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A young man from England

My grandfather Ernest William Skyvington was born in London in 1891. Queen Victoria had been on the British throne for over half a century. On the other side of the globe, in the colony of New South Wales, a constitution was being drawn up for a political entity that the statesman Henry Parkes was starting to refer to as the Commonwealth of Australia.

Ernest's father William Jones Skyvington, born in Devon, had come to London to work as a salesman. A fortnight after his twenty-first birthday, William married a Middlesex girl named Eliza Mephram, almost four years his senior, who earned her living as a dressmaker's assistant. When Ernest came into the world, his father was employed in a warehouse for leather goods. Eliza died of tuberculosis of the lungs and heart disease at the age of 34, and her eight-year-old son was then cared for by his widowed maternal grandmother Martha Watson, in the North London suburb of Hornsey, in the company of his unmarried aunts Louisa and Agnes Mephram.

Ernest attended the Stroud Green school for boys in Hornsey, where his "best subjects"—as my grandfather told me in a letter—were arithmetic and soccer. His father then found him a trade apprenticeship. By the time he was seventeen, Ernest had decided to leave London for Australia. This adventure was possible because his late mother had a brother named William Mephram who was settled in Sydney. This uncle, slightly younger than Ernest's father, had obtained his master's certificate in the British merchant navy in 1900. He had found himself a job in 1908 with the Union Steamship Company as a captain of their vessels plying between Sydney, Tasmania and New Zealand. William Mephram had married an Australian girl named Gertrude Driscoll whose father was a grazier out in Gulgong. It was relatively easy for William Mephram to arrange for his nephew to travel out to Australia on a ship called the *Marathon*, operated by the Aberdeen Line and captained by a friend named Burns.

Voyage to Australia

In November 1908, Ernest arrived at London's East End docks in a horse-drawn four-wheeler cab that transported all his worldly possessions: a large cabin trunk full of clothing and books.



Item 1-1: SS *Marathon*, the vessel that brought my grandfather to Australia.

The *Marathon* was an elegant vessel with a pair of masts, a bowsprit like that of a clipper, and a single funnel exuding a trickle of black smoke. She was due to leave London the following day. Ernest was not particularly upset by the idea of setting out for the Antipodes. He told his aunts who had come to bid him farewell that he would only stay out in Australia for the time it would take him to accumulate a little wealth: a decade, say, at the very most.

The next morning, a doctor responsible for examining passengers leaving London found that Ernest was skinny but sufficiently healthy for the voyage. The young man was so excited about his departure for the other side of the planet that he worried little about the state of his health.

The *Marathon*—quite a rapid vessel for that epoch—reached Sydney six weeks later, enabling Ernest to set foot in Sydney on Christmas Day 1908. William Mephams and his wife Gertrude Driscoll were waiting on the wharf to welcome the young man to his new land.

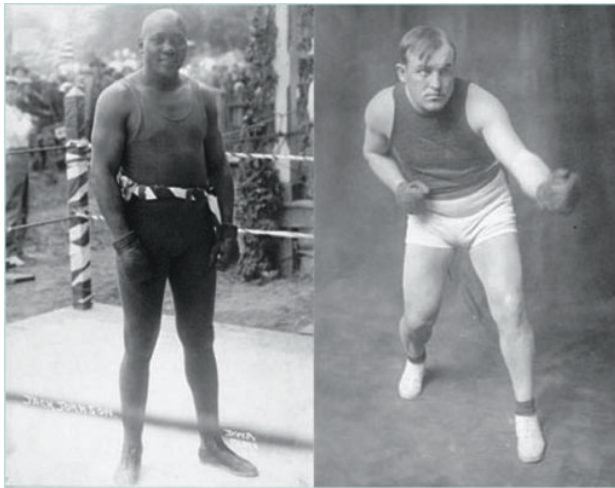
Historical boxing combat

The Mephams lived at Rushcutters Bay, which was the site of Australia's best-known boxing stadium. The fighters Tommy Burns and Jack Johnson were to meet here on 26 December 1908 for the world heavyweight title.

That Saturday morning, after waking up on Australian soil for the first time in his life, Ernest happened to be strolling around in sunny Rushcutters Bay at the moment that Burns and Johnson arrived at the stadium. Alas, the young man from London did not have enough money to pay for a seat at such an event. On that summer afternoon, boxing enthusiasts witnessed a match that had been unthinkable in the Northern Hemisphere. A black Texan, Jack Johnson, whose parents had been slaves, finally seized the world heavyweight championship from a white Canadian, Tommy Burns.



Item 1-2: Overflowing stadium at Rushcutters Bay, Boxing Day 1908.



Item 1-3: Jack Johnson [1878-1946] and Tommy Burns [1881-1955].

Much has been said about this match, which can still be viewed today on video. It was not the referee but rather the Sydney police who intervened in the 14th round to halt this one-sided combat, which looked as if it might culminate in a fatal issue. The police ordered the news filming to be stopped, and they separated the boxers. Historians now consider that Sydney police had orders to prevent the creation of sporting archives with images of a black man hammering a white boxer to death.

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This photo, with Ernest in the middle, was taken in Sydney shortly after his arrival. The people were probably from the merchant shipping world.



Item 1-4: Ernest in Sydney. Gertrude Driscoll is standing at the back.

Ernest, wearing his mother's wedding ring, was quite a dandy.



Item 1-5: Enlarged image of Ernest.

The youths in this photo have an English look:



Item 1-6: Ernest with two unidentified mates.

Into the outback

In the course of his voyages between various Australian and New Zealand ports, William Mephram was accustomed to inviting certain distinguished passengers to dine with him at the captain's table. In this way, he met up with prosperous pastoralists who owned properties in the Australian outback. They moved around in a quest for excellent breeding stock, which they would purchase and bring back to Australia. Through long conversations with such pastoralists, William Mephram had apparently imagined the idea of retiring from the merchant navy and becoming an outback land-owner, but this project never became a reality. Meanwhile, William Mephram had transmitted his enthusiasm for the outback to his 17-year-old nephew Ernest Skyvington, who dreamed of moving into the bush, learning to ride a horse, earning his living as a jackaroo (apprentice station hand) and looking after herds of animals.

Soon after reaching Sydney, Ernest got aboard a train bound for a remote region of NSW, up near the Queensland border. In his pocket, he had the

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address of one of his uncle's pastoralist contacts, who had agreed to employ the London lad as a novice stockman. Alas, when Ernest got off the train at the end of the line, he discovered that his cabin trunk had disappeared. All his material links with his motherland and his adolescence in London had suddenly evaporated, forever. Left with no more than the clothes he was standing in, Ernest still faced a long coach journey to reach his destination: Angledool Station, just south of the Queensland border.



Item 1-7: Smith's mail coach, Angledool, 1906.

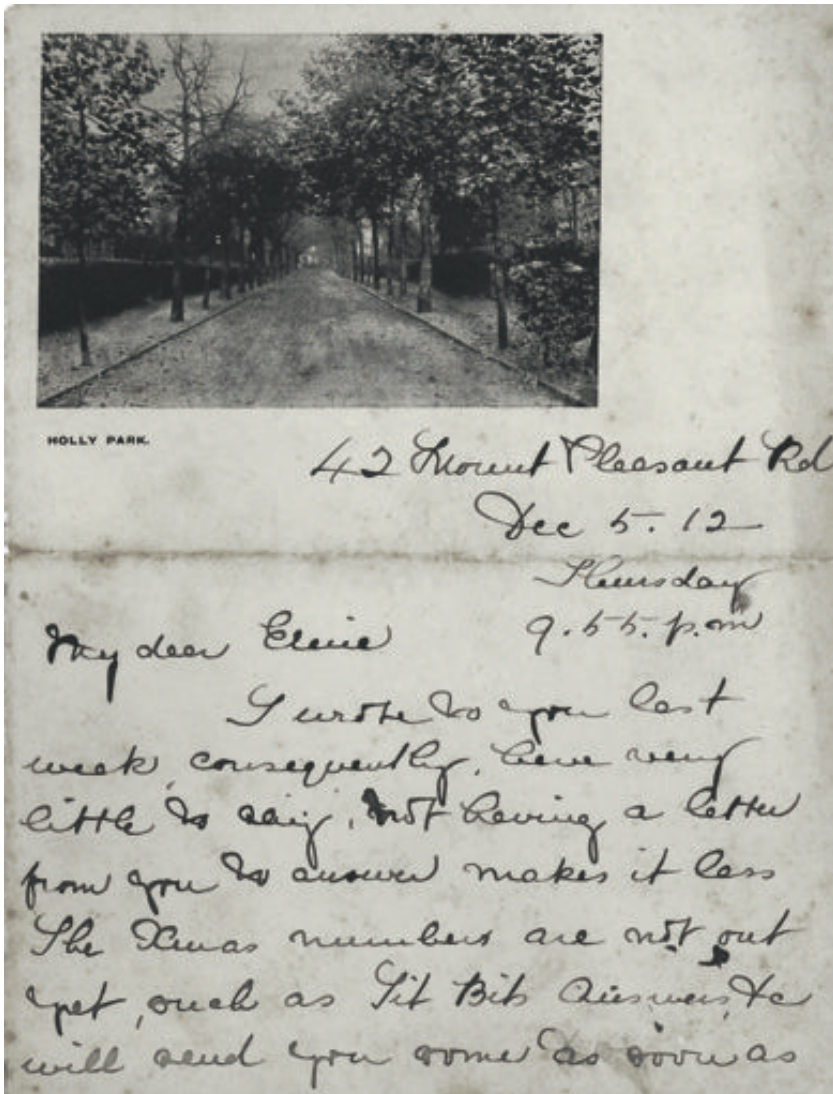
In a letter to me dated 17 February 1980, my grandfather described this tiring journey *“by train and horse-drawn coach into the backblocks of rural Australia”*. After deploring the loss of his trunk *“holding such valuables as prize books”*, he mentioned an anecdote that I visualize with amusement: *“After a couple of days and nights, I was no doubt in an exhausted condition, as I recall valiantly holding on to an elderly lady of greater weight than me to save her from unexpectedly leaving the swaying coach during the night.”*

Ernest worked as a jackaroo at Angledool Station for three years: that is, up until the start of 1912, when he was about to turn 21.

