

A JOURNEY FROM ABBOTSKERSWELL TO QUANTONG

THE STORY OF MARY JANE VENING

MARY JANE KNIGHT nee VENING
1861 – 1957

Our story begins on 11th August 1861 when 21 year old Joseph Vening married 20 year old Elizabeth Matthews. Joseph was born in Abbotskerswell, the fourth of William and Jane's seven children born in the village. Like his father and brother, John, he became a stonemason and in the later part of the 1860s both Joseph and John were working in Weston-super-Mare in Somerset and both would marry local girls. Elizabeth Matthews was born in Uphill, Somerset to James and Betsy Matthews and in 1861 was living there with her widowed father and three siblings and working as an ironer.

Joseph was a boarder with Stephen and Elizabeth Woolacott, a Kingskerswell couple with children who were also masons, who lived in St Stephens Square Weston-super-Mare. The story takes a turn at this point as Elizabeth was pregnant when they married in August 1861, and on 15th December Mary Jane was born in Uphill; it complicates the story a little as Joseph's brother John also had daughter called Mary Jane Vening! Their second child Ann was also born in Somerset, in 1864, but by 1865 Joseph and Elizabeth were back in Devon when William was born to them in Wolborough (which really meant Newton Abbot).

The Abbotskerswell Years

They had moved to Abbotskerswell by 1868 to what the 1871 census called 'Tree Cottage', in all probability this was 4 Rose Cottages, which is shown below, on the left.





MARY JANE VENING

The Abbotskerswell That Mary Jane Would Have Known



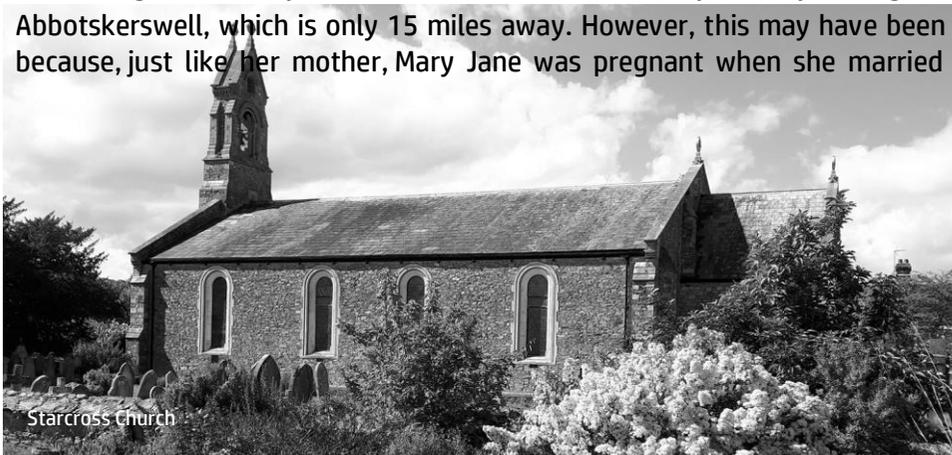
Top left and clockwise:
Buckpitt's Hill
Prospect Place
Court Farm
St Mary's Church
The Square



Henry, Joseph and George were also born in Abbotskerswell after 1868. Mary Jane would have attended the village's National School in Church House, where a relative, William Vening, had been the teacher; it should be noted that there were quite a few branches of the Vening family (or Venning as it was sometimes spelt) in the village over the years. Mary Jane's teacher would have been Miss Cornish, who went on to teach at the new village Board School in 1875. The next phase of Mary Jane's life is unclear as she disappeared from records until 1887. A common employment path for young girls when they left school at that time, usually at the age of 10, was to go into domestic service and it is possible that this occurred as she is not listed as living with her family, who had moved to a bigger house at 1 Sunny Bank by 1881. Joseph and Elizabeth remained in the village until their deaths in 1921 and 1922 respectively.

