Croker Prize for Biography

Entry 1511

Granny Knott

Granny Knott

According to her granddaughter, Eliza Bella, Granny Knott was a bit of a character and everyone was scared of her. Apart from this description, her descendants know nothing about her except basic facts – no physical description, no photographs and no insights into her likes, dislikes or outlook on life. Like many women in the 18th and 19th centuries she was invisible except as daughter, wife, mother and grandmother. However, by crossing the world in her early forties she became a founding immigrant for at least 30 Australian grandchildren and many more great-grandchildren and their descendants.

Eliza Bella's description suggests that her grandmother was a strong woman with an instinct for survival – good qualities for managing the ups and downs of life.

Mary Ann Smith, only child of John Smith and Susannah Warnes, was born in Oulton, Norfolk, in March 1796.[1] John Smith was a labourer who probably did not venture far from Oulton, a village about 25 km north-west of Norwich, in his whole life. His daughter would have a very different existence.

Susannah was in her mid-thirties when Mary Ann was born and she died when her daughter was only 10.[2] Mary Ann probably looked after her father or went into domestic service in the years before her marriage, at age 24, to John Neale[3], three years older and also born[4] and bred in Oulton. Mary Ann and John had three children – William in 1821[5], John in 1823[6] and Susanna in 1825.[7] When Susanna was only 14 months old Mary Ann's life changed for ever, as John Neale died.[8] His wages as a labourer would have died with him.

How Mary Ann managed in the next few years is not known, but at some stage she met a younger man, Robert Knott, a gardener from Strood in Kent.[9] A man eight years her junior with a recognised trade probably seemed like good insurance for the future care of herself and her children. Mary Neal and Robert Knott married in Norwich in mid-1831.[10] Both are noted in the marriage record as being single, even though Mary Ann was a widow. Presumably her children were nowhere to be seen.

Sometime after their marriage Mary Ann and Robert moved to Kent, almost certainly to his birthplace of Strood. It was from there that the Knott/Neal family travelled to Deptford, on the south bank of the River Thames, in late April 1838 to start a new life in New South Wales. By then Mary Ann and Robert had two children – Isabella born in 1834[11] and Robert in 1837[12], so it was a family group of seven which embarked on the *Woodbridge* for the voyage to Sydney. There were nearly 300 people aboard the *Woodbridge* who, apart from the crew, were assisted (bounty) immigrants consisting of 51 family groups and a small number of single men and women.[13] At the time, bounty immigrants were supposed to be aged not more than 40. Mary Ann was 42 when she left England so put her age down a couple of years to qualify.

The *Woodbridge* took four and a half months to sail from England to Sydney with only one landfall. At the insistence of the surgeon on board, a stop was made at the Cape of Good Hope to obtain fresh food (but unfortunately no fruit) as quite a few passengers were ill including some showing early symptoms of scurvy.[14] The voyage was regarded as relatively healthy with only 10 deaths, fortunately none of them from Mary Ann's family.

Within days of arriving in Sydney in September 1838, Robert Knott and both his step-sons were engaged as gardeners by John Blaxland of Newington House on the Parramatta River.[15] Mary Ann had somewhere to live and a known family income for at least her first year in Australia as Robert was to be paid 30 pounds per year, William 15 pounds and John 14 pounds, all with rations. By the early 1840s Mary Ann and Robert Knott and their family had moved further west to Mulgoa. John Neal worked for George Cox on his property *Winbourne* at Mulgoa and some family notes say that William Neal was a coachman for one of the Cox family, several of whom had properties in the Mulgoa Valley. It is most likely that Robert Knott worked somewhere in the Mulgoa Valley too. Robert died in September 1843[16], so at the age of 47 Mary Ann was widowed for a second time. At least this time she had adult or near adult children to look after her and her younger children.