Letter from the motherland

In chapter 2, I shall describe the Mepham family context that Ernest left behind him when he set sail for Australia in 1908. Unfortunately, little has survived in the way of letters between the London Mephams and young Ernest down in the Antipodes. The following rare 4-page specimen from Ernest's aunt Louisa Mepham is dated 5 December 1912, at which time her

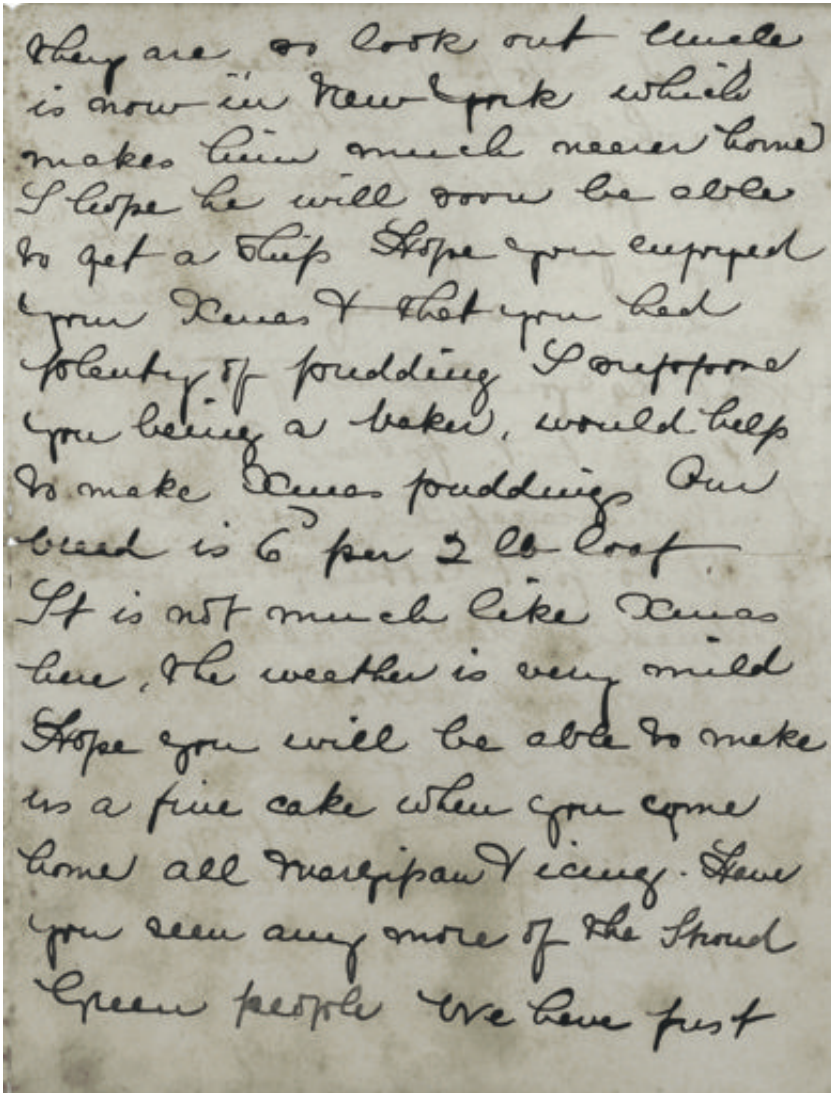
nephew had been living in the Antipodes for four years:



Item 1-8: Letter of 1912 from Louisa Mepham to Ernest Skyvington (page 1).

Louisa's letter seems to have been written on local stationery. Holly Park was a street in Islington just a block or so away to the west of Mount Pleasant Road, on the far side of the old railway line.

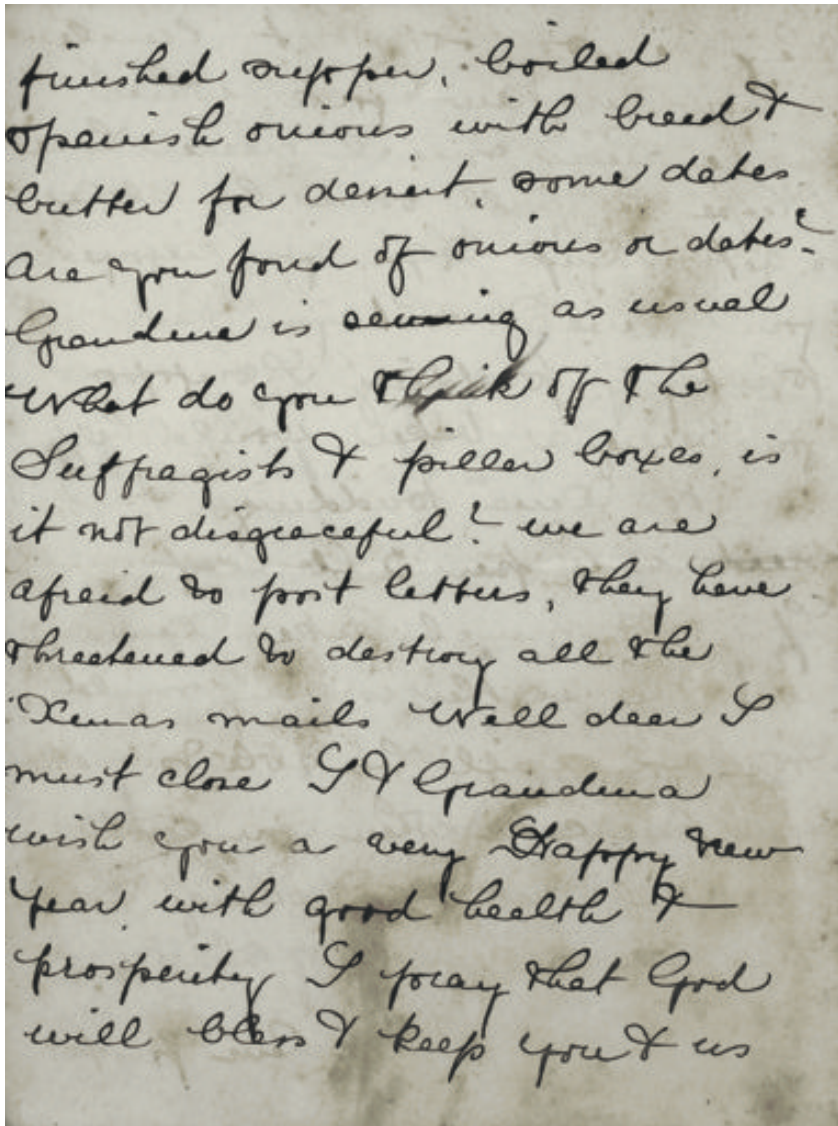
The "*Xmas numbers*" that Louisa mentions were surely supplements of London newspapers that Louisa sent habitually to her nephew. Would my grandfather, in outback Australia, still have been interested in such stuff?



They are so look out Uncle
 is now in New York which
 makes him much nearer home
 I hope he will soon be able
 to get a ship. Hope you enjoyed
 your Xmas & that you had
 plenty of pudding. I suppose
 you being a baker, would help
 to make Xmas puddings. Our
 bread is 6 per 2 lb loaf.
 It is not much like Xmas
 here, the weather is very mild.
 Hope you will be able to make
 us a fine cake when you come
 home all marzipan & icing. Have
 you seen any more of the Stroud
 Green people we have just

Item 1-9: Letter of 1912 from Louisa Mepham to Ernest Skyvington (page 2).

The fact that Louisa's brother William Mepham was now in New York gave her the impression that he was "*much nearer home*". The German U-boat menace in the waters surrounding Britain would soon put an end to this feeling. It appears that my grandfather had learned, by this time, the art of baking bread. As for English-style Xmas puddings and fine cakes, "*all marzipan and icing*", I do not know whether Ernest ever mastered such cooking. Louisa's reference to "*the Stroud Green people*" indicates that Ernest had already run into former London neighbors.



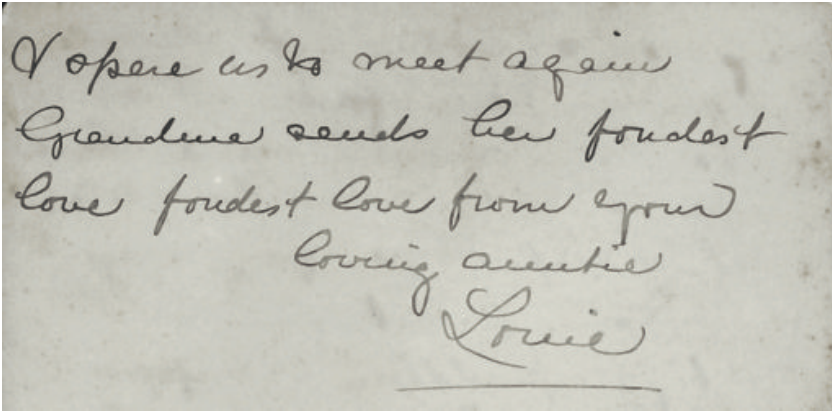
finished supper, boiled
 Spanish onions with bread &
 butter for dessert, some dates
 are you fond of onions or dates?
 Grandma is sewing as usual
 What do you think of the
 Suffragists & pillar boxes, is
 it not disgraceful? we are
 afraid to post letters, they have
 threatened to destroy all the
 Xmas mails Well dear I
 must close I & Grandma
 wish you a very Happy New
 Year with good health &
 prosperity I pray that God
 will bless & keep you & us

Item 1-10: Letter of 1912 from Louisa Mephram to Ernest Skyvington (page 3).

Louisa's description of a supper of "*boiled Spanish onions with bread and butter*" followed by dates for dessert is hardly, by modern standards, mouth-watering. We see that Louisa was a rigid-minded lady of a kind that might be described today as Victorian. Her comments suggest that she was not on the side of the courageous activists who sought equal rights for women: "*What do you think of the Suffragists and pillar boxes? Is it not disgraceful? We are afraid to post letters. They have threatened to destroy all the Xmas mails.*"

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Here is the end of Louisa's letter:



Item 1-11: Letter of 1912 from Louisa Mephram to Ernest Skyvington (page 4).

Bicycle odyssey

In a letter to me dated 12 January 1980, my grandfather said: *"I did about three years at that job and then, with my uncle's consent, I bought a bike and, in company with two brothers, sons of a sheep farmer, we pedaled with our swags strapped on, out west, and followed the western river system into Queensland. We sought work, and where not available, it was then the custom to get a tucker handout, enabling us to live off the land with the aid of a 22 rifle and fishing lines. From that experience I gained much enjoyment, valuable knowledge, together with health and strength, as I had to keep up with the others who were a bit older and heavier... not that they would have thought of letting me down. From it all, I was later able to enter ballots for selections that used to attract some 300 per ballot, and I was never successful."*

My grandfather's description of this bicycle exploit appeared to me as fanciful. I found it hard to believe that three fellows on bikes could transport enough stuff to truly *"live off the land"* and *"enter ballots for selections"* from time to time. But the adventure outlined by my grandfather was probably a reality, at least for a limited time and in a limited geographic zone. Today, I am incapable of describing Ernest Skyvington's exact itinerary between his departure from Angledool Station and the epoch of World War I. I know that certain significant events took place during that period, but I cannot always say when and where. So, instead of attempting vainly to establish some kind of plausible chronology, I shall simply set down the facts to the extent that I understand them.