Married Life

It was not until 27th September 1887 that Mary Jane reappeared, which was when she was married in Starcross, Devon. Where she had been is not known but often the reason for not being in a census, which she was not for the 1881 one, was because the person was abroad, so it was possible that she was a servant to a family abroad, but there is no way of knowing this of course. She married Allen Knight who had been born in 1855 in the village of Offham, near Lewes in Sussex, to John and Caroline. His father was a carpenter, and by the age of 15 Allen was a halter's apprentice in Lewes. In the 1881 census he was a visitor at a Rectory in Cornwall, with no occupation given. It is something of a mystery to explain how they were both in Starcross by 1887 and it is also interesting is that they married in Starcross and not Mary's family's village of Abbotskerswell, which is only 15 miles away. However, this may have been because, just like her mother, Mary Jane was pregnant when she married

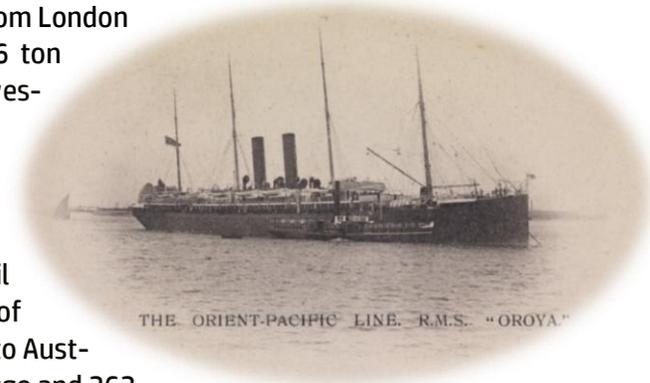


Allen, as their first child, Maud, was born in January 1888 in Kingskerswell. In 1891 the Knights were living in Bristol at 1 St Luke's Road, Bedminster, where they were listed as greengrocers. Later that year their second child, Constance, was born in Bedminster, Somerset.

Emigration to Australia

It was at this time that they must have decided to emigrate to Australia and perhaps their knowledge of fruit helped as they opted to settle in a fruit growing area. In early 1892 Allen, Mary and their two girls set sail from London

on RMS Oroya, a 3,266 ton screw propelled steam vessel, which was part of the P & O fleet. Built at Barrow in 1887, she sailed out of the port of Liverpool and could sail with a gross tonnage of 6,057 and when sailing to Australia, with a general cargo and 262



passengers, she had a crew of 160. Shipping Lines promoted the exotic aspects of a voyage to Australia via the Suez Canal and many people enjoyed the trip as an adventure and a holiday. However, diarist, George Stammers was unimpressed by his 1894 voyage on the Orient Line's 'Oroya': "People are seen at their worst on board ship and so the greed, ill manners, jealousy and unpleasant ways of many I met are, like the 'Oroya' best forgotten." With the use of steamships the journey would have taken around 40 days and in June 1892 the Knight family arrived in Melbourne. From there they took the train to Horsham before going on to their new home at Quantong in the state of Victoria, arriving on 22nd June. However, there was a complication as smallpox had been found amongst the passengers on board the Oroya and consequently the local Board of Health had to be certain that the family had been vaccinated, which fortunately they had. Their luggage was fumigated before they were allowed to travel on to their new home, but it was noted in the local paper that "they will be closely watched by the health officer, and should any symptoms of the dreaded disease make itself apparent amongst them they will of course be immediately isolated." The Knights had brought all their household chattels with them from England, which included beautiful old

vases and magnificent big picture frames with oil paintings of a country scene and beautiful children. They had purchased 47 acres of land in what was called the Quantong Irrigation Colony, where fertile land was to be created and they became some of the early pioneers of fruit growing in the area.



Life in Australia

Quantong is 14 miles south west of Horsham and was developed as an irrigation colony from 1892. Irrigation water was to be obtained from the Wimmera River, and the colony's 2000 acres was mainly composed of holdings of between 10 and 20 acres. The place name was derived from the numerous quandong trees which grew in the area but were soon cleared for farming and orchards. When the irrigation colony was promoted there was already a railway line into Horsham, by which produce could be transported to provincial or metropolitan markets.

The Quantong district was growing with a Bible Christian church, which was opened almost immediately the irrigation colony was founded, and a school which was opened in 1893. A public hall was added, along with a store and an Anglican church. The 1911 census gave the population as 196.

