

Ayers Story

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(note: this story is my reading of the documents, and includes some 'creative licence')

To my sons, and all their cousins on the Ayers side.

Let me tell you the story of your tupuna (ancestors), this strong branch of our family tree. It's marvellous to be here, telling this story, here in this place which is ground and foundation, where we come from as a people.

200 years ago my mother's mother's mother's grandfather was born, here in Turvey. Thomas Ayers (born 1 November 1817). His parents were already 40, and Thomas grew up with 3 big brothers and a sister who were all way older than him. After his parents died (when he was in his early 20s) his oldest brother took over the family home, 88 Carlton Rd. When Thomas was 24 (in 1841) there was a census. From this information we can tell that they must have had a reasonable sized home (either that or they were really squashed), because living there were:

- Thomas's older brother James, his wife Esther, and their 7 children (the oldest was the same age as Thomas)
- Thomas
- his fiancé Elizabeth (Elizabeth Gibbs, born in Turvey in 1818)
- plus a woman called Rachel Markham, same age as Esther, who lived with them (I wonder if she was her sister, or a friend, perhaps she never married, or perhaps her husband had died & she moved in with them).

Soon after, Thomas married Elizabeth (I guess they were probably called Tom and Lizzie), and they moved in to their own home a few doors along at 98 Carlton Rd. Thomas was a bricklayer and his brother James was a stone mason. Their dad (and probably his dad before him etc) had also been a builder, and they knew about stone and brick.

Turvey was known as the town of 'golden stone'. There is a quarry up the road where all the stone came from for Turvey and all the villages near here. From this they cut small blocks, smoothed them off, and made the houses. The stone is definitely a golden colour. They also knew how to work larger blocks of stone, which would have been needed for grander buildings, like the large All Saints Church in Turvey.

Turvey was a place with extremes of wealth and poverty. There is a very grand manor house, 400 years old, looking out over an expanse of green grass and enormous oak trees. There is an enormous church, mostly paid for by the lord of the manor. Various generations of lords & ladies are buried inside the church in stone boxes with their statues (life size!) lying on top. In the village, however, most people were poor. In 1671 there were a hundred homes, and only half of these had their own fireplace inside. Few people lived into their 60s (lots died of smallpox). By 1817, when Thomas was born, things had improved, more houses were being built, and Thomas and his brothers learnt new ways of working the stone to make homes more waterproof and comfortable.

Thomas and Elizabeth had a sad start to their marriage; their first two babies died. Then, 5 years after they married, they had Samuel, born 13 September, 1846.

The next census was in 1851. By that time James & Esther had only 3 kids still at home, and they also had James Gibbs (presumably Elizabeth's brother) and his daughter visiting. A few doors up the road at 98 Carlton Rd was Elizabeth & Thomas's house, and in 1851 they had two children (Samuel & his little sister Sarah). Rachel Markham had moved in with them, as had Elizabeth's mother Sarah Gibbs (she was 67 by then). And on census night two teenage Gibbs nieces are also staying.

Census night 1851 gives as a real insight into life for the Ayers family. They were clearly a very strong close-knit extended family, with two homes along from each other. Kids lived at home till their early 20s, and cousins came and went. Grandma came to live with them once she got too old to manage on her own. All the men of the family described themselves as either stone masons or bricklayers, and all the women were lacemakers.

It's worth reading up on women's work from home, and especially the art of lace making. It was something women could do at home, often together, often by candlelight. It was a luxury for the rich, made by the poor. There are very fine examples in the museums, and I have a few old lace doilies passed on to me by Grandma.

But over the next few years everything changed. Elizabeth's brother James (the one who was staying with Thomas's brother on census night), together with their brother George, took their families and left for New Zealand. They sailed to Christchurch and settled in Woodend, in fact for several years Woodend was called Gibbstown! So, Thomas and Elizabeth decided to go too. Not that they could afford the trip, but the New Zealand government advertised for families to go, and paid part of the costs. The local lord Wiggins also helped families pay the fare.

So, on 11 June 1858 Thomas & Elizabeth and their family stepped on board the brand-new ship, Zealandia, at the docks in London. As well as Samuel and Sarah, they now have a 3-year-old Thomas, and a new baby called Rebecca. And, their old family friend Rachel Markham decided to come too. And, there's another Gibbs family on board, presumably Elizabeth's cousin.

In Woodend they became literally foundation members, building homes and churches, shops and schools in much of North Canterbury. Samuel chose to live in Rangiora, and used his ancestral skills in working stone and brick to make a beautiful home, which he called Turvey, and added to over the years as they had more and more children (9 grew up + 1 who died). I hope you get to visit this house, which is still home to our cousins.

One fascinating detail I'd like to add in before I finish – church. Thomas & Elizabeth's families, like all their community, were involved in the local Anglican church, getting married and baptised there. But Thomas and Elizabeth had a significant faith experience, and joined the Methodist Church. In NZ they were passionate followers of Christ, and deeply committed to the vibrant life of the local churches they were part of.

Ship's records say that there were several other Methodists on board the Zealandia and much time was spent in song and prayer.

We also know that Samuel was a good singer. He was in the boys choir in the large parish (Anglican) church in Turvey. A piano was high on the list of items required for their home in Rangiora.

They never returned to England, though they probably thought of it as 'Home' with a capital 'H' for many decades.

As I stand here on these fields and walk these old village footpaths, it does not feel like my home, but it is significant to know that my family line did not begin in 1858 in New Zealand, but goes back generation before generation, in this land, with these stones cut from the ground and worked into homes by my ancestors.

Questions I'll keep pondering on:

How did they get to London? It may well have been the first time they had travelled even that far, let alone the ends of the earth. How did they feel leaving everything they knew behind? What did they take with them?

How could Elizabeth carry a baby onto the Zealandia, having lost two babies already, knowing full well that the trip would be hard on the little ones and that many babies died at sea?

I'd love to know more about Rachel Markham. When she got on board the Zealandia she was 63 years old. Surely she was too old for the rigours of 3 months on board ship and crossing Canterbury hills and swamps. I wonder how much longer she lived and how she coped. She had been living with the Ayers family for most of her adult life, presumably a much-loved member of the family, granny to the kids (remember that Thomas' parents were both dead before he married). The fact that she was not a blood relative obviously did not make her any less part of the family.