. Apparently he made friends with Thomas (sen), who was equally keen to make friends with the Maori. Mary recalls:

“Solomon invited father to go to Kaiapoi where he himself lived and teach Maori children to learn English, in return Solomon would teach him the Maori language. I can easily imagine something of what a fascinating offer this would be to a man of father’s ambitions and aspirations. A devout and devoted Christian man, he had longed in his early life to become a foreign missionary. This would have been the opportunity of his life to teach native children and adults alike, not only the
English language but also the love of God. Obviously this couldn’t be, however, since money must be earned to support the growing family. He held the friendship of Solomon for some months although unable to comply with his wishes in the first place.”


The Canterbury Association’s settlement scheme never worked quite as intended, although the intention of an agricultural settlement remained a dominant goal of the settlers. Pastoralism proved a more viable economic system and rapidly became the major form of land use. Both the New Zealand Company and the Canterbury Association were brought to an end by the New Zealand Constitution Act 1852. They were replaced by the Provinces, each run by an elected Superintendent and Council. James Fitzgerald was elected the first Superintendent of Canterbury when Provincial Government was established. Previously he had bought the pastoral license for Springs Station, where he had resided for a time.

Leaving the port with a large family must have been an onerous task. Again ‘Pilgrim’ conveys some of the flavour of the situation:

“We took some food so as to refresh the inner man, and started up the Bridal-path, and along the top of the hill, and down the spur, to the river Heathcote. By this time we sat down to rest our weary limbs. Bill Holland, our guide and handy man, was invaluable, he lighted a fire and made tea, and we had a jolly lunch; we then crossed the river by a small boat; we had a long and tiring walk through tussocky grass, wild Irishman (a prickly shrub that grew in great abundance). At last my mother said to Bill, “When shall we get to Christchurch?” he answered with a smile, “Why, ma-am, you are in the middle of Christchurch now.” She looked round in dismay, there was nothing to be seen but the Land Office, a large tent (Dr Barker’s), a large expanse of plain, dotted here and there with Ti palms,
quantities of tutu and fern, gullies, creeks and swamps all around, and nothing but a narrow track to
guide us; such was Christchurch in 1851. For the next three or four months we were busy getting on to our respective sections of land, building
fencing, and making gardens, so that in a short time, the Plains began to look populated, houses, “V”
huts, tents, and lean-to’s were springing up in all directions. We were very sociable then, and used to
visit one another, but generally in the evening, when the day’s work was over. It was always open
house with everyone, and our friends would walk in quite sure of a hearty welcome; we always carried
a lantern when we went out in the evening, as we should certainly have lost our way without, there
were so few landmarks. Our life in those days was very pleasant, although there was plenty of hard
work and a dearth of comforts.”

Family tradition holds that Thomas and his family shared a hut in Hagley Park with Dean Jacobs’ family Early Christchurch was primitive as shown by John Durey’s painting of ‘The Bricks’(1851), where
daughter Harriet maintained the family first lived.  


Another Fitzgerald painting (12.) shows the still undeveloped landscape. Thomas’ initial job was
working for John Deans at Riccarton (13.) and then on another farm near Ferry Road (shown in
illustration 10, leading from the Port Hills to Christchurch).
Early farming around Christchurch was largely mixed farming. By 1853 some 200 hectares were cultivated in grain and potatoes and another nearly 25 hectares in gardens, with nurseries flourishing in producing fruit trees and shrubs. Wage earning settlers also quickly began their own little farms, often supplementing family income with sales of milk or cheese, often produced from leased cattle. Most of the land settled was within ten miles of Christchurch and relatively swampy, but potentially more fertile than the drier and lighter tussock plains. Then Thomas leased Newbiggin Farm of 50 acres at Upper Riccarton, about seven miles from Christchurch, from C. J. W. Cookson. The lease was for six years, which were probably 1857-1862. During that period Thomas (Sen), Henry and Thomas (jun) of Fendall town, as it was described, were enrolled in the Christchurch Militia. They had begun their family tradition of service in their new land.