The Knights and the early settlers, some of whom they travelled with on the

Oroya, including the Howell family, needed the irrigation waters which would carry names like the Horsham Channel, No. 10 Channel and the Quantong Irrigation Channel; their land was close to the river. It appears that both families had planned to buy land in Queensland but were persuaded to buy in Quantong. It was a hard time for the settlers, there were problems with proof of landownership and it was to be two years before the irrigation waters arrived, which made growing crops very difficult in the early years. They had to clear the land, which was covered in plants such as the tea-tree, banksias and eucalypts, then level the sandhills and plant their trees. The first houses built were often a tea-tree shed with a thatched roof and later a house of sun-baked mudbricks would have replaced this. In the first three years, about 60 settlers and families arrived in Quantong, they were ship's carpenters, sailors, tradesmen, dairy farmers, small retailers, English countrymen, Swedes and Danes but not a practical orchardist among them!



The first school used the church building, which is shown in this photograph of c1905. Evelyn Knight is on the extreme right and Edith is shown on the third row between the two girls in the black dresses. A new purpose built school was constructed in 1908.

As soon the channels were dug the irrigationists, or orchardists as they were also called, soon began to make things work and were quickly growing apricots, peaches, plums, pears, apples and zante currants. They also needed to become businessmen to take into account where their market was and the rail transport costs, therefore in 1900 the Quantong Fruitgrowers Association was formed and until the 1950s the area's orchards were active, together with market gardens for melons, onions, pumpkins and tomatoes.

Once production had got seriously underway the orchardists made progress, although events such as the great western Victoria flood of 1909 did not help.



The houses of both the Howells and Knights were flooded and they were forced them to leave for a few days; four people died in the floods. The picture of the village's bridge over the River Wimmera, shown left, gives a good impression of the area's nature.

As Mary Jane and Allen's land developed, their family also grew, with Allen born in 1893, Evelyn in 1895, Edith in 1900 and lastly Caroline in 1904. They were all born at nearby Natimuk Hospital, whose register is shown below.

19 th March 1899	Edith	Female	Allen Knight	September 27	Mary Jane Knight
1916 Quantong	Not Present		Fruit grower	1885	nee
Shire of Wimmera			2	England	Boring
County of Boring			43 years	2	21
			3	Maud	33 years
			Lowes	Evelyn	3
			England	England	Abbotskerswell
					England

The Children

Once the family's lives as orchardists settled into its yearly pattern, the six children began to blend into life in Quantong, firstly at school, as the pictures show, and then with their own lives.

The first to fly the nest was **Maud** who married John Struthers, the son of one of the original settlers; there is a Struthers Avenue in the locality today. It looked a rather rushed affair as their first child, John was born not long afterwards at Natimuk Hospital, when Maud was only 16. Connie (**Constance**) was the next to marry, again to local man in Hurford Hughes, whose family were also early settlers who are commemorated with a road



L to R: Edith, Caroline Mary & Evelyn are pictured c1910



named after them a too. Their first child, Hurford, was born the following year in Natimuk.

Allen, shown left, had joined his father working in the Knight orchards but things changed for the family on 28th April 1916 when the young Allen decided to volunteer to join the Australian Imperial Force that was involved in The Great War in Europe. He left the shores of Australia on 11th September and sadly he would never return. His story is told in the Appendices.

Also in 1916 it was Eva (**Evelyn**) who married next, to local man James Lillywhite, with their first

child Thomas, being born in Natimuk the following year. They later moved to Mooroodu, which is south of Melbourne on Port Phillip Bay. The fourth of the girls to marry was **Edith**, who married Ronald Tonkin from Portland in 1923. Their first child, William, was born in December of that year.

When Allen had left to join the army it would appear that the work at the Quantong orchards had become too much for his father, who was 61 by that time, and it was time to retire; consequently they purchased a house on the coast, 172 Percy Street in Portland, Victoria. On 8th July 1919 the local press recorded that the Knights had sold their land to the Closer Settlement Board, who had purchased it on behalf of a soldier who had returned from the war, 37 year old Fred Symons from Inglewood.