Although the above extract from a letter suggests that my grandfather and his two mates headed for Queensland as soon as he left Angledool, we must imagine that, at some time in 1912 or 1913, he worked on a property in NSW in the vicinity of Breeza, enabling him to encounter the woman who would become his wife in January 1917: Kathleen Pickering. In a letter dated 15 September 1981, my grandfather answered vaguely a question about the place where he was employed at the time of that encounter: *"The property was a few miles from the Pickering farm..."*

There is a family legend about the first encounter between our future grandparents having taken place on the platform of the railway station at Breeza. Did Ernest meet William Pickering at that time? I would think so.

My father's sister Yvonne believes that Ernest and his mates actually rode their bicycles, at one time or another, as far south as Forbes.

Jackaroo turns to shopkeeping

By the middle of 1913, Ernest was working as a shopkeeper to the west of Emerald (Queensland). My grandfather mentioned this activity in his letter of 12 January 1980: *"Left to my own resources and its limited capital, and no selection acquisition, I had to turn to business ventures, namely stock, station and forwarding agency, general store with butchery attached..."*

When my grandfather speaks of being left to his own resources, he was evoking the absence of his uncle William Mephram. I believe that, with war on the horizon, William had returned to the English shipping world. As I said earlier on, "selection acquisition" refers to an aspect of the Australian system for the allocation of rural properties, which involved ballots.

Among objects left by Ernest Skyvington, his daughter Yvonne came upon a railway ticket dated 14 July 1913 for a return journey between two neighboring localities to the west of Emerald: Benlidi and Blackall. Since Ernest's principal customers were workers building a railway line to the west, his shop was in fact a makeshift structure on the siding at Benlidi.



Item 1-12: Train ticket towards the wilderness.

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Blackall was the home of the legendary Black Stump, which marked the Astro Station established in 1887.



Item 1-13: Alleged home of the “fair dinkum black stump”.

Places to the west of this point were said to be “beyond the black stump”. So, in the “last of lands”, Ernest had literally set up shop at the last train stop.



Item 1-14: Ernest Skyvington (white hat) outside his store.



Item 1-15: Ernest (mustache) behind his splendid cash register.

This photo (without mustache) probably dates from that same epoch:



Item 1-16: Ernest Skyvington in storeman's overalls.

London vision of Ernest's life Down Under

Those photos give the impression that Ernest's store was built out of sheets of corrugated iron fixed to an elementary wooden structure. In the heat of a Queensland summer, I would imagine that Ernest spent his days inside a dusty metallic furnace.

In July 1913, Ernest's younger aunt, 39-year-old Agnes Mephram (married in 1907 to John Lavin, referred to as "Jack"), sent him a letter. Clearly, she has a certain idea of her nephew's activities as a storekeeper, but she seems to imagine Ernest's outback store as if it were a London tearoom.

16 Hallwick Place

Monday, 7 July 1913

My dear Ernie,

Jack and I were at Grandmama's yesterday and we were reading a letter you had sent telling about your mare winning a ribbon. I was very glad indeed to read it, and more that glad to hear you are well and prospering. I hope your store will be a success if you open it, and I was saying I could imagine you with just your shirt and trousers on and an apron serving and washing up and Jack reckons you would be wiping up on your apron, but I said "not at an old established firm like Blacker and Skyvington".

Well dear Ernie I see by your letter that you will not be with us in August and I am sorry, and now I shall not look forward to seeing you, my patience has become exhausted, I can never wait very long for anything, and you said you would be home in 5 years, and now it is 6 or more and so I shall not think about it any more. I wrote a letter or two to you I suppose you got them, I told you about Jack's brother and 2 sisters going off to St Louis. They like it very much out there, which is more than I should, but they are with all the friends they care about out there and that makes all the difference. If Jack and I ever go away it will be to Canada I think I should like it there I have heard several good accounts of it, I think I should like it better than Australia it is too hot there at least I imagine so. I am glad you are keeping well, and I should like to come to your shop to get a cup of tea out of the billy-can (I don't think). Personally I should imagine Blacker and Skyvington's tea would be "It". I am getting on with my violin and it would be nice if I came to your store to bring it with me and we could pass the hat round when I had finished playing. I am teaching Jack to play the piano he would play well and quickly if he tried hard, but I think it is too hard work for him, but I never knew anything worth learning in the way of music that wasn't hard to learn, unless one is a genius then

perhaps it comes easier. I know I have to grind hard at my violin and do not mind so long as I am the victor. I work hard and conquer, and he works easy and fails, then he says mine is the easiest but those who know say otherwise. Willie is still in America, but I know Louie tells you all the news. Do the Driscolls ever write to you now, Stella is back again, I expect she is swanking about in all the fine clothes she bought in London.

She has got a husband well off, and she can spend the money on herself, but never a ½p for anybody else. Somebody we know now is home for a holiday from Canada and is longing to be back, according to their account they live much the same life there as in Australia, mostly out of doors. We are getting a good summer this year, last summer was very wet indeed. I shall be anxious to see the photo you are sending of yourself and your gee-gee whichever you said it was.

For ever so long Jack and I have been going to have our photos taken, whenever we do I will send you one I expect you will be proud to get one of Jack's, he is such a fine looking chap you know. How are your muscles now, as big as a strawberry I suppose and as hard as butter. What did you call your mare Kitty for, is that the name of your Sunday girl. You ought to see your back garden this year, no cabbages or beans but a lovely crop of weeds, Jack has been too busy with his piano to see to it, but still next month is not too late for a few winter green, so we must see what we can do, I reckon he left it because he thought you might come home in August and dig it for him, but alas you will be busy making cups of tea and cutting slices of bread and butter, etc. Well dear Ernie I am glad you are well and I hope you will keep so, I hope your shop will be a success, and I guess there are some Irishmen about out there as you remember St Patrick's Day.

With very much love from your Aunt Agnes.

We learn from this long and rambling letter that Ernest had apparently teamed up with a partner named Blacker to create the store. I would imagine that Blacker is the man on the left in item 1-14.

Letters from Ernest's uncle and his wife

Here is a first letter from William Mephram:

*42 Mount Pleasant Rd
Crouch Hill
London N*

3 September 1913

Dear Ernie,

You'll be very surprised to see I am home at last, 1912 has been very kind to me, I have got a permanent Comm and is the Donald SS C/o of a 4,500 ton ships trading from New York to Central America and owing to the ships being laid up I took the opportunity of coming home, they look so well here all speak so fondly of you they long to see you but fully realize that you can't come till things brighten up again. Mother bustles about just as much as ever and Louie is the same old stick and the old place is the same as ever and everything is so clean, never want to see Australia again, to me it was absolutely rotten I never made enough to buy tooth picks. I hope your store venture is progressing favourably. There is certainly money in the game Gerts cousins the Youngs made their money at the store game so why shouldn't you. Address my letters in future to Captain Mephram C/o Donald SS Co 18 Broadway New York USA and I will always get them safely. I went and spent the evening at Agnes' place and she is very happy and spoke of you the whole evening, they all long to see you but realize your career has to be made before you can come home. I return to New York about the 13th of this month to resume our running. I could not bring Gertie with me as it meant £90 and I hadn't that to spare so she remained in New York till my return. Send me a letter (no matter how short) I do not forget you Ernie, but lately over in New York I have my hands full and didn't write when I should have done. Louie is writing to you this mail.

*Believe Me Ever
Your fond Uncle Will*

It is ironical that William, who had played an instrumental role in helping his young nephew to reach Australia and discover the outback, seems to have become totally disenchanted with that country.

Four months later, William sent Ernest another letter from London:

SS Lillie
Wallsend on Tyne

24 January 1914

Dear Ernie,

Very glad to get your letters and to know of your progress. This is the second time I've been home in 5 months so I am doing well. I feel Ernie I ought to warn you re your business transactions with your partner, nothing is valid unless signed and agreed upon by both parties. I paid for my knowledge so I give it to you feeling sure you'll accept it in the right spirit. Have a full written undertaking, if he's a fair minded man, he will be quite willing and if he objects well, comments are needless. You deserve to get on, and myself and those at home who love you are most anxious for your welfare. I have explained the conditions at home to them (under which you live) and tho they would like to see you yet they know it's impossible just yet awhile so they are contented to just hear from you. Captain Mephram 18 Broadway New York USA always finds me. Mother and Louie take such a keen interest in all you say in your letters. Grandma is so well, just fancy nearly 80 years and bustles around in great style. Well Ernie, look after yourself, I am always with you in thought.

Your fond Uncle Will

Once again, we hear that Ernest was working with a business partner.

Punters

In that first month of 1914, Ernest received a postcard from a fellow in Sydney named Bert, who was clearly aware that Ernest was persevering in his work as a storekeeper while hoping that he might be a lucky winner, one day, in the Down Under system that allocated rural land in a kind of lottery.

1 Cromwell St
Leichhardt, Sydney

9 January 1914

Dear Erne,

I don't see where you have drawn any land yet. You haven't! Then why stick out in the wilds. But of course you must have the "mun". That reminds me, I'll have to be looking for a gold mine soon. Am still having a good time, but I can't last forever. I've been to Randwick three times but always come away lighter. On

two occasions I had 1 win out of six races. I have a strong liking for a certain horse for the Doncaster McKinnon on April 20th. Nominations just out — let you “in the know” when next writing.

With best wishes for 1914

Bert

World War I

The United Kingdom declared war on Germany on 4 August 1914. That date represents the start of Australia's participation in World War I.

Today, many Australians are surprised to learn that, throughout World War I, military conscription never existed in Australia. In other words, the 60,000 Australians who died at Gallipoli (in today's Turkey) and on the Western Front (France) were all enlisted as volunteers in the AIF (Australian Imperial Force). My aunt Yvonne once asked her father about his activities during the war years. Ernest had apparently contracted a bout of typhoid fever towards the end of his cycling adventure, and his fragile state of health prevented him from enlisting in the AIF.

