

# **CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2023**

## **2307 Henry Bingham – Myths and Reality**

**by Alan Bingham**

## Henry Bingham – Myths and reality

The new Commissioner for Lands, Henry Bingham, arrived in the colony of New South Wales from Cork in 1837 on the Lady Macnaughton. He was listed as a protestant ‘Gentleman’, married and of age 38. He had a private cabin for which he paid 80 pounds.

There was an outbreak of Typhus on the ship and she remained in quarantine, under North Head, upon arrival in Sydney. 10 adults and 44 children died during the voyage with 5 more dying later in Sydney.

Henry Bingham came from a family of ancient origins easily tracing back to 920AD. His lineage included many Knights, Earls and Barons. The family, based in Dorset, was heavily involved in Ireland from the 14<sup>th</sup> century as adventurers, administrators, landlords (mainly absent) and were the landed gentry.

Henry, was the only son of Arthur Bingham, R.N., who was the second son of John Bingham of Newbrook in Ireland. As the second son Arthur didn’t inherit the family estates and so, as was the case with spare sons, Arthur joined the navy. Married to Grace Blakeney Fitzgerald, Arthur had one son - Henry (b: July 24 1797). But both parents died young, Arthur drowning whilst in the royal navy, and his mother, it is believed – *according to family myth* - during the birth of a sibling for Henry.

Orphaned Henry became the ward of his godmother, Gertrude Blakeney Fitzgerald of Queenstown, Cork. Educated at Cork College under a Professor Hamblin and at his junior school was awarded a silver medal for “diligence and superior genius” at only 10 years of age.

Henry married Margaret Creine in Dublin in 1822 and they brought two children into the world; Edward Charles and Isabella. The family lived at Ballyclough Castle where Henry was the Land Steward for the Purdons who were relatives of his godmother.



Commissioner Henry Bingham with his horse.  
Image of the painting held in the Mitchell Library, Sydney.

- *attributed to Conrad Martens circa 1839*

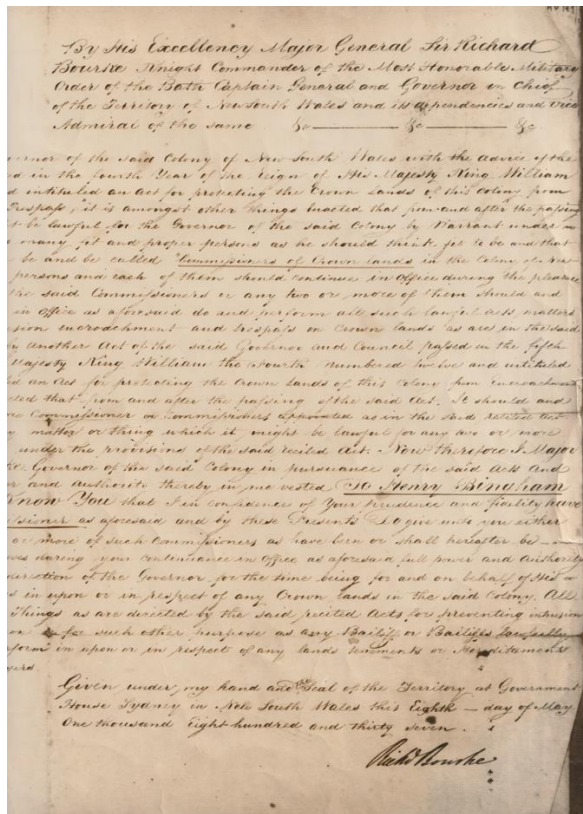
When Margaret died in 1830 Henry wrote in his diary, “*Dear Margaret, in the garden cutting her flowers, Friday May 7<sup>th</sup> she left this world. Monday 10<sup>th</sup> May Interment*”. Her tombstone in St Anne’s Churchyard, Shandon, now lost to posterity, is known to have read; “*Watch therefore for ye know neither the day nor the hour when the son of man cometh*”. Matthew (25.13) - generally interpreted as ‘the son of God will come to gather in the good and virtuous at a time to be decided’.

Gertrude had named Henry as her heir to the vast Water Castle estate but disinherited him after his marriage to Margaret. We don’t know the cause of this breach but a major myth of the family is that this is the reason for Henry’s decision to seek his fortune in Australia. The other *myth* was that Margaret was Catholic. She was not.

Henry remarried, this time to Penelope Checkley of Mallow, Cork and they had five children together, Ethel Alice, Gertrude Clara, Julia Henrietta, William Henry and Grace Blakeney.

Determined to better himself, Henry traveled to London to receive a ‘arranged employment agreement’ for a role in the colony of New South Wales. He joined the ‘Lady Macnaughton’ in London.

The Surgeon Superintendent of the Quarantine Ground, Spring Cove on March 13, 1837 wrote to Governor Bourke Commending "Mr Henry Bingham, for without his exertions on this occasion any endeavour of mine must have proved futile."



Governor Bourke made Henry Bingham Commissioner of Crown Lands for the Colony. The Governor was making a strong effort to ensure he had the right people in offices in the colony. Henry's work with the Lady Mcnaughton immigrants had impressed Bourke, and this may have helped lead to this appointment and commission. Of course, he had a charter of employment from London prior to his departure, but of what that referenced we know little. *Perhaps another myth?* Also, the Bourke and the Bingham families were, conveniently, Irish landowning gentry and known to each other.

The Commissioner of Crown Lands was the sole Government official in areas outside the settled districts and as such had magisterial authority. He had police and convicts assigned to him in this role. As a Justice of the Peace and a civil magistrate, he had the power to try certain criminal cases - on the spot, and he did. He also became the Gold Commissioner. He was kindly to the aboriginal population and was held responsible for their wellbeing, a function he took seriously. We know this from his reports to the Governor.

Henry built his home – *Wallongawah* – (a friendly aboriginal greeting) on a bluff above the Tumut river. When completed in 1841, Penelope and the children joined Henry sailing on the 'Canton' via Cape Horn.

On June 23, 1852 heavy rains following an unusually rainy few weeks earlier caused a major flood in the Murrumbidgee river creating a catastrophic situation at the town of Gundagai. The flood wall hit the town around midnight on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, knocking houses from their foundations and flooding others. Many died in the early part of the flood. Henry went about organizing a bizarre rescue operation of local aboriginals and set them to work making bark canoes. As soon as they were finished they were put to the task of rescuing people. The floodwaters were some 30' deep above the town centre. The death toll was over 90 people with 34 buildings destroyed.

In 1853 the town slowly moved to higher ground. Henry Bingham drew up plans for the new town on the higher land where it stands today. Henry contracted pneumonia following his rescue work and died. He was 57 years of age and is buried at Wallongawah.

Henry doesn't figure greatly in Australian exploration but he is notable. He opened up considerable areas for grazing as far as the Edward River and into Victoria. He established good peaceful relationships with the aboriginal peoples in the Tumut, Murrumbidgee and Lachlan areas.

Henry was my great, great grandfather.

**Resources:**

Quarantined! The 1837 Lady McNaughton Immigrants: Perry McIntyre & Elizabeth Rushen, Anchor Books Australia, 2007. (*a copy which is in SAG's library.*)

British Naval Biographic Dictionary, Pub: William Cowes & Sons, London, 1849

Memoirs of the Bingham –Rose Elizabeth McCalmont, Spottiswoode & Co, London, 1915

Mitchell Library, Sydney

Irish National Archives, Dublin