Allen and Mary Jane, with last daughter **Caroline Mary**, continued to live in retirement in Portland until Joseph's death in 1936. Caroline stayed at home to look after her aging mother, eventually marrying after Mary Jane's death, in 1957, to local man Arthur Dodson, later the same year.

Mary Jane's great granddaughter, Jane, became a source of pleasure and companionship until Mary Jane died at the age of 95. It was Jane who contacted AbbPast to seek information on Mary Jane, as Abbotskerswell had always remained dear to her great grandmother. Jane explained to us that

Mary Jane often talked about the village to her, and in later life seemed to pine and fret about life back in England. She encouraged Jane to visit one day to make the circle complete and although this has not yet happened Jane feels close to her ancestors after working with us to uncover the family story. So Felicity, Nick and I started digging and came up with this account, which I hope tells Jane about her forbears and informs today's villagers how life has changed and how it impacted on the lives of past villagers. Jane also helped us by spending many hours discovering much of the information on Quantong that informs those of us at the Abbotskerswell end of the story, how villagers who left for far off shores, lived. It is fascinating to learn that our predecessors in the village had an impact around the world.



In 2006 the importance of the early 'irrigationists' was commemorated with this monument. It notes that "This plaque commemorates the 200 families who pioneered fruit growing in the Quantong area between 1900 and 1964."

I am grateful to Jane, Felicity and Nick for the time they have put in to allow me to tell this story. Interestingly there are a number of the descendants of Mary Jane's brother George who now live in Abbotskerswell, having returned to their roots over previous generations, so the 'Vening' story is still active here.

Peter Wade
AbbPast 2020

APPENDICES

QUANTONG IRRIGATION COLONY

HORSHAM, VICTORIA.

On the Adelaide & Melbourne Railway.

— SCALE 16 CHAINS = 1 INCH — 1891

THE
CO-OPERATIVE IRRIGATION
SOCIETY

Mercantile Society of Australia, Ltd.

Head Office: 49 Queen Street, Melbourne.
AGENCIES THROUGHOUT AUSTRALASIA.

Horticultural Allotments.

PRICE—£11 per acre, including water right to each allotment (see Society's Form of Contract), and the services of the Society's expert.

TERMS—Deposit, £2 per Acre, and £1 per acre every six months, with 6 per cent. Interest.

2½ per cent. discount allowed for cash, if paid within two months.

TOWNSHIP ALLOTMENTS.

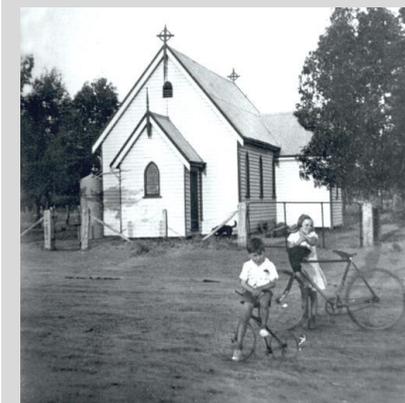
PRICE—£12 each (corner allotments £20 each).

TERMS—Half Cash, Balance in 12 months, with 6 per cent. Interest.

2½ per cent. discount for Cash.

Title Certificate.

This is the promotional material that Allen and Mary Jane would have seen in 1892 and may have encouraged them to become some of the original 'irrigationists' at Quantong. The settlement itself never developed like the plan above suggested it would, with the population of the 'locality', as it is now called, only being 310 in 2016 and with no 'township' having been developed.



In 1908 the Church of England bought an old dismantled church which was re-erected and renovated in the 'village'.



The new school is pictured here c1910. Edith Knight is pictured below the chimney stack with the pigtails and larger white collar, and Caroline Mary is in the centre, two in front of the man with the football under his arm, again with a white collar.



This appears to be the Knight house in c1917, with Allen's military portrait on the sideboard behind them (see page 8). This photograph shows, L to R: John, Allen Percival and John/Jack Struthers, Louisa Hughes, Edith and Allen senior, Maud and Constance sitting with Edwin 'Ted' Hughes.