I too brought up this subject in letters to my grandfather, who replied on 6 April 1980: “[...] *that leads me to deal with your query about my feelings at the opening of World War I. At that time, I made contact with a schoolmate at the furthest west terminus of a railway line in Queensland. This fellow was a member of a team of drovers who had delivered a large mob of cattle from the Northern Territory to the nearest point at which they could be railed to the coast. And, as I was one of a very few around, he recognized me sufficiently to inquire who I was, and came over and introduced himself. As he had no ties and a rail ticket to accompany the cattle, and for which he would collect wages, away he went. And the next time I met him was likewise by accident when we had breakfast together at the Steyne Hotel, Manly, several years after the war. After the cattle trip and spending his earnings from it, he volunteered, whilst I remained out west connected with a project that was government-sponsored as important to the war effort. So, there was no pressure on me to leave, rather the reverse, plus that my financial resources were at stake, as I had no one to look after my interests.*”

Initially, Ernest's customers had been building a railway line for purely civilian reasons. It was intended to enable outback Queensland pastoralists to convey their wool and livestock to the coast. My grandfather suggests that this railroad project had become (in the second half of 1914, no doubt) an element of the war effort.

Ernest's chance encounter in Manly

I jump forward in time to evoke a chance encounter at the Steyne Hotel, mentioned in my grandfather's letter of 6 April 1980. My father's sister Yvonne recalls exactly what happened, and when. When my grandfather spoke of an encounter "*several years after the war*", he was referring in fact to a Sydney visit during the 1970s (well after the death of my grandmother Kathleen Pickering in 1964). My grandfather was staying at the Steyne Hotel on the Manly beachfront.



Item 1-17: Steyne Hotel, Manly (NSW).

Ernest went down for breakfast in the dining room, where a man asked him if he might share his table. The outcome of that chance encounter was amazing. My grandfather and the other fellow soon realized that they had been schoolmates back in England at Stroud Green [item 2-17 and 2-18]. And this fellow (whose name I do not know) gave my grandfather a couple of precious photos [items 2-15 and 2-16]. We seem to have guardian angels!

I have the impression that the unnamed old friend at the Steyne Hotel in the 1970s was no doubt the same "*schoolmate at the furthest west terminus of a railway line in Queensland*" whom my grandfather had encountered at the outbreak of World War I.

Love letters

I believe that my future grandparents Ernest Skyvington and Kathleen Pickering must have known each other for four or five years before getting married. Much of their courtship would have been conducted at a distance, by correspondence. Two chaste specimens of such letters have survived. They were written on stationery bearing the printed letterhead of the Beulah Flats in Milson's Point (Sydney), but both letters seem to have been sent from Kathleen's home town in outback NSW, Breeza.

28 January 1914

Dear Ernie

Just after posting your letter today the postman came and brought your packet and I must thank you very much for it, it is just lovely and I have it on my arm now. I will keep it as long as I live and will always think of you when I look at it.

I told you all of the available news this morning, only that we have had a terrific dust storm this afternoon and we are nearly all choked with dust. Miss MacPherson's sister went to Tasmania today for a holiday I am thinking that she will have a fairly rough passage. Thanking you again for the nice bangle (I really should scold you for extravagance). I will say good-bye.

Kind regards from all at home and from Kit

The second letter, six months later on, is even more cold and maidenly.

20 July 1914

Dear Ernie

You owe me a letter but as I am doing nothing at present, I thought I would write you a few lines. The weather has been very cold here these last couple of weeks. We are nearly all frozen and we have had Mamma in bed with a slight attack of bronchitis but I am very pleased to say that she is better and up again. After losing our dear Daddy we are doubly anxious if anyone is ill. Yesterday being Sunday we went for a short walk in the afternoon, up to the suspension bridge and got a bunch of wild flowers. They are blooming early this year. I've been expecting a letter from you, but as none came I came to the conclusion that you were busy, or had fallen in love and got married.

I haven't been to any of the theatres lately so I cannot tell you anything in that line, but I am going to see a girl friend of mine who is taking part in an ama-

teur affair on the 5th of August and we are all excitement for her to be perfect in her part so I help her all I can and act the part with her so that she has two or three rehearsals in a week. We are fairly busy here although there are not many visitors to Sydney just now. All at home wish to be remembered to you and are quite anxious to know when you are coming to Sydney. I think you said you played bridge. They will have you playing every night when you come here if you can.

Our brother King has grown a big boy and quite a man. He is very pleased with himself because I promised to go riding with him next Sunday and he is taking me to a dance sometime in August. You never mention Kitty now. I hope she is well and you give her a squeeze round the neck for me. They have had six inches of snow in Blackheath. I'd like to be there.

Hoping you are well. I am always yours sincerely, Kitty

I try to imagine the identity of the creature referred to as Kitty towards the end of this letter. Was it a pet animal (maybe a cat), up in Queensland, that symbolized Ernest's distant loved one? In any case, the tone of the love affair between Ernie and Kit, as revealed by these letters, was not torrid.

Finally, Ernest took time off from his business activities in the vicinity of Blackall to travel down to North Sydney where he met up with his fiancée, who was working as the desk clerk in a guest house in tiny Beulah Street, Kirribilli, which could well be one of the buildings seen in this recent photo:



Item 1-18: Beulah Street, Kirribilli.

Last letter to Ernest from Uncle Will

I would imagine that this was the last letter that my grandfather received from his uncle William Mephram:

*Donald Steamship Company (Incorporated)
Steamer Amelia
Havana, Cuba*

30 November 1916

My dear Boy

I suppose it's about time I wrote to you seeing we've had 3 letters from you, but I've had, and am still having an anxious time, as indeed are all captains, avoiding submarines. I suppose you've heard they are working off the North American coast now, they sank 5 ships outside of New York 3 weeks ago, so I suppose my turn will come too, if my lucks bad, but I feel it's a mean death and I would rather die fighting than be sunk without warning and be unable to offer the least resistance. Well Ernie these are strenuous times and everyone nearby is put out and suffering by the war. By the way if you have a photo of Kitty, I would like to have one, Louie told me she had a photo of Kitty on horseback and I would like one like that. Received your photo, homestead and works and was very pleased, but I don't like your moustache. Cut it off. You are better clean shaved. Glad you liked your dear mother's photo. I am afraid, if I had kept it much longer, the salt air would have ruined it, as it does all photos. Well, Ernie, I am pleased to know that drink is not one of your failings and trust it will never be. No man can drink and work and success, if you drink you are doomed just as sure as the sun sets, make no mistake about that.

Well Ernie my boy, God keep you safely. Give my love to Kitty. I wish you all possible happiness.

I remain ever your fond uncle Will

For the moment, I have never found any document indicating the fate of my grandfather's uncle.

Marriage in Sydney

Ernest and Kathleen were married at the Anglican Church of St John the Baptist in North Sydney on 3 January 1917. The witnesses were the bride's sister Gertrude Pickering and their brother-in-law Leonard Moore (husband of Lilian Pickering). Curiously, Ernest indicated on the marriage certificate that his father's name was Henry (instead of William) and that his mother was Elizabeth (rather than Eliza).



Item 1-19: Anglican Church of St John the Baptist, Kirribilli.

The marriage certificate indicates that Ernest's father was deceased. I never got around to asking my grandfather what made him think that his father William Skyvington [born in 1868] was no longer alive. I shall explain later on in this book that I discovered by chance (on the first day of spring in the year 2014) that Ernest's father did not die until 1959.

Birth of children

After the ceremony, the newlyweds traveled back up north to the place in outback Queensland where Ernest had his store. During the months that followed, the couple left this locality and settled in Mount Larcom: a township near the coast, due east of Blackall, not far from the port of Gladstone. Was this the coastal terminus of the railway line that was being built out near Blackall? Ernest transferred his business activities to this new location.

As I said in the preface [page XXX], my father “Bill” Skyvington was born at the Hillcrest Hospital in nearby Rockhampton on 16 October 1917. A daughter, Yvonne Elizabeth Skyvington, was born at the same place on 1 May 1919.

Move to Sydney

In his business activities associated with the stores in Queensland, Ernest Skyvington would have normally been required to handle his bookkeeping. But I have the impression that these accounting operations soon became a passion. In the following extract from his letter of 12 January 1980, my grandfather explains that his outback business activities had *“[...] led me into contact with a remittance man from England, an alcoholic accountant who had been sent out to Australia by his people in England. He interested me in accountancy, in which I added a year of full-time study in Sydney.”*

Ernest’s mentor in the Queensland outback is described as a “remittance man”: that is, a fellow who was banished by his wealthy family in Britain—no doubt because his drinking troubled them—by putting him on a ship to the Antipodes and then sending him a regular “remittance” (money) so that he would remain there forever, out of their sight.

To move to NSW with their two children, the Skyvingtons went by train to Brisbane, and then boarded a coastal vessel for the voyage down to Sydney Harbour. In Sydney, they lived in Forest Lodge, near Glebe. During that year in the city, Ernest’s wife suffered from a grave attack of empyema (a severe lung infection), and had to undergo a thoractotomy at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital. During Kathleen’s illness, her sister Florence Pickering looked after the children. Meanwhile, Ernest succeeded brilliantly in his accountancy exams.

Move to Grafton

In the following extract from the above-mentioned letter of 12 January 1980, my grandfather evokes Grafton: *"During that year in Sydney, I met an Englishman who was forging ahead in the motor industry. Among his interests was chairman of City Garage Grafton, beside a branch of his business in all capital cities. Ultimately, I invested in the City Garage and became its secretary-director..."*

Yvonne told me that the Englishman who spoke to Ernest Skyvington about an automobile business in Grafton was Charles Bennett, whose Sydney bicycle factory, *Bennett and Wood*, had created the Speedwell brand.

The Skyvingtons moved to Grafton in late 1920 or early 1921. At that time, Charles Bennett's company was known as the *City Motor Garage and Engineering Company*. When Ernest Skyvington took over the company, his main collaborators were Arthur Frewin, Charles Shaw, Lester Henkel and Eva Kearns [see item 1-29].

Excursions into the bush

Ernie and Kit (as they were called by their friends) were both accustomed to the Australian bush. Since they were now motorized, the family got into the habit of moving around on excursions into various rural regions.

These photographs were taken on a rural property belonging to family friends at a place called Blandford, not far from Kathleen Pickering's birth-place, Murrurrundi [see chapter 5 of this document]. Here's a modern photo of the beautiful Blandford landscape:



Item 1-20: Pages River at Blandford, NSW.

Today, when I hear of this place in rural Australia named Blandford, I am struck by a trivial but weird coincidence of which not even my grandfather would have been aware. Readers will see in a moment, in chapter 3 of the present document, that a place of the same name, Blandford in Dorset, was the ancestral home of the Skivingtons.



Item 1-21: Bill and Yvonne in a stream at Blandford, near Murrurrundi, circa 1922.



Item 1-22: My grandmother and the children at Blandford.

