

Dennis Family

Paul Michell, 2015.

One of the early families of Northcote. Settled in original Northcote Town (now Westgarth) south of Westgarth St.

Father – first chairman of the Borough (Jika Jika)

Son – Mayor of City of Northcote.

Contractors, builders, quarrymen, councillors, mayors, early movers and shakers.
Likely from Cornwall.

William Henry (1832 – 1909) Father . 6 boys:

Samuel (1869 - 1945)

William James (? - ?) Grocer. brother of Samuel? Maybe brother of W H.

John (? - ?)

Annie (? - ?) crèche –wife of Samuel Dennis. Lady Mayoress (Lemon).

From Oral History of Mr & Mrs Dennis, 36 Walker St, Northcote early 1983 by Jess Howard for NHCS. (Courtesy of Darebin Heritage.)

“ ... this area (36 Walker St, Westgarth that we’re on here was all stables and that for the Council, and there was all cobblestones. Across the road where the house is burnt down – the vacant block – that was all cobblestones and was for horses and carts and drays and things like that, and they used to operate the quarry. The quarry was over here in Heidelberg Road, just right next to the Merri Creek bridge there, where the park is, where the Yarra Park starts, right on Heidelberg Road, that was a bluestone quarry. They built the Rechabite Hall opposite the Town Hall in Westbourne Grove.

“Well, great-grandfather was, oh they had a history in the Stone Mason business. They were stone masons in England and they came out here and, I’ve got half a bluestone block here somewhere, under the house I think it is, with, it’s broken in half so only half the message is there. They’ve written a message on it. It’s ah, ‘...Dennis rowed up the Merri Creek’; and just over the railway line just up here, behind the first house, there’s a depression (west of the train line, north of Urquhart St, south of Walker St) and they cut the bluestone out of that depression to build this house next door.

And then they went away to the Gold Rush and they made some money there, and they came back and they built the red brick part of it on the front. The bluestone was just a double-storey square.

“My grandfather, ah, was getting on in years and he couldn’t sort of keep the quarry going so he was gonna turn it over to the boys, but they were all, what would you call them, I suppose you’d call them larrikins.

“They didn’t want to continue with it, so he ended up buying quite a few farms and he

put the boys on them and they failed, and they just went to various other things from there. But most of the farms, there was one at Beaconsfield, there was two at Kulkyne, up Mildura way and, what's that part just west of Mildura?

"Ah, a pub [Bridge Inn (1871-1922)] down on the Creek here, on the north side of the Creek on the west side of High Street that used to be frequented by ah, oh – Ned Kelly – I think it was in his day. I'm not terribly sure, I think it was Ned Kelly In the early part of his (ed.) days, before he became completely notorious, the local policeman used to frequent down here ... it was a great gathering area."

Paul's note:

The Bridge Inn hotel – located west of High St on banks of Merri Ck (directly opposite Urquart St) operated between 1871-1922. Not purpose built, using an existing structure, more than likely a house. Next door was a forge for shoeing horses whilst their owners enjoyed a tippie.

In a 1933 memory of Penders Grove, an old local Medurst, claims that the bushranger Dan Morgan frequented the area. As Mad Dan Morgan lived between 1830-1865 this was the time that Pender family lived there. Thus it is highly probable that he means a later bushranger – perhaps Ned Kelly (1854-1880).

Its possible there are two connections in Northcote with Kelly – Bridge Inn (Hotel) and Penders Grove after Pender family left.

--- 000 ---

William Henry Dennis (1832-1909)

Northcote Mayor: 1884-85 & 1902-3. Councillor: 1883–1904.

In May 1853 William Dennis (likely from Cornwall district – many Dennis families lived there) arrived in Melbourne aboard the ship Earl Grey with his wife Mary. Later the same year they bought land in the first land sales of Northcote Township. These were lots 12 and 13 in Walker Street just east of High Street. They lived however in Collingwood and Carlton until the mid 1860s. By 1865 they were living in Walker Street, where Dennis's occupation was described as contractor. In 1893 he is listed as Builder.

1856 – purchases lots 12 & 13 in Govt auction of Northcote.

1868 – Living in Northcote. First rate books (1883) indicate 34 Walker St.
Late 1870s – purchases Shepherd's Patent Compositon Pavement & Stonebraking Co.

1870s – W J (son ?) joins him in Walker St.

In 1880 the Northcote Health League was formed with Dennis as an active member.

(Set up by the vicar of All Saints church.) Mainly in protest at the large number of toxic smelling industries in Northcote and Gowerville (South Preston). The League attempted to close down the large number of butchers and abattoirs operating in High Street and the immediate area. Others along the Merri Creek polluted the water. The Shire of Jika Jika was lackluster in its attempts to stop the trade, no doubt due to the strong pro butchery presence of George Plant and others. In desperation the League proposed that Northcote leave the Shire and form its own township with its own council.