A Boxing Day picnic in 1914 for the Lilly-whites. Eva Knight is sitting far left with her future husband Jim drinking tea behind her.



When Mary Jane and Allen Knight opted for a new life in Australia in 1892, her brothers and sisters stayed locally. In this picture George and his wife Lily, next to him, are shown outside The Thatches in Abbotskerswell, which is still in the family today.

Allen at War



Allen left his home in Quantong on 31st May to begin his training at Ballarat Camp, before moving to Broadmeadows near Melbourne. His Attestation Papers describe him as 22 years old, 5' 7¼" tall, weighing 10st 4lbs, with brown eyes and black hair.

Having completed his training he set sail for Europe on *HMAT Euripides* on 11th September 1916, arriving in Plymouth on 26th October. After seven weeks rest and training he left for France from Folkestone on *SS Arundel*. He joined the AIF's 6th Battalion on 16th February 1917 and fought with them until he was given leave in England on 16th March 1918. In this time the 6th Battalion had fought at the second

Second Battle of Bullecourt at Arras and, in the Battle of Menin Road. On returning from leave the Australians were heavily involved in the fighting on the Somme and were closing in on Albert by late August 1918. In Quantong Allen's nickname was 'Cocky' to his mates and he was well known and liked. He had managed to avoid being wounded or becoming ill in his year and a half in France, but on 23rd August 1918 his luck ran out.

When Allen was training at the Broadmeadows Camp near Melbourne like many soldiers he had a series of photographs taken by the Darge Photographic Company of Collins Street, Melbourne. Algernon Darge, set up the company in 1903 and took around 40 000 glass negatives of soldiers at the camp, mainly in his 'tent studio' that can be seen in the pictures of Allen. In 1938 around the 19 000 negatives that still existed were bought by Australian War Memorial, they weighed three tons. We know of at least four of these negatives that feature Allen, which are shown in this history of the family.



The Battalion were fighting in Belgium trying to recover Albert from the Germans. An attack was made in the early morning mist of 23rd August, to clear Germans from woodland near Roseries-en-Santerre, with Allen's Lewis Gun team being in the front of the attack; he was the No.1 gunner meaning he was the one who fired the gun. In the attack Allen's team was hit by a German shell and he was killed, aged 24, with the other three team members being badly wounded. He was eventually buried in Heath Cemetery at Harbonnieres in France, with 22 other Australians who fell that day.

The West Wimmera Mail & Natimuk Advertiser described him as "a keen, active, manly, young fellow, who played the clean game, whether on the field of battle or football ground. He was held in high esteem by the residents of Quantong and by all who knew him". His friend, and fellow soldier, Bert Edmondson wrote home saying: "I'll never forget poor old 'Cock.' We have been in the same platoon ever since we went to France, and he proved himself a soldier and a man. I can't tell just how I feel towards the good old boys with whom I have gone through so much together. We were just like a big family of brothers, and I've seen things done in the heat of battle that would turn a heart of stone."

Following Allen's death six letters were written describing what happened by the soldiers of were involved in the action. These seem to have been sent to the Australian Red Cross and were presumably forwarded to the family to help them cope with their grief. Extracts from these letters are quoted page 15.



After Allen's training in Australia he sailed to England on *HMAT Euripides*. She was a 14 947 ton ship built in 1914 by Harland & Wolff of Belfast for the Aberdeen and Commonwealth Line. This photograph is of the actual sailing that Allen was on in August 1916.

THE LETTERS

Lt. W McNichol: "Casualty was in advance on Rosieres, when he was killed by shell fire. I saw his grave at Rise Cemetery on the main Amiens, Peronne Road, about two miles from Bayonvillers. A cross was erected with his name number and unit on it."
(He was later reburied at Heath Cemetery)

Pte. A Ford: "Casualty was advancing at Rosieres when an H.E. shell landed killing him instantly. I saw his body lying in the open as I passed."

Cpl. H Simmons: "as a private in A. Company, 6th Battalion, No 1cn Lewis Gun, tall, thin, fair. I saw him hit in front of St Denis Wood on 23rd August about 6.a.m. during the advance on the wood. A shell landed amongst the gun team, he was hit all over and killed instantly, and 3 others were wounded."