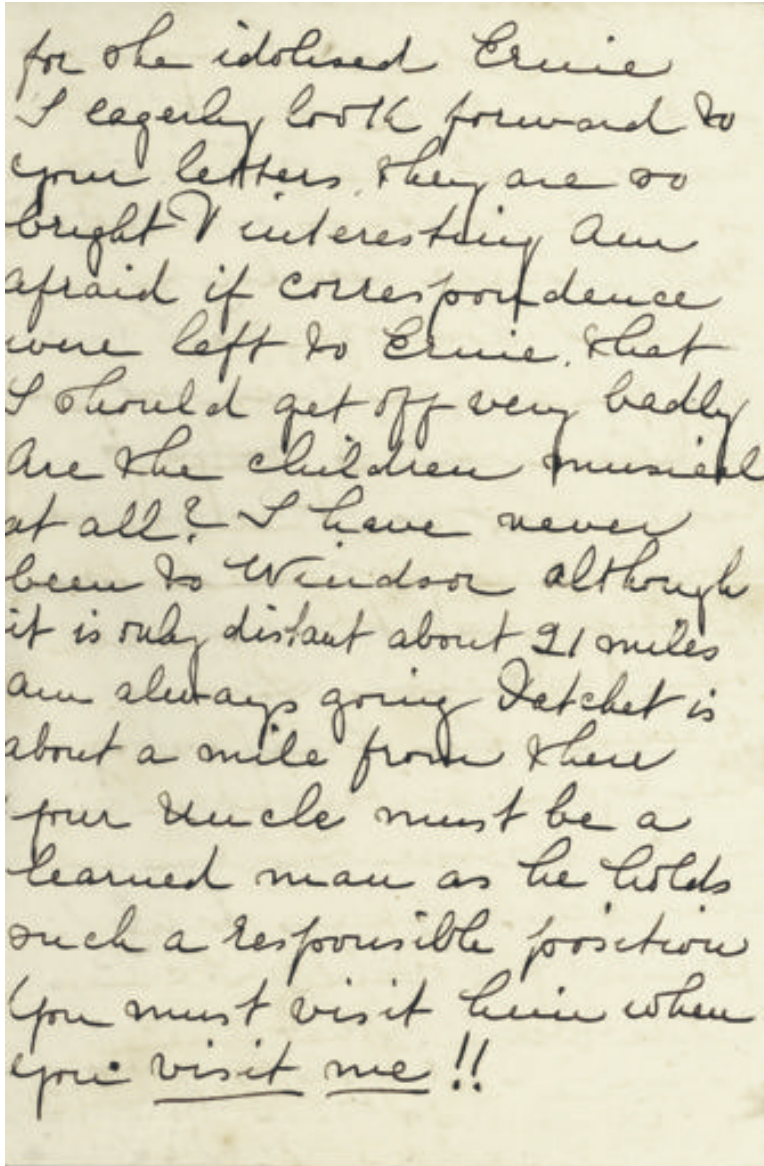
Photos of Ernest's children reach London

On 8 October 1923, Louisa Mephram sent a letter, not to Ernest, but to her nephew's wife, Kathleen ("Kitty"). Louisa was living, by that time, at 11 Trinder Road

So glad you are interested in church work & are not identified with the present age in ignoring Religion. Is it not dreadful? Trinder Rd
Oct 8. 23
My dear Kitty
You cannot imagine how pleased I was with one of the children. They look lovely what a bonny girl (pounce is! but no likeness to our family. She greatly resembles you! Bill is just like his father was at his age & he greatly resembled his mother. They look clever intelligent children. How I would love to see them! can imagine how proud Ernie's mother would have been of them.

Item 1-23: Letter of 1923 from Louisa Mephram to Ernest's wife (page 1).

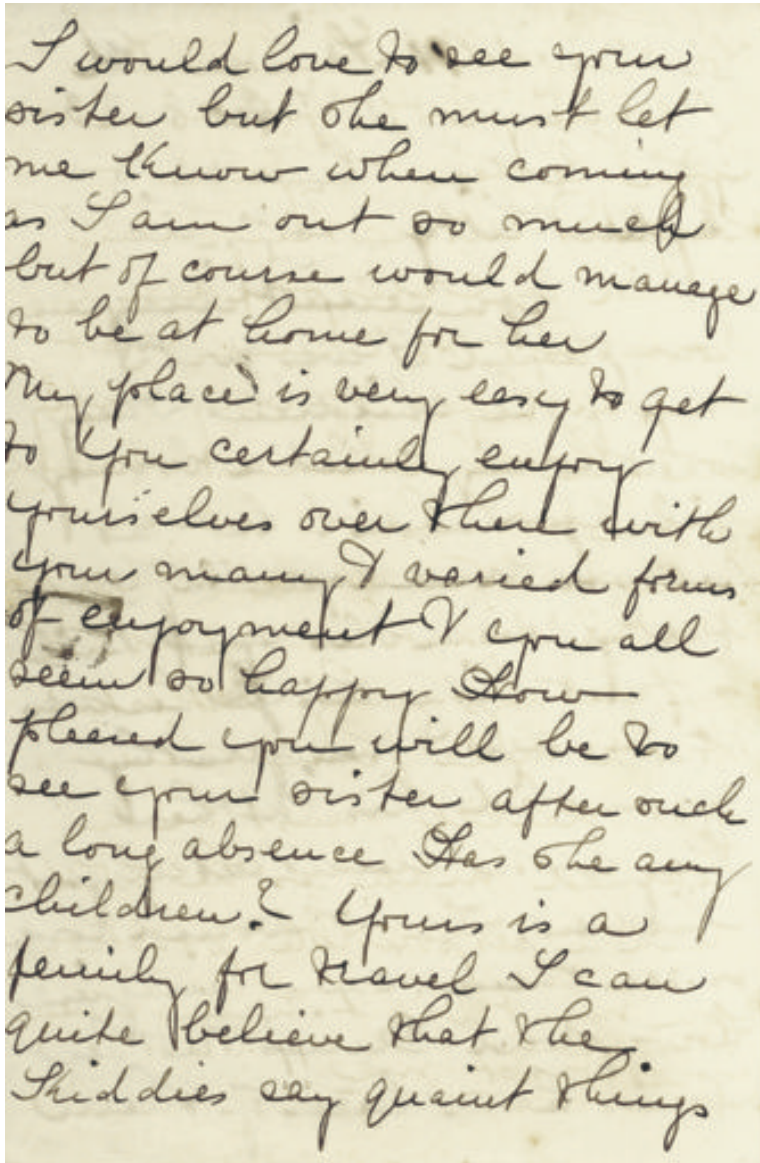
The words in the top left-hand corner are edifying: *"So glad you are interested in church work, and are not identified with the present age in ignoring religion. Is it not dreadful? The majority of people are leading animals' lives, all materialism."*



for the idolised Ernie
I eagerly look forward to
your letters. They are so
bright & interesting. I am
afraid if correspondence
were left to Ernie, that
I should get off very badly.
Are the children musical
at all? I have never
been to Windsor although
it is only distant about 9 miles
and always going. Datchet is
about a mile from there.
Your Uncle must be a
learned man as he holds
such a responsible position.
You must visit him when
you visit me!!

Item 1-24: Letter of 1923 from Louisa Mephram to Ernest's wife (page 2).

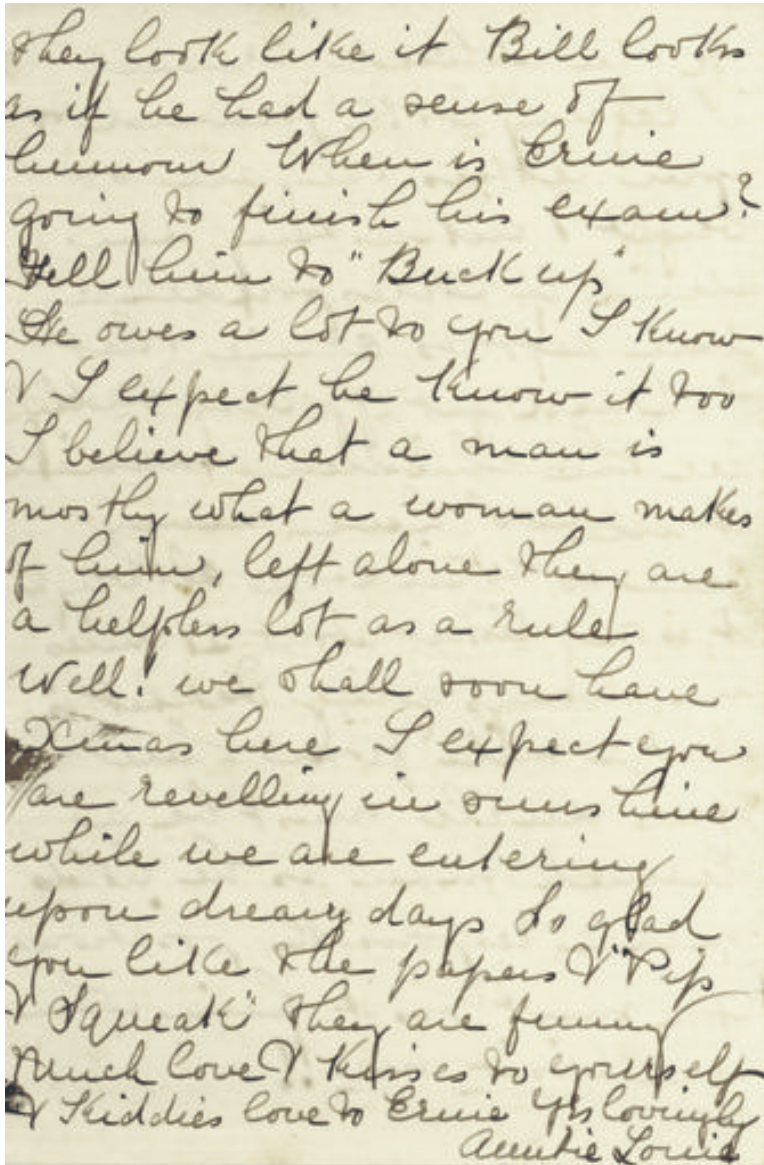
The reference to the Windsor neighborhood and Datchet concern my grandmother's uncle John Pickering (described at length in chapter 6).



I would love to see your
sister but she must let
me know when coming
as I am out so much
but of course would manage
to be at home for her
My place is very easy to get
to You certainly enjoy
yourselves over there with
your many & varied forms
of enjoyment & you all
seem so happy How
pleased you will be to
see your sister after such
a long absence Has she any
children? Yours is a
family for travel I can
quite believe that they
find the very quaint things

Item 1-25: Letter of 1923 from Louisa Mepham to Ernest's wife (page 3).

The sister about to visit England was Irene Pickering [1900-1972], whom I present in chapters 5 and 6.