She became Granny Knott on 1 June 1852, with the birth of Eliza Bella, daughter of her son William and his wife Isabella Campbell.[17] During the next 30 years at least 28 more grandchildren were born – twelve more to William and Isabella[18], five to John and his wife Eliza Knight (née Raynor)[19], nine to her daughter Isabella and husband George Glover[20], and two to Robert Knott jnr and his wife Elizabeth White.[21] Descendants of her daughter Susanna have not been traced but it is likely that Susanna married and had children.[22]

William's elder children would have known their granny quite well. She was living with William and his family when she died, and had possibly lived with them for some years. However for most of her grandchildren, Granny Knott would just have been a name as fewer than half of them were aged five or more at the time of her death and five were born after her death.

Mary Ann lived to the age of 75 and saw her sons established in their own businesses or good long-term employment, probably doing better than they would have in England.

William Neal married at Cobbitty in 1851[23] and remained in the area just west of Sydney during his mother's lifetime. At some stage he gave up his earlier occupations and become a blacksmith, possibly working for a few years with his father-in-law Sweyn Campbell, a blacksmith at Cobbitty. By the beginning of the 1860s he had his own business at Bringelly – general store, post office, smithy and pound. In early 1874 William transferred the business at Bringelly to his newly-married eldest daughter and her husband and moved to Shaw near Carcoar to become a farmer.

The early 1860s saw Mary Ann's other children move away from the Mulgoa area where they had spent most of their first years in Australia. John Neal and his family went from *Winbourne* to *Burrundulla* at Mudgee, another property owned by the Cox family. He remained near Mudgee for the rest of his life, eventually leaving the employ of George Henry Cox and having his own farm which he named *Nealton*. Isabella Knott married in 1859[24] and a few years later moved to the Central Coast and then to Maitland where she lived to the ripe old age of 93. Robert Knott jnr became a bootmaker and moved west to Bathurst where he married in 1864.[25] About 1882 he settled in Blayney, close to where William and family were then living.

Mary Ann Knott died at Bringelly in July 1871 and was buried in the churchyard of St Thomas, Mulgoa,[26] beside her husband. Her family put up a gravestone which is now very worn so the inscription is hard to read, but it was recorded some years ago as:

<div align="center">

Sacred
to the Memory
of
Mary Ann Knott
born March 16 1796
died July 31 1871
Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ
And ye shalt be saved

</div>

The marriage records of Mary Ann and both husbands indicate that none of them could write (they made their marks). Mary Ann must have seen this as holding her back and somehow she gained at least basic literacy so that when she came to Australia she was recorded as being able to both read and write.[27] Widespread illiteracy in rural England well into the 19th century means that Mary Ann's descendants from her first marriage are not certain whether they should spell their surname as NEAL or NEALE (they use NEAL). The records for the family's travel to Australia and initial employment on arrival are no help as the surname is variously written as NEAL, NEIL[28] and NEILL[29]. Church records for her first husband and members of his family have both NEAL and NEALE[30], equally common spellings throughout Norfolk, presumably at the whim of whoever made the entries in the parish registers.

In the lottery of family life, Mary Ann had two daughters and a lot of granddaughters, great-granddaughters and great-great granddaughters. Her first husband's name lives on in relatively few descendants with the surname of Neal and some others with Neal as one of their given names. She has no living descendants with the surname of Knott as her son Robert had one daughter who did not marry[31] and one son who did not survive.[32] Unless one of her female descendants marries a Mr Knott there will never be another Granny Knott in her family.

---

[1] Freereg.org.uk, Parish records of Oulton, Norfolk (database on-line), baptism of Mary Ann Smith (born 16 March 1796), daughter of John Smith and Susannah Warnes, on 20 March 1796.

[2] Freereg.org.uk, Parish records of Oulton, Norfolk (database on-line), burial of Susan Smith, aged 44, wife of John Smith, on 11 April 1806.

[3] Freereg.org.uk, Parish records of Oulton, Norfolk (database on-line), marriage of John Neale and Mary Smith on 20 November 1820 at St Peter and St Paul, Oulton.

[4] Freereg.org.uk, Parish records of Oulton, Norfolk (database on-line), baptism of John Neal, son of William Neal and Ann Taylor, on 2 June 1793.