William Dennis was a strong supporter of separation [of Northcote] and with local school teacher Richard Tobin taking a leading role in the push, Northcote became a township in 1883. In the elections held in July of that year William Dennis polled 291 votes, second only to the “grand old man” of Northcote politics, Edwin Bastings (owner of the General Store).

In 1884 William Dennis became Northcote’s second Mayor. He was to serve a second term as Mayor in 1902-3. He left Council in 1905 after 32 years of serving the people of Northcote.

Dennis’s contributions to Northcote did not rest solely with his Council contributions, a staunch (Primitive ?) Methodist; he played a strong role in the Northcote Methodist Church and Sunday school including 32 years as superintendent of the Sunday school. He was a founding member of the Star of Northcote, I.O.R (International Order of the Rechabites). The Rechabites were a fraternal organisation that were against alcohol.

Some of the Dennis family in Cornwall had become conservative church goers. Known as Primitive Methodists (Non Conformists). Highly likely that William Dennis followed this path particularly to Methodist Church worship in High St.

After Dennis’s death of heart failure in 1909 his role as Councilor, Mayor and membership in the Methodist Church and I.O.R. were filled by his son Samuel. (DHE)

A plaque in Uniting Church High St details his connection with church since inception as trustee. Sunday school teacher/superintendent for 50 years. Wife (Mary) died 17 Feb 1908 helped in the church too.

It is highly likely that the Dennis family were connected with the original Methodist church directly opposite on the eastern side of High St (now a café).

Samuel Dennis (1869-1945)

Councillor: 1909-1945. Mayor: 1913-14, 1927-8, 1936-7

Followed his father William into Northcote Council. During a life time of public service Dennis served as a M.M.B.W. Commissioner from 1920-1945 and the Federal Member for Batman from 1931-1934. His church duties included being a trustee of the Northcote Methodist Church, and trustee of the Northcote Tent of the International Order of the Rechabites (as well as being the Deputy District Director of the Order).

During the First World War tensions in the Northcote Council were frequently high. Labor representative John Cain Snr. frequently clashing with several other Councilors. (DH)

1912 – Northcote Municipal Quarry. Establishment soon. Sites inspected included: Arthurton Rd, Darebin Rd, Closer Settlement Grounds, Milot's (site) & Dennis' (site). Latter estimated to yield 86,000 cubic yards of (blue) metal. If adjoining 8 allotments purchased then additional 90,000 yards. Cartage would be 2/- / load vs 2/6 from Closer Settlement. (Age, 25 Nov 1912, p 14)

1913 – Northcote Quarry opens. Details of land bought from Closer Settlement Board. Plant and equipment. Etc. (Age, 27 Aug 1913 – p 15)

1914 – Northcote proclaimed City – 27 May. Sam (mayor) gifts fountain (5 Dec).

1914 – Northcote Quarry – Letter from W M Casserly, Vic Quarrying Employer's Assoc. Only 2 of the eight men are working there again. Other six have found employment elsewhere and have no intention of working there at the present. (Age, 22 Oct 1914 – p5)

1914 – Municipal Quarry at Northcote. Union vs Non-Union Labor. Earlier problems now resolved. Quarry reopened on 12 Oct. Dennis represents Quarry Committee. (Age, 4 Nov 1914, p 8)

1914 - Quarry Explosion: Experiments being made withn newly invented explosive at Dennis' Quarries, Northcote. A charge was being tapped with a broom stick when an explosion took place, with the result that the stick was blown through Mr Dennis' hand, and struck his shoulder, seriously injuring him. (Geelong Advertiser, 7 Dec 1914, p 4)

1914 – Fairfield Explosion – Cr Dennis Experience – Bystander's version. Dennis Bros quarry in Fairfield. (Age, 8 Dec 1914, p 9)

1917 - Dennis found himself opposing Cr. Cain as both fought to represent the state electorate of Jika Jika. Dennis represented the National Federation who unwisely decided to field two candidates. The plan backfired and Dennis was narrowly beaten by Cain, who later went on to become the Labor Party Leader and thrice Premier of Victoria.

During the 1920s Sam Dennis was a heavy investor in the building of Westgarth Picture Theatre, a grand building which cost £20,000 to construct. [More details under Son Yeomans.]

1923 - Quarrymen's Holidays – Northcote municipal quarry requesting a week's holiday at Christmas (same as other employees). They work 44 hour week, whilst others 45 hours. Crs Cain, Dennis, Oldis, Harry, Timmins. Granted. (pp 3) Copy made. Leader: Dec 22, 1923

1923 – Anniversary celebrations of local (Gippsland) IOR tent. Methodist church pulpit occupied by S Dennis of Northcote, Past District chief of the order. Dennis will be tendered a civic reception by acting mayor Cr Bolitho. Gippsland Times: 6 Aug, 1923, p 6

1924 – Transfer of Land from will of W H Dennis to William James Dennis & Samuel Dennis both of Walker St, Northcote. (Argus, 30 Dec 1924 – p 15)

1925 – Northcote Stone Quarry lease on Merri Ck. For 5 years. Lease by B(H)worth & Quinn. (nil to do with Dennis apart from approving this.)