They look like it Bill looks
 as if he had a sense of
 humour When is Ernie
 going to finish his exam?
 Tell him to "Buck up"
 He owes a lot to you I know
 I expect he know it too
 I believe that a man is
 mostly what a woman makes
 of him, left alone they are
 a helpless lot as a rule
 Well! we shall soon have
 Xmas here I expect you
 are revelling in our time
 while we are entering
 upon dreary days So glad
 you like the papers "Pip
 & Squeak" they are funny
 Much love & kisses to yourself
 & Kiddies love to Ernie Yrs lovingly
 Auntie Louie

Item 1-26: Letter of 1923 from Louisa Mepham to Ernest's wife (page 4).

The judgment of the spinster Louisa Mepham on the question of men is no less edifying than her thoughts on religion: *"I believe that a man is mostly what a woman makes of him."*

By today's standards, the cartoon characters Pip and Squeak (a dog and a penguin) were rather dull, and it is hard to understand what made them so popular in England at the end of World War I.

Villiers Street in Grafton

In Grafton, the Skyvingtons lived in a spacious house in Villiers Street, with a private tennis court in the backyard. As a child, I knew this place well.



Item 1-27: Left to right: Kit, Ernie, John Unwin and Norah Hayes. Yvonne and Bill.

Tennis afternoons were a central element in the social life of my grandparents. In these two photos, Ernie is smoking his familiar pipe.



Item 1-28: Members of my grandfather's tennis club.

City Motor Garage

In 1925, Ernest Skyvington's business became a Ford dealership.



Item 1-29: Prince Street façade of Ernest Skyvington's business in Grafton.

The business soon adopted a shortened name: the *City Motor Garage*.

Automobiles

Photos of the Skyvington family often included an automobile, because motor vehicles were at the center of the preoccupations of my grandfather... and (later) my father.



Item 1-30: Rural excursion.



Item 1-31: Rural excursion.

Admirers of old automobiles will have recognized that the Skyvingtons were moving around in a 1926 Ford Model T roadster.

World War II

Earlier on in this chapter, I evoked the question of how my grandfather avoided being sent to the terrible battlefronts of the so-called “Great War”... in which case I would probably not have been here today. Similar questions arise concerning the activities of my father in the context of World War II. As a child, I remember my father telling me that he had been involved in the Light Horse Brigade. Naturally, the idea that my father might have been a mounted cavalryman pleased me immensely... but there was a problem, which I never dared to mention explicitly: *What had happened to his horse, and his fancy uniform, and his sword?* In fact, it is only quite recently that I have obtained satisfactory answers (thanks to the Internet) to those naive childhood questions.

Ever since World War I, Australia’s operations in the horse-based military arena had been greatly respected, not only through the actions in conflict of members of our Light Horse brigades, but also as an exporter of excellent horses to certain Old World nations. Around 1937, however, military chiefs in Australia realized that traditional cavalry was a thing of the past. Worse still, horse breeding had declined to such a point that the idea of maintaining Light Horse brigades was no longer plausible. Consequently, in the space of a year or so, Australia’s old-fashioned horse brigades evolved into machine gun regiments. But the “Light Horse” expression subsisted for a while, along with nostalgic superficially-equestrian elements such as plumed slouch hats. This photo, dated 1938, shows a group of “lighthorsemen” being moved on the back of a truck.



Item 1-32: Members of the Australian Light Horse Brigade, 1938.

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Here is a recent photo of a vintage specimen of that vehicle: the famous Ford V8 truck of 1938, which would have been distributed in northern NSW by Ernest Skyvington's Grafton-based business.



Item 1-33: Vintage specimen of the 1938 Ford V8 truck.

Here is a revealing photo of the so-called *15th Light Horse camp* set up in Grafton in 1939:



Item 1-34: The 15th Light Horse camp in Grafton, 1939.

We can use modern images of vintage vehicles to identify some of those lovely “motorized steeds” lined up alongside the tents of the Light Brigade.



Item 1-35: Ford utility of 1934.



Item 1-36: Ford utility of 1939.

As a “lighthorseman”, my father (aided at times by my mother, an expert driver) was involved in the supply and servicing of such vehicles to military camps from Grafton up into Queensland.

I sometimes wonder whether the expression “Light Horse”, in my father’s mind, might have had nothing to do with real-life animals and old-fashioned cavalrymen. It probably meant, for him, “low horsepower vehicles”, such as those elegant two-seater Ford utilities of the 1930s.

Marriage of my future parents

Bill Skyvington and Kath Walker were married on Australia Day 1940 in Grafton's Anglican Christ Church Cathedral.

383	1940 26 th January Grafton Municipality	King Mephan Skyvington Ernest Kathleen Walker	Melba Butler Home Duties	Grafton South Grafton
Married at <u>Christ Church Cathedral</u> <u>Grafton</u>		The Consents of _____ were given in writing to the Marriage of the Bridegroom. The Consents of _____ were given in writing to the Marriage of the Bride.		
According to the rites of the <u>Church of England</u>				

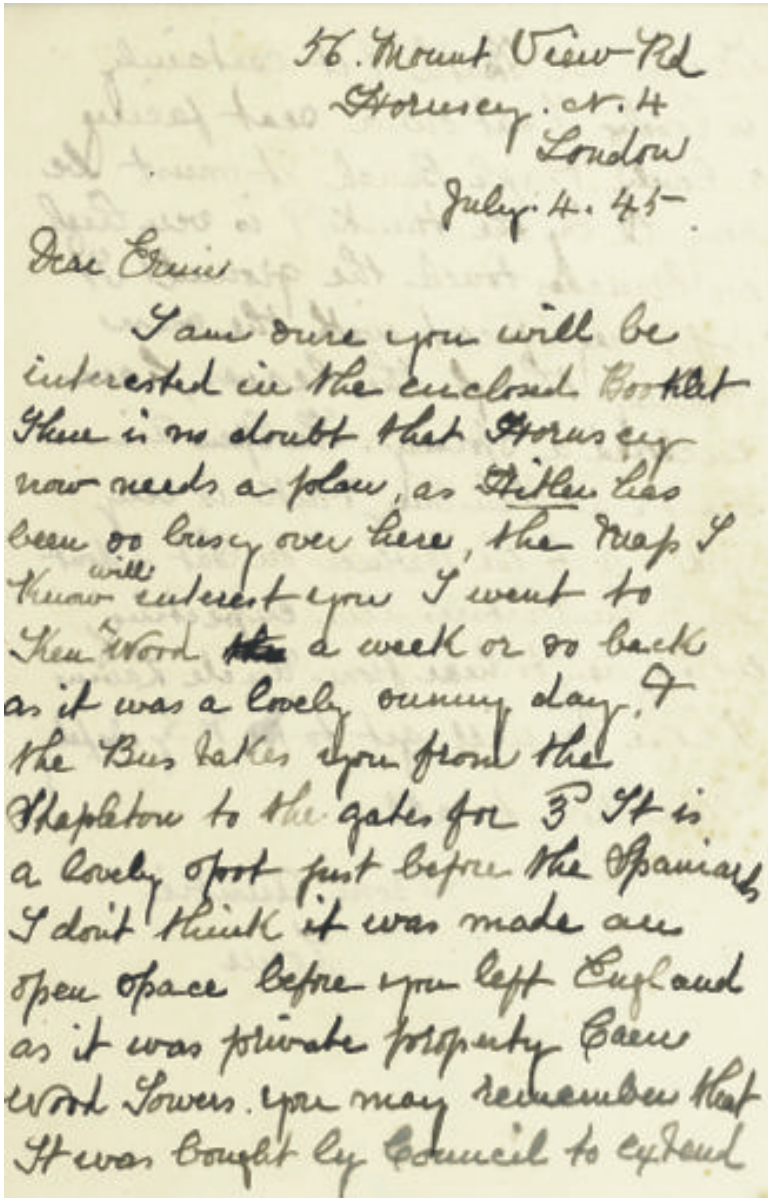
Bachelor	Blackhampton Queensland	Years 22	Ernest William Skyvington Kathleen Pickering	Manager Bily Motor Garage
Spinster	South Grafton N.S.W.	22	Charles Henry Walker (deceased) Mary Jane Kennedy	Farmer
This Marriage was solemnized between us A. M. Skyvington K. Walker			By me, <u>David H. Pettiback</u> Officiating Minister.	
In the presence of us M. M. Pettiback D. A. Phillips			RECEIVED and Registered by me, this <u>Twelfth</u> day of <u>March</u> 1940 <u>Ernest Walker</u> District Registrar.	

Item 1-37: Marriage certificate of Bill Skyvington and Kath Walker.

My father's second given name was spelt stupidly as "Mephan" instead of "Mepham". And the second given name of my maternal grandfather was said to be "Henry" instead of "Herbert". Family history has never been an exact science.

Letter of 1945 from Louisa Mephram to Ernest

On 4 July 1945, Louisa Mephram—now living at 56 Mount View Road—wrote to her nephew.

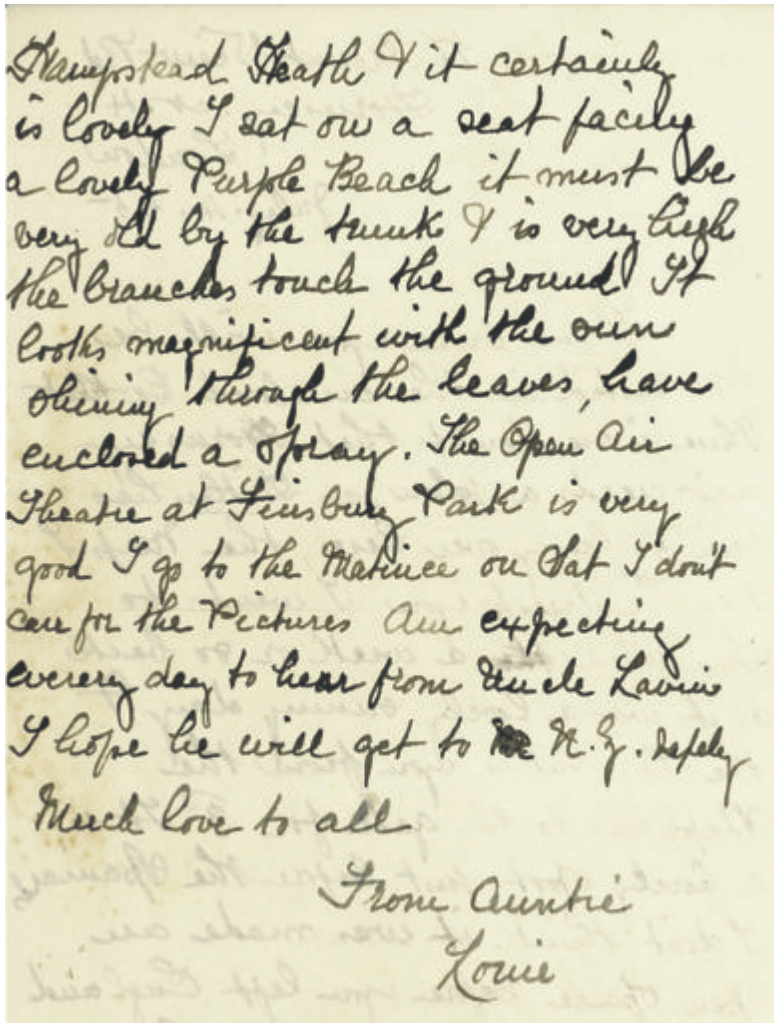


56. Mount View Rd
Storsey. nr. 4
London
July. 4. 45.

Dear Ernest

I am sure you will be interested in the enclosed Booklet. There is no doubt that Storsey now needs a plan, as Hiller has been so busy over here, the Map I know ^{will} interest you. I went to Ken Wood ~~the~~ a week or so back as it was a lovely sunny day. The Bus takes you from the Shapleton to the gates for 3. It is a lovely spot just before the Spaniards. I don't think it was made an open space before you left England as it was private property. Ken Wood says you may remember that it was bought by Council to extend

Item 1-38: Letter of 1945 from Louisa Mephram to Ernest (page 1).