Pte. T H Rusden: "I saw him practically blown to pieces by a whizz bang which lobbed right on top of him, killed instantly."

Pte. B Heathcote: "He was in B.Coy. came from Victoria and was single, and about 23. I do not know his number. He was killed by a shell at St Martin's Wood about 4 or 5a.m. while on fatigue for rations."

Pte. J W Hamilton: "I saw him just after he was killed. I knew him well. He came from Quantong, near Horsham, where I live."

NB. There are a number of inconsistencies in these accounts but they do tell us the nature of the attack he was involved in and how he died; they also reveal the chaos that these actions were fought in.



Allen's Final Journey

1. AIF's 6th Battalion's action on 23rd August, 1918
2. Buried at British Cemetery at Bayonvillers
3. Final burial at Heath Commonwealth War Grave Cemetery

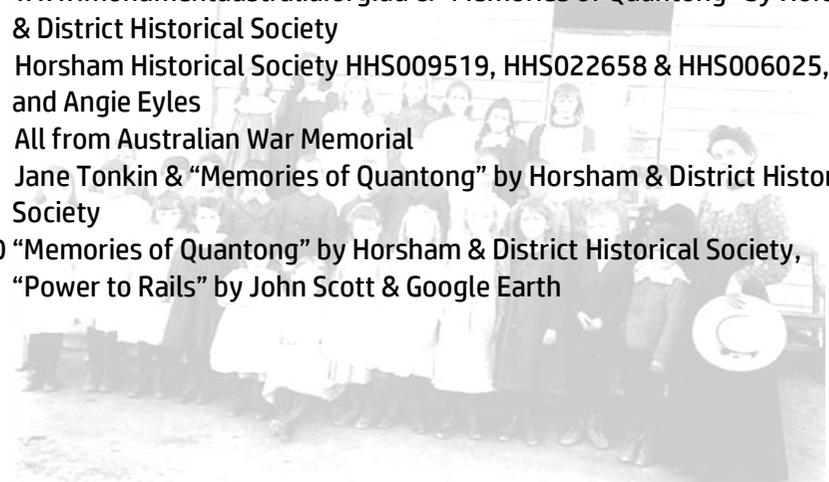


After the war Allen's father had to try to make sense of Allen's affairs. He had to write a pleading letter for the return of Allen's few personal effects, which were listed as: a YMCA wallet, photos, a notebook, a 50 centime note and a wallet. Allen had made a Will before leaving for Europe which he had left with Mary Jane, but to obtain his life insurance they had to obtain a photograph of his grave from the Army, which is shown here! They also arranged to have his campaign medals sent to them, the British War Medal and Victory Medal.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Lindsay Smith of the Horsham Historical Society for finding us a number of the photographs we have used and also Angie Eyles for photographs that she supplied. Specific photograph references are as follows:

- P1 AbbPast Photographic Archive
- P2 Ancestry & AbbPast Photographic Archive
- P3 Peter Wade
- P5 Horsham Historical Society HHS005952 & Australian War Memorial
- P6 www.monumentaustralia.org.au & "Memories of Quantong" by Horsham & District Historical Society
- P7 Horsham Historical Society HHS009519, HHS022658 & HHS006025, and Angie Eyles
- P8 All from Australian War Memorial
- P9 Jane Tonkin & "Memories of Quantong" by Horsham & District Historical Society
- P10 "Memories of Quantong" by Horsham & District Historical Society, "Power to Rails" by John Scott & Google Earth