1928 - Rechabite Jubilee. Northcote Juniors celebrate opening of the Hope of Northcote Junior Tent opened by late Bro W H Dennis (father of present Mayor of Northcote – Samuel Dennis). Long article. Leader: Apr 13, 1928, p 2

1928 - Letter from S Dennis Mayor. Appeal for Soldiers Widow (unknown) with donations list. Leader: July 13, 1928, p 3

1928 - Northcote Crèche & Kindergarten. Mrs S Dennis called seeking availability of forming one. Leader: July 20, 1928. P 5

1928 - Northcote Council – Ordinary Business) Complaint about a 'riot' in McDonnell Park on Sat where two football teams had fought with sticks and bad language. Police sent for. Dennis Club to explain. Threatened with expulsion. Leader: Aug 10, 1928, p 4.

1928 - Dennis / Cain - Mayor Dennis Entertains. Presentation to Ex Cr J Cain, MLA. Long article. Leader: Aug 10, 1928, p 1

1931 - **Samuel Dennis** (26 March 1870 – 28 January 1945) was an [Australian](#) politician. Born in [Melbourne](#), he was educated at state schools before becoming a contractor and company director. He served on [Northcote Council](#) for 36 years before his election to the [Australian House of Representatives](#) in 1931 as the [United Australia Party](#) member for [Batman](#). Dennis defeated [Labor](#) member [Frank Brennan](#) on a swing of over 26 percent as part of the massive UAP victory that year. However, Batman was naturally a Labor seat, and Brennan defeated Dennis in a 1934 rematch.

(Wikipedia)

1934 – Clifton Hill Quarry inquiry. Residents request Mr Dennis, M P – a quarry expert. (Age, 25 July 1934, p 6)

1935 – Cr S Dennis, Northcote mayor – claims to be first ‘dry’ mayor of Northcote and since 1914 (21 years) there has only been one ‘wet’ mayor. (Age, 27 Nov 1935, p 13)

1945 - Death (yesterday) of Sam. (Advocate, 30 Jan 1945 p 2)

1945 – Probate application. S Dennis late of 33 Walker St. Martha Annie Dennis (same address) and Leslie Clive Dennis, 33 Walker St. Argus: 9 Feb 1945, p 15

1950 – Clive Dennis’ sister being married. Pre-wedding party held at Northcote home of Mr & Mrs Clive Dennis. Sister – Mrs Betty Holdsworth & Mr Nevin Vawswor. To be married at S John’s Camberwell. (Argus, 27 March 1950).

1957 – Memorial clock erected. West side of High St. North of Urquart St junction.

1964 - Dennis memorial clock - Problems of maintenance. [Photo] Leader: March 4, 1964

1985 – October Dennis memorial clock removed for street widening.

Annie Dennis Kindergarden

Annie Dennis (wife of S Dennis) – in July 1928 Chairwoman of Creche & Kindergarden Committee urged Northcote Council to acquire Joshua Pitt's deceased estate and Beaumont (11 Bastings St). Creche & Kindergarden opened there in 1929. Beaumont is at least as early as c1864. Originally owned and built by John Gull Johnson – fruit merchant, land owner/developer. Owning it until 1900. (Johnson was member of Library Committee and Health League). By c1908 Joshua Pitt took ownership until his death in 1928.
(Butler, Vol 2 pp 37)

(Baby) Health Centres – first advice given in 1921 by Sr Bowe from Town Hall. Thornbury began in 1923. Purpose built centre in 1927.
(Lemon)

1936 – 17 Aug. Opening ceremony. Argus: 18 Aug 1936, p 4. Opened by Lady Latham. Age: 17 Aug 1936, p 13

1949 – Martha Annie Dennis. Probate application.

1952 – listed as dec.

Further reading - Dennis family history. Note does not include Northcote Dennis families. Ex State Library of Victoria. Maybe copies elsewhere.

Title: From Buryan to Bondi : the Dennis family of West Penwith, Cornwall, and some Australian descendants

Author/Creator: Louise Wilson 1946-

Request from onsite storage SLT 929.20994 D42W

Publisher: South Melbourne, Vic. : Louise Wilson

Date: 2008

Description: 386 p. : ill. (some col.), geneal. tables, maps, ports. ; 21 cm.

Identifier(s): ISBN 9780980447811 (pbk.)

Notes: Includes bibliographical references and index.