**Church Attendance**

Thomas has been described as one of the first Baptists in Christchurch, together with Thomas Lewis and his wife. In the New Zealand *Census of Population* of November 1851 there were only 19 Baptists in the Canterbury block compared to 2253 Anglicans. Besides the Pannetts there were perhaps 3 or 4 other families of Baptists.

At first the Pannetts worshipped with the Anglicans at St Michael and All Angels, a humble V-hut, but the only church in Christchurch. Thomas was for a time the bellringer. Two first-hand accounts of this period survive. John Avis Pannett recalled the family’s second church and walking with his father to early gatherings of Baptists in a small house church near what is now Fitzgerald Avenue.
It was over four miles across the unformed tracks of early Christchurch. The other account comes from the Pannett’s future son-in-law, Thomas Adams. He recalls their first meeting in 1862:

“It was my good fortune to meet Mr Pannett the second day after my arrival in Canterbury and the only day I ever carried a swag. Mr Pannett had been more than ten years in Canterbury and as communication with England was not what it is today, he much appreciated meeting one who was familiar with the Baptists of England and one who had heard Mr Spurgeon so recently, so he gave the swagger a shakedown for the night and in the morning offered him employment at £1 per week and board...I have always recognised and been thankful for the Providence that guided my steps and led me to the home of Mr Pannett.”

Lincoln and district

While Thomas Adams was working for Thomas Pannett, moving further out of Christchurch began to be contemplated. Under the system of land administration adopted by the Province of Canterbury, the successor to the Canterbury Association, settlers could select land that was only subject to a Pastoral lease and apply the Land Office to purchase it. The lessee had a right of pre-emption to buy it themselves within a limited period, if they so wished. Generally pastoralists were not allowed to cultivate the land they had leased except to grow crops to feed their livestock.
Land Regulations for Canterbury

“With the exception of reserves for towns and for special public purposes, all the lands in the province are open for sale at £2 an acre. There is a limit as to the form of the sections, to prevent an undue monopoly of frontage, but none as to size from twenty acres upwards. The purchaser chooses his land wherever he pleases, describing it at the Survey Office with reference to some features or objects indicated on the map; and upon payment of the purchase money, immediate possession is given by means of what is called a “License to Occupy;” a surveyor is sent to lay off the section as soon as possible afterwards, and the Crown Grant then issues. This instrument conveys in a few simple words the land in question to the purchaser, “his heirs and assigns, for ever,” is issued by the Governor under the seal of the colony, and constitutes a title free from every possible doubt or difficulty.

Until applied for to be purchased, the waste lands may be rented from the Crown for pasturage purposes. The rent is almost nominal, the maximum amount for a 20,000 acre run being £62. 10s per annum. All the land known to be available for these purposes, has been long since taken up in runs varying from 5,000 to 50,000 acres, and is stocked with sheep and cattle. The pasturage licenses are renewable from year to year until 1870, until the year the Waste Lands Ordinance provides, that the terms of the holding shall not be altered. The license gives no kind of title to the soil, and, with exception of small blocks of land from 50 to 250 acres, upon which the run-holder may have erected buildings or other improvements, a purchaser may at any time buy wherever he pleases; over these the run-holder has a pre-emptive right for six weeks after the application to purchase has been made by any one else, and if he does not exercise this right within that period, the first applicant may take it.

The interests of the agriculturists and the run-holders are distinct, but they do not conflict. The latter holds the pending it’s being required for the superior purposes of cultivation, and the terms upon which he holds it do not interfere with the acquisition of it by others for those purposes. In the meantime it is turned to valuable account. The wool export of Canterbury was about £20,000 in 1855, in 1860 it reached £180,000, and it is increasing at a larger rate every year. This is so much clear gain to the colony, and has contributed more than any other influence to its advancement; it represents so much money imported every year, and the community is so much richer. It is hardly worth while to inquire, what would have been the present condition of the colony, without the wool export. This much is certain, that it would not have been as wealthy as it is, if agriculture alone had been depended on: and it is equally clear that it would have been neither so wealthy nor so populous, if sheep farming only had been engaged in. Each interest is benefited by the existence of the other, and so far from either the run-holder or the farmer regarding the other with suspicion or jealousy, it is the wisdom of both to concur in that course which, as far as the case admits of, will advance both these interests, rather than that either should attempt to secure special advantages to the prejudice of the other.