Hampstead Heath & it certainly
is lovely I sat on a seat facing
a lovely Purple Beach it must be
very old by the trunk & is very high
the branches touch the ground & it
looks magnificent with the sun
shining through the leaves, have
enjoyed a spray. The Open Air
Theatre at Finsbury Park is very
good I go to the Matinee on Sat I don't
care for the Pictures am expecting
every day to hear from Uncle Lavin
I hope he will get to the N.Y. safely
Much love to all
From Auntie
Louie

Item 1-39: Letter of 1945 from Louisa Mepham to Ernest (page 2).

Kenwood House lies on the northern edge of Hampstead Heath. The nearby *Spaniards Inn* is one of London's oldest pubs. The place in Highgate referred to as Caen Wood Towers is now known as Athlone House. Finsbury Park is quite close to the old Mepham house in Mount Pleasant Road and Louisa's residence in Mount View Road.

Letter of 1945 from Louisa Mepham to Ernest's wife

A letter from Louisa, dated 9 August 1945, was sent to Ernest's wife.

56. Mount View Rd
Wynsey, London
cr. 4
Aug. 9. 45.

Dear Kitty

I had a lovely interesting letter from Ernie yesterday. The 8th & being Air Mail it was only a month coming I was so very pleased to hear that you were having such a pleasant holiday together. I am sure it must have been beneficial to both of you to have such a nice rest from home cares. I am sure the family would all be delighted to welcome you home again. I was so very grieved to hear of your sad loss & my sympathy also goes out to the wife & family. What a comfort to you at to know that your brother was so liked & respected a little while ago.

Item 1-40: Letter of 1945 from Louisa Mepham to Ernest's wife (page 1).

XXXX

(2)
 I sent you a parcel of black & white
 lace I hope it has arrived safely
 Ernie should also by now have
 received his Birth Certificate
 It was very interesting to ~~the~~ hear
 that Ernie has met an old
 resident of Stroud Green. Mr Gibberd
 who kept the Greengrocers shop has
 been dead for some years. He had
 3 daughters 2 of them married 2
 brothers named Shiggins who were also
 the sons of Stroud Green trades people
 They still have premises in Stroud
 Green Rd & carry on a large wholesale
 business under the name of Gibberd
 they manufacture sweets chocolates
 fruits &c & they export to all parts
 abroad. I often see their motor
 going from their premises I suppose
 to the docks I am cooking
 forward to the papers & photos of the

Item 1-41: Letter of 1945 from Louisa Mephem to Ernest's wife (page 2).

I can find no traces in NSW of the greengrocer from Stroud Green named Gibberd.

(3)

N.Y. wedding From her letters to me I think Freda is very nice I am sure you two would get on very nicely together as she is so homely, she loves her home & garden Uncle Jack says she has a lovely home & most beautiful garden, he cannot attempt to describe it Like you she makes her letters a Pen Picture I do hope you will meet I know she will be interested in the children as she was a Schoolmistress & is fond of children I do hope you will be happy in her new home, if she has time to write to me I should be most interested to hear about it I have sent her a book which may interest I had a book lent to me some time ago which I thought was most thrilling & uncommon

Item 1-42: Letter of 1945 from Louisa Mephram to Ernest's wife (page 3).

Louisa's sister Agnes had died in Islington in 1938. Her widowed husband John Lavin ("Uncle Jack") had later moved out to New Zealand. Maybe he had remarried a schoolmistress named Freda, and this was the wedding that Louisa mentioned.

(4)
if it is to be had over then I could
recommend it. It is called
"Roots" 129th Thous.
By Naomi Jacobs
Well dear I will close as it is
getting late I am keeping well
am thankful to say Love to
Ernie & all the family
Much love to yourself
Yr loving Auntie
L Mephams

Item 1-43: Letter of 1945 from Louisa Mephams to Ernest's wife (page 4).

On the first page of this letter, Louisa referred to the death of "King" Pickering in a road accident at Gunnedah on 16 June 1945.

On the last page, Louisa referred to a book by the Yorkshire novelist Naomi Jacob [1884-1964], known for her masculine appearance and lesbian behavior. The UK Amazon website proposes quite a few books by this Jewish author, who was recently compared to contemporary pulp-fiction novelists such as Barbara Taylor Bradford and Barbara Cartland,

My father becomes a grazier

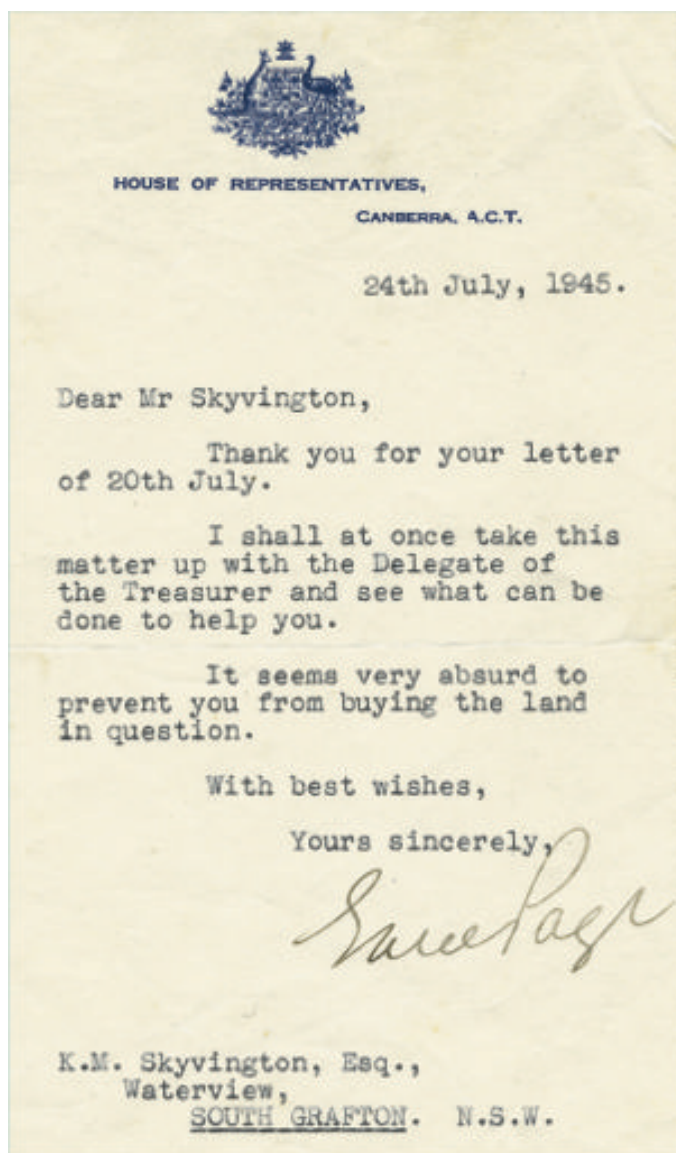
In July 1945 (when I was 4 years old), my 27-year-old father had been working, ever since leaving school, as an automobile mechanic in his father's Ford business in Prince Street, Grafton. His dream, for ages, had consisted of purchasing land and becoming a grazier. In July 1945 (a month before the surrender of Japan), he finally found a small property on the outskirts of South Grafton that he was able to afford. Alas, a wartime law (designed to persuade men to join the war effort) limited the acquisition of grazing land to existing graziers. Shocked by this obstacle, my father appealed to the local representative of the Country Party and former Australian prime minister, Sir Earle Page.



Item 1-44: Sir Earle Page [1880-1961].

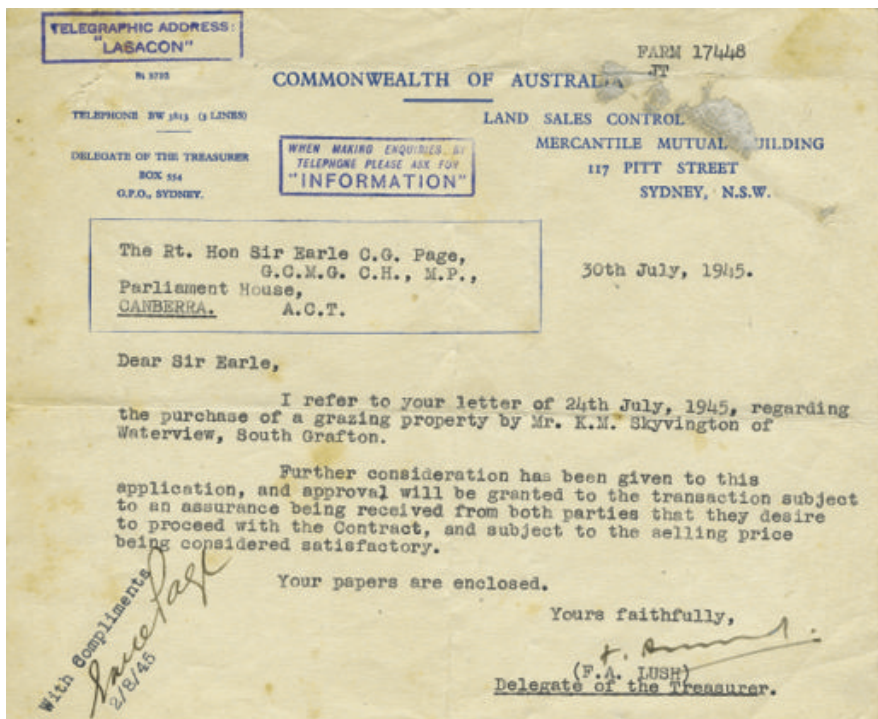
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Page replied that he would try to unblock the situation with the help of the Delegate of the Treasurer.