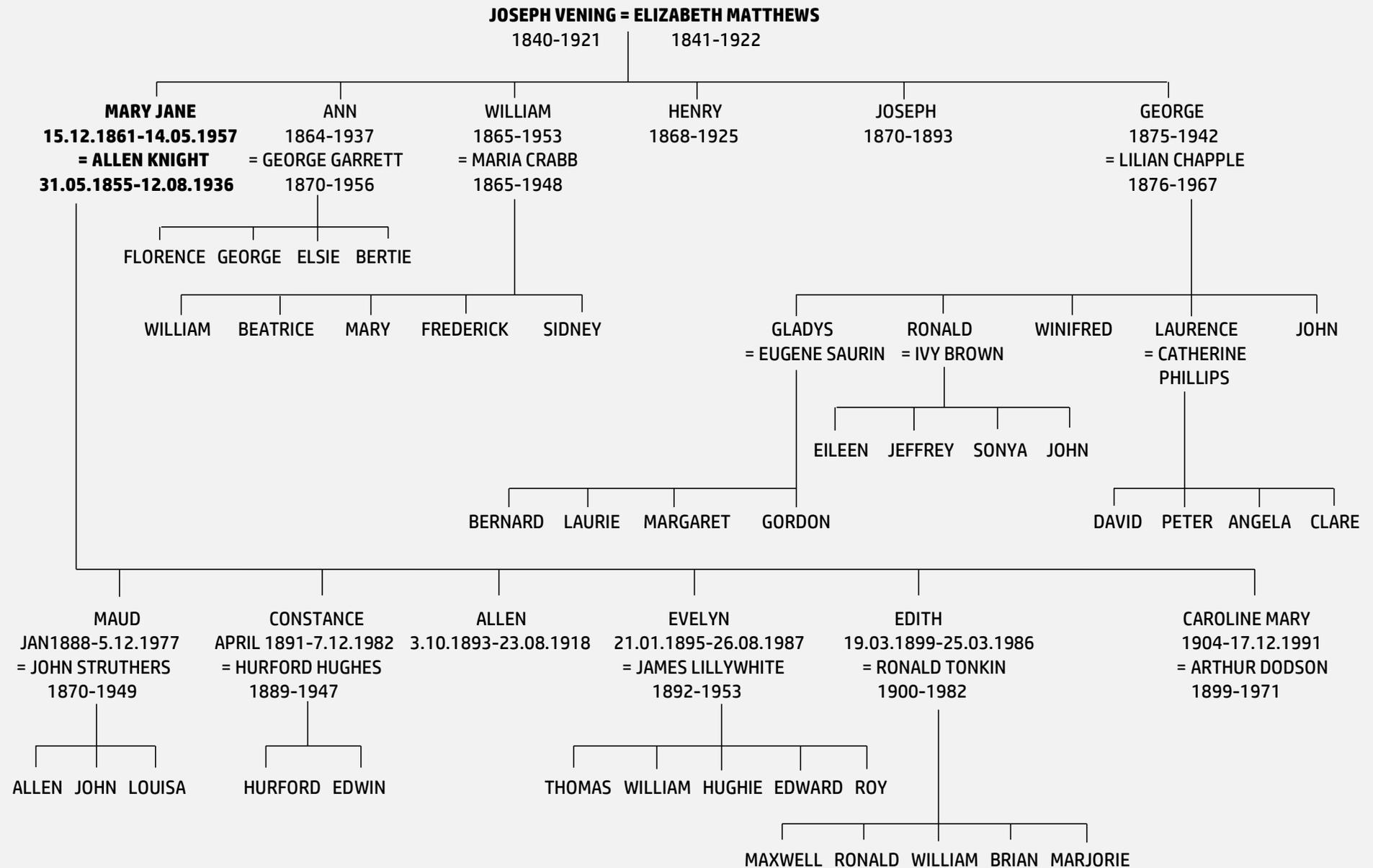
These photographs give an impression of life in Quantong over the last 100 years.

The Horsham to Noradjuha railway (known as the Balmoral Line) was opened on 25th August 1887. It was a single track railway with local stations that included Vectis East and Quantong, shown here. The line carried much of the fruit grown in the area until the 1930s; the line closed in 1988. The monument to the early settlers shown on page 6 is located on the site of the former station, which was also the site of the Quantong Fruitgrowers Association.



The bridge that once carried the railway over the River Wimmera in Quantong, shown above when in use, still exists today and can be seen next to the Wimmera Highway Bridge behind it. The irrigation channels that were dug to open the area up to the fruit growers are all abandoned now; here is what remains of the Horsham Channel as it crossed Pelchens Road.





NOTES: = Married to. In UK births were publicly registered in a 3 month period rather than by date.