

John and Agnes Clay

Petrockstowe, Devonshire England



The ancestral home of John Clay, at Petrockstowe, Devon, England, taken in June 1913,
Pictured are Mr and Mrs Moase and their daughter Averil Harding.

The Clay family story begins in the county of Devonshire England, where John Clay was born in Petrockstowe; the second child of a family of nine born to Zachariah Clay and his wife Elizabeth Youlden. Current research shows Zachariah was also born at Petrockstowe, the eldest child of William Clay and Margaret Baker. John was baptised on 25th July 1802 and grew up at Hall Farm where his father farmed on a property owned by Lord Clinton, 3½ miles from the Petrockstowe post office. On 11th September 1834, John married Agnes Moase, who was baptised on the 14th February 1813 at Frithelstock; she was a daughter of Rowland Moase and Catherine Mullis.



The village of Petrockstowe in north Devon has its roots set firmly in farming, with a history that dates back to the Domesday Book. It was and still is a very picturesque location studded with white, thatched cottages and St. Petroc's church with its 15th century tower. Apparently, "ball-clay" for pottery was excavated at Petrockstowe and it is claimed that the surname Clay, came from the workers in the clay pits of the 12th century. Agnes had grown up at Frithelstock, some 8 miles from Petrockstowe, where at the time of her birth, her father's trade was shown as "mason".

One wonders why the family decided to leave their kinfolk and the beautiful surroundings of Devon for an unknown country so far across the sea. Although John Clay was said to be a valued tenant farmer for Lord Clinton, he may have felt that a new life in a drier, warmer climate might be more comfortable and that the more readily available land could afford greater opportunities for his large family.



The village of Petrockstowe in north Devon

By the end of 1850, John and Agnes decided to emigrate to Australia; the country everyone was talking about at the time. John began to dream about owning his own farm and Agnes thought of her children growing up in a land of sunshine. She also thought of the long sea journey to the other side of the world, after having lived all her life in the corner of Devon, and not having travelled more than a few miles from home. The family of eight children, William b.1835, John b.1837, Mary Ann b.1839, Richard John b.1842, Joseph b.1844, Frederick b.1846, Elizabeth b.1848 and Eliza b.1850 sailed from Plymouth on 24th March 1851, aboard the ship "City of Manchester". After a journey of almost four months, the family arrived in Adelaide on the 16th July 1851.

Agnes was horrified at how dry and dusty it was in Adelaide after the green of England. So in late 1851, hearing of the gold rush in Victoria they decided to try their luck at the Ballarat goldfields, but on arriving in Melbourne, Agnes had developed typhoid fever. They settled initially in Melbourne at 65 Condell Street Collingwood, where they met and possibly shared a house with John Hollingworth Clay and his family. It is not clear what relationship existed between the two families, but at that time, our John worked as a tentmaker in Carlton. Whilst living at Condell St, the couple's last child, Catherine Elizabeth was born in May 1853. Then later that year in December, they had to cope with the death of their five-year-old daughter Elizabeth, which would no doubt have been a severe blow to the family. While registering Catherine Elizabeth's birth in April 1854, John gave his address as Napier Street, Collingwood and his occupation as storekeeper. Before long, the inner city house was found to be too small and overcrowded for the large family.

In 1854, 36 acres on the south side of Doncaster Road was purchased, opposite to where the Tower later stood. This area became known locally as "Clay's Hill". Perhaps the picturesque Doncaster area reminded Agnes and John of their Devon homeland. Soon John, with the help of his eldest sons cleared the land, building a new house and growing vegetables whilst establishing one of the first orchards in the district. The house was of modern weatherboard construction, with a veranda under a pitched roof and extra rooms at the back under a skillion section.



John and Agnes house – left centre with the stripped veranda – taken from the tower abt.1900

John was a quiet retiring man, whereas Agnes was out-going and liked to entertain friends, frequently catering for family functions, including the weddings of her children. Mary Ann was first to marry when she wed William Mitchell at her parent's home in 1865. Joseph married Lucy Crossman in 1870 and Frederick married Mary Jones in 1872. 1873, was a very busy time for the family with the marriage of Catherine Elizabeth to Robert Edwin Wilson, Eliza to Thomas Petty in August, followed by Richard marrying Mary Ann Carnegie in December. Eldest son William b.1835 died a bachelor in 1910 and second son, John b.1837, was killed in a mining accident at Hoddles Creek in 1894, was also unmarried.

By the 1880s' the Doncaster area was a well-established orchard district with approximately 1500 acres planted with apple, pear and peach trees. In addition to working extremely hard on the properties, our ancestors took an active interest in community affairs, serving the district in many ways such as on the local council, the Roads Board and involvement with several churches. Clay Street, Doncaster is one of many streets in the area named in recognition of the pioneers of this period. The Holy Trinity church in Doncaster has two stained glass windows dedicated to the Clay family.



Many descendants remain in the Doncaster area, becoming leading citizens of the area, Victoria and elsewhere. In fact, many of John and Agnes descendants still live there today, with others scattered throughout Australia and probably overseas as well.

Doncaster tower circa 1910



John Clay died at Doncaster on 16th July 1871 at 69 years, exactly 20 years after arriving in this country. Agnes lived for another 10 years, spending her last years with her daughters at Wandin. She died on 6th April 1881 at the age of 68 years.

Boroondara General Cemetery BAPT A 0448

Name	CLAY, JOHN
Date	19-Jul-1871
Age	69
Grave	BAPT A
Location	0448
Section Name	Baptist
Grave Type	(not recorded)
Service	Burial

The inscription on the headstone reads:

*"In Memory Of John CLAY of Doncaster d 16 Jul 1871 69y
also Agnes CLAY d 6 Apr 1881 68y"*



*Acknowledgements to Patricia Lovegrove (Clay) for her contribution to this story
There are no images available of John or Agnes*