It might be objected that the run-holders have, in the high price demanded for the lands, an undue advantage as against the intending agriculturist; and further, that Canterbury compares unfavourably with other parts of New Zealand, in some of which land is given away to those who undertake to occupy it, and in others is sold at from 5s. to £1 per acre. These objections appear weighty at first sight, but they admit of answers.

The present price is undoubtedly prohibitory of land-jobbing on a large scale, and so it was intended to be; and in this sense it is protective as regards the run-holder, but this is an advantage rather incidental to it, than intended by it. It is protective also in another sense, as regards all future purchasers. The rate was determined by the colonists themselves through their elected representatives, each interest being fairly represented; and the object was to make it high enough to hinder the purchases of large blocks for purposes of speculation, and at the same time to make it low enough to admit of its acquisition by those who required it for bona fide occupation.”
Family tradition holds that Thomas was one of a group of men who set out to walk from Fendalton across the Plains in search of a potential farm, where both water and wood were easily obtainable. He chose a site between Lincoln and Springston another seven miles from Christchurch, which he acquired and called Southam after the property where he had been brought up in Sussex. Thomas Adams continued to work for the Pannetts after they removed to the Lincoln area.

However, Henry Pannett was the first to buy land at Lincoln. He had worked for Robert Chapman for eight years at his large run Springbank, near Rangiora, and had obviously fulfilled the ideal model of the Canterbury Association, saving enough to permit land purchases. Chapman also helped him establish a prize winning Shorthorn herd. Henry bought several selections from Fitzgerald’s Springs run, as well as six lots in Block 1 of the proposed township of Lincoln for £64. 10s.0d. The purchases of Henry Pannett are recorded in 1862, those by Thomas (sen) in 1863.

James and Fanny Fitzgerald of Springs Station provide us with pictures of what the area was like at this time. Fanny wrote to one friend when her husband was in the election for the first Superintendent of the Province of Canterbury in 1853:

“I am afraid he will be elected…which would oblige us to pass the winter in Christchurch. I have no servant so I am obliged to sweep, iron, and wash a little, attend to Amy etc. etc. We have a dairy woman but her time is entirely taken up with cheese making and butter making. We are at present making one cheese per day about 225 lbs. weight besides whey butter. I have a beautiful pony to ride. We are among the swamps near Lake Ellesmere and have a fine view of sunny mountains and the peninsula…It is very jolly up here far away from everybody and we are all very happy indeed…

He (J.F.) is suffering from rheumatism – the New Zealand complaint. We are in a great muddle, the house being quite unfinished. We are drenched in wet weather of which we had had plenty.

14. Canterbury Runs, with Springs Run highlighted in red, adapted from Acland (1975)
She added two weeks later:

“I would rather he was a cowkeeper than a superintendent” 19

After their initial period in Canterbury the Fitzgerallds had returned to England for a period for James’ health’s sake, but he was back and writing to his relation Henry Selfe Selfe from Springs Station in 1861:

“It is amazing how the place is changed. I used to drive 13 miles seeing only one or two houses and now I drive between fences and ploughed land the greatest part of the way.”20

He would have been referring to the area close to the Lincoln road from Christchurch, which had been one of the chief ways for the settlement to expand. Later he refers in another letter to the swamps around the area of his run:

“…these swamps though now passable are gradually drying out and contain the finest land.”21

Then, the following September, he writes enthusiastically of the potential of the Otago gold diggings to improve cattle sales and therefore the value of his land.22 He began to fence his property to take advantage of improved English grasses as well.

15. Mr & Mrs Fitzgerald at their house The Springs. Original photograph by Dr A C Barker, Canterbury Museum (Document ref. 19XX.2.652).
Adams has described the heavy harvest work that was endured when the Pannetts harvested their first crops:

“The harvest of 1863 was not a particularly good one, as the season had been very dry during the summer, and while we were cutting the wheat the whole plains were ablaze from the Waimakariri to the Selwyn, and from the hills to the swamps below the Springs tracks. It took Mr Pannett and myself all that we could do to keep the fire out of the crop, but fortunately the ditch and bank proved a substantial barrier, and we did manage to save the crop. Others down Shand’s Track were not so fortunate, and lost their crops. The fire passed away down to the swamp, crossed all the tracks, and was burning for months in the peat below Lincoln and Prebbleton.”