[5] Freereg.org.uk, Parish records of Oulton, Norfolk (database on-line), baptism of William Neale, son of John and Mary Neale, on 9 September 1821. Records from the *Woodbridge* give his birth date as 5 September.

[6] Freereg.org.uk, Parish records of Oulton, Norfolk (database on-line), baptism of John Neale, son of John and Mary Neale, on 23 March 1823. Records from the *Woodbridge* give his birth date as 22 March.

[7] Freereg.org.uk, Parish records of Oulton, Norfolk (database on-line), baptism of Susanna Neale, daughter of John and Mary Neale, on 1 May 1825. Records from the *Woodbridge* give her birth date as 15 April.

[8] Freereg.org.uk, Parish records of Oulton, Norfolk (database on-line), burial of John Neale, aged 33, on 2 July 1826.

[9] BMDregisters.co.uk, *Register of Births and Baptisms at Zoar Independent Chapel at the High Street in the Parish of Strood, Kent from 1785 to 1837*, Reference RG4/Piece 1189/Folio 30, baptism of Robert Knott (born 23 May 1804) son of William Robert and Ann Knott, on 17 June 1804.

[10] Freereg.org.uk, Parish records of Norwich, Norfolk (database on-line), marriage of Robert Knott and Mary Neal on 20 June 1831 at St Michael Coslany, Norwich.

[11] No birth or baptism record located but records from the *Woodbridge* indicate a birth date of 30 December 1834

[12] Freebmd.org.uk, Index of Births, Sep Quarter 1837, North Aylesford, Kent, Vol 5, Page 245. Records from the *Woodbridge* give his birth date as 2 July.

[13] State Records NSW: NRS 5313 Persons on government ships, Aug 1837–40, [4/4780]

[14] xroyvision.com.au/andrews/history/hist4.htm, *Log of the ship 'Woodbridge' by Alexander Stewart MD RN*, transcribed by Peter Charles Andrews, accessed April 2006

[15] SRNSW: NRS 5313 Persons on government ships, Aug 1837–40, [4/4780]

[16] NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, death of Robert Knott, V1843617 27B

[17] NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, birth of Eliza Bella Neale, V18521584 38A

[18] NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, births V1853401 40; V18551305 42A; 5709/1857;6222/1859; 11607/1861; 12476/1862; 13745/1865; 7891/1867; 16818/1869; 16158/1871; 9278/1874; 9912/1876.

[19] NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, births 11047/1858; 11064/1860; 11475/1865; 14137/1869. No birth record has been located for the daughter born about 1862.

[20] NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, births 10944/1860; 11084/1861; 6298/1863; 10772/1865; 11405/1867; 13193/1869; 12507/1871; 12887/1873; 14085/1875.

[21] NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, births 6361/1871; 9602/1879.

[22] Mary Ann's death record shows daughter Susannah aged 45 and there are no death records for Susan/Susanna/Susannah in any variation of Neal.

[23] NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, marriage of William Neal and Isabella Campbell, V1851375 37B. The marriage was at St Paul, Cobbitty, on 7 July 1851.

[24] NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, marriage of George Glover and Isabella Knott, 2734/1859.

[25] NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, marriage of Robert Knott and Elizabeth White, 1488/1864.

[26] NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, death of Mary Ann Knott, 5435/1871.

[27] SRNSW: NRS 5314 Entitlement Certificates of Persons on Government Ships 1832–42 [4/4836]

[28] SRNSW: NRS 5314 Entitlement Certificates of Persons on Government Ships 1832–42 [4/4836] has Neal and Neil.

[29] SRNSW: NRS 5313 Persons on government ships, Aug 1837–40, [4/4780] has Neill.

[30] Freereg.org.uk, *Parish records of St Peter and St Paul, Oulton, Norfolk* (database on-line).

[31] NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, death of Myrah Mary Elizabeth Knott, 5736/1957.

[32] NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, death of Robert Knott, 4348/1879 (birth record 9602/1879).