16. Thomas Adams (Baptist Archives)

Thomas Adams also tells how he and the younger Thomas Pannett had to travel all the way across the burnt plains to Kowai Bush to get timber to build a stable at Lincoln. Southam Farm was on Ellesmere Junction Road halfway between Lincoln and Springston. The Pannetts had to convert the land from its natural state to farm it. Ellesmere Junction Road provided a division between the dryer ground (to the north), which was covered in tussock, and the wetter ground (to the south), which was in toi-toi, flax and raupo.

Mary Pannett recollected the farm house and garden at Southam:

“The garden was a large one, comprising three fourths of an acre. It was surrounded with Eucalyptus trees (Blue Gums as we called them locally)…Inside this enclosure were flowering trees and shrubs, many fruit trees and flower beds, nearer the house. Fruit grew profusely. On summer evenings several members of the household were often employed gathering fruit from which preserves and jellies were made next day. The gooseberries were as large or larger than the Black Walnuts of this country, and full of sweet delicious juice…In one corner of the garden stood the beehives of which mother took great care…

The house as first built had six rooms. Two rooms downstairs and two above. Those faced the main road – though not very near the road. There were two fields between…Behind was rather a large room with roof running the other way. It was kitchen and dining room combined; that room
opened into a smaller one, used as a back kitchen. A few steps from the back door was the dairy…

17. Land acquired for Lincoln College 1877-1977 showing purchases from Pannetts with red margins and Henry’s shaded in green. Southam Farm was the remainder of the Pannet holdings at that time, located around the bend in Ellesmere Junction Road, now the University dairy farm (adaptedBlair, 1978).

Lincoln Township

The township of Lincoln had now been laid out. Not where the original maps suggested but at a crossing of the L 1 stream. From part of the freehold of Springs Station Fitzgerald cut out the sections for the township of Lincoln, with the cross streets being named after his children; those around the Anglican church, James, Edward and Fitz, and the street through Lincoln was called Gerald. The winding streets along the river were called Kildare Terrace and Leinster Terrace after his home town and county in Ireland.
When the sale was advertised in *The Lyttelton Times* on 8 November 1862, the town of Lincoln was described as being in Lincoln district, the largest agricultural district in the Province. It was not the township envisaged in Captain Thomas’s 1848 plan which the government had not proceeded with but a modified proposal:

“The site of the town of Lincoln... is on the banks of a stream known as No.1 Gully...It is situated on good dry land lying on both sides of the valley, which is at this place about twenty feet deep, having a beautiful stream of clear and delicious water running rapidly at the bottom. Two public roads meet at the stream...”

The construction of a bridge was envisaged and the development of public roads giving ready access to the wooded parts of the Port Hills for firewood was described as already allocated funding. Further, a railway connection to Christchurch was also foreseen by the vendors foreshadowing Lincoln’s later importance as a railway junction.

Adams describes an early walk around:

“There was a Lincoln township in 1863 without houses, and I remember seeing at the corners of the streets the names marked, which caused me some amusement. There was no bridge across the stream, but the creek must have been quite narrow, because I crossed it near where the bridge was afterwards built. The first bridge over the stream was a footbridge put across to allow the children to get to school. The first house I remember was a sod one with a blacksmith’s shop adjoining,...”

1. Ibid., 4-5.
3. Ibid., p.4.
4. Innes, ibid., 19-20.
5. Ibid., 21-22.
7. Adams, Harriet. Obitusry


15. Richards, ibid., p. 5: Mrs Harriet Adams, obituary


17. Penney, op. cit., p. ____.


19. (All quoted from Bohan, 2002, pp. 82-83)

20. Letter from The Springs dated 13 January 1861, quoted in The Irish Connection – J E Fitzgerald and the Springs Run (no author or date given), Lincoln Public Library, Selwyn County Council, Lincoln.

21. Ibid., 4 March 1861.

22. Ibid., 6 September 1861.