Item 1-45: Letter from Earle Page to my father.

A few days later, the Delegate of the Treasurer sent a positive response to Earle Page who (on 2 August 1945) typed "*With compliments*" in the left-hand corner, signed the document, and forwarded it to my father.



Item 1-46: Letter from the Delegate of the Treasurer to Earle Page.


In September 1945, my father obtained a registered stock brand. As a symbolic reminder of his past contacts with Ford vehicles, he chose V8.



Item 1-47: One of my father's two branding irons.

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Here is the certificate concerning this brand:



New South Wales.

~~STOCK AND BRANDS BRANCH,~~
19th September 1945
SYDNEY, 193

REGISTRATION OF STOCK BRANDS ACT, 1921.
FORM 5.

APPLICATION No. 99562

This is to Certify that KING MEPHAM SKYVINGTON
of WATERVIEW, SOUTH CRAFTON
has this day been registered as the proprietor of the Brand shown in the
margin hereof for use on horses and cattle, in terms of the provisions of the
abovenamed Act.

H.M. SHAW
Actg. Registrar of Brands.
per 


L8

ASMS 10.34 21 2116 A. J. KEENE, L.A.O., Govt. Printer

Item 1-48: Certificate for my father’s V8 brand.

And here is the receipt for the price of the brand registration: 10 shillings.

NEW SOUTH WALES.

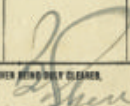

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE.

No. N 8352

RECEIVED

On	From	Receipt No.	By Cash.	By Cheque.	Exchange included.
3/9/45	K.M. SKYVINGTON WATERVIEW SOUTH CRAFTON				
CREDIT A/C. No. 27	THE SUM OF TEN SHILLS. REGISTRATION OF BRAND	8352	10 0		

IF PAYMENT HAS BEEN MADE BY CHEQUE, THIS RECEIPT IS ISSUED SUBJECT ONLY TO THE CHEQUE OR ACCOUNT OF WHICH IT IS GIVEN BEING FIRST CLEARED.

Signature of
Accounting Officer 


Item 1-49: Registration fee receipt.

Over a year before acquiring his first bush paddock, my father purchased a bay horse from our Waterview neighbor Jim Roche. Then, in 1946, he purchased a brown mare and her bay filly from our neighbor Bill Moran.

9th March 1944

Received from Bill Skivington
the sum of £6 for purchase of one
bay horse, branded 3.

Signed J. P. Roche.

No. 1  September 20th 1946

Received from K. M. Skivington
the sum of Fourteen Pounds
being payment for one brown mare
branded T and one bay filly unbranded

£14-0-0 W. V. Moran

Item 1-50: Receipts for the purchase of horses.

First letter of 1947 from Louisa Mepham to Ernest

On 10 February 1947, Louisa Mepham wrote a letter to her nephew of which only the first page has survived.

56 Mount View Rd
Worcester, London
cr. 4
Feb 10. 47

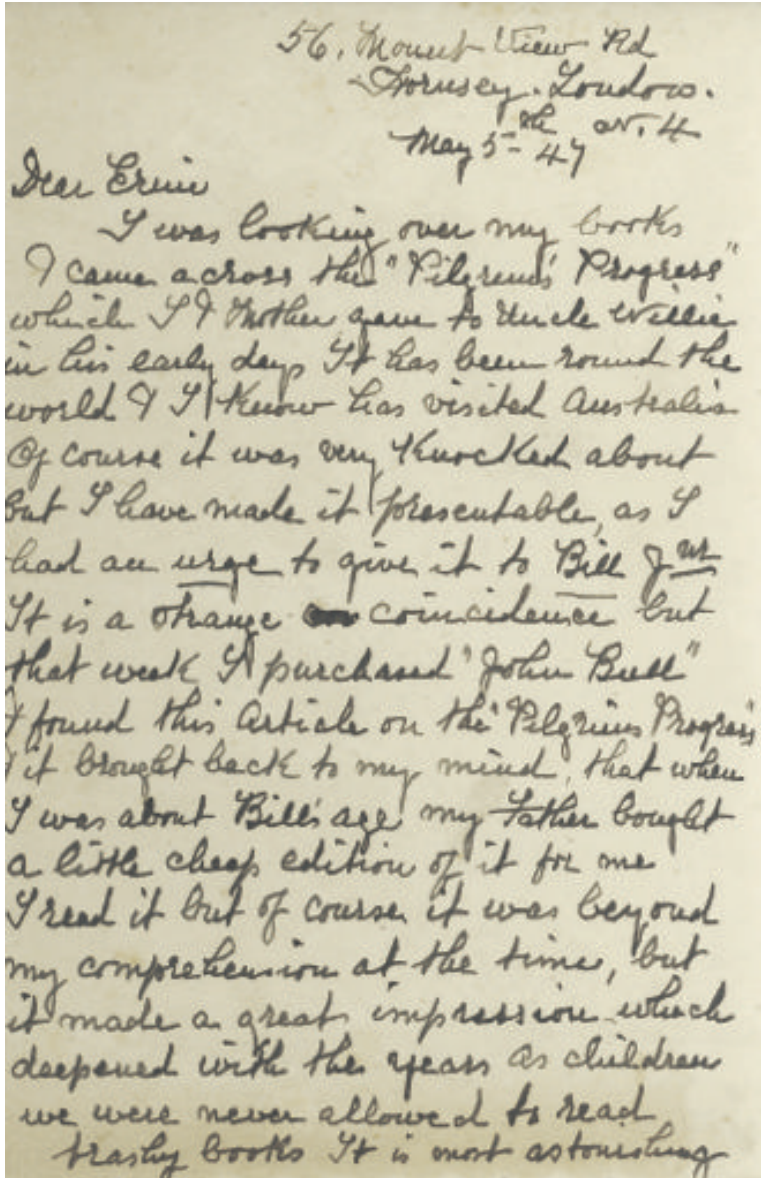
Dear Ernest

I hope you will be interested in the 2 books enclosed. I know that "Ship that Pass" will be of great interest to you. I have read it many times & each time it has had an added interest. Years ago I sent it to Uncle Willie & marked certain passages that particularly struck me. I asked him to mark some. You will see that often we have thought alike. I think it has travelled nearly all over the world but is now on its last legs. I had an urge to pass it on to you when you have read it you can let me have your opinion. No hurry. Of course I do not want it returned.

Item 1-51: Letter of 1947 from Louisa Mepham to Ernest.

Final letter of 1947 from Louisa Mepham to Ernest

On 5 May 1947, Louisa Mepham wrote a final letter to Ernest.



56, Mount View Rd
Torussey, London.
1st av. 47
May 5-47

Dear Ernie

I was looking over my books
I came across the "Pilgrim's Progress"
which I & Mother gave to Uncle Willie
in his early days. It has been round the
world & I know has visited Australia.
Of course it was very knocked about
but I have made it presentable, as I
had an urge to give it to Bill & at
it is a strange ~~one~~ coincidence but
that week I purchased "John Bull"
I found this article on the "Pilgrim's Progress"
it brought back to my mind, that when
I was about Bill's age my Father bought
a little cheap edition of it for me.
I read it but of course it was beyond
my comprehension at the time, but
it made a great impression which
deepened with the years as children
we were never allowed to read
trashy books. It is most astonishing

Item 1-52: Second letter of 1947 from Louisa Mepham to Ernest.

As a child, I well remember this old book, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which

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Louisa Mephram had had “an urge” to send me. At the risk of disappointing the dear lady’s ghost, I must point out that John Bunyan [1628-1688] could not possibly attract the attention of a rural lad such as me, more interested in the adventures of “Biggles” (W E Johns) or the “Swallows and Amazons” (Arthur Ransome) than in archaic Christian allegories.

This is probably the third and final page of Louisa’s letter:

(3)
Thankful not to be decided
I have a good view of the Northern
Heights from my window, so you can
tell I am high. Sight is a great
blessing I came across a lovely little
couplet the other day
"Fear knocked at the door" —
"Faith opened it and there
was No One — there" —
I think it is a mistake & not a
kindness to Billy Boy. to hold him up
as a pattern as it will make him
to be disliked. The drawing to me looks
very good & shows that he is Resworn
Well dear I will close with love
to yourself Kit & all the family
Up Loving Auntie
May God Bless you all
is my prayer

Item 1-53: Second letter of 1947 from Louisa Mephram to Ernest.

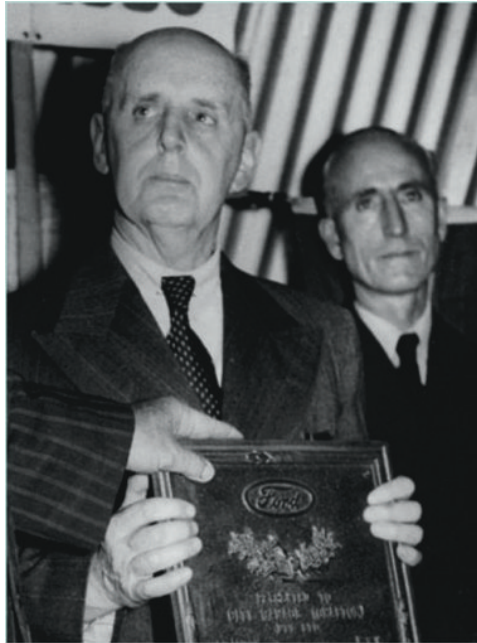
"Fear knocked at the door. Faith answered, and nobody was there." Once upon a time, this anonymous quote was often found, in a glass frame, on the

living-room wall of pious Christian families.

The final paragraph of Louisa's letter cannot fail to intrigue me. It would appear that my grandfather had sent his aunt one of my drawings (?), which caused her to conclude that I was "*observant*". The notion that both my grandparents tended to "*hold Billy Boy up as a pattern*" makes sense. They thought of me, rightly or wrongly, as gifted at a scholastic level, and they were capable of inviting me to demonstrate my alleged talents in front of such-and-such a bored visitors. I can recall—as clearly as if it had happened yesterday—their asking me to read out aloud a page from a translation into English of *Man, the Unknown* by Alexis Carrel [1873-1944]. Aunt Louie may have been right in thinking that this attitude towards me was "*a mistake and not a kindness*", but I have certainly never felt, at any moment of my life, that the immense love and kindness expressed towards me by my paternal grandparents gave rise to any negative effects.

Golden years of the City Motor Garage

In 1950, Ernest Skyvington received a jubilee award from Ford.



Item 1-54: Ford jubilee award. In the background: the mayor of Grafton, Bill Weiley.



Item 1-55: *City Motor Garage* team in the early '50s. My father is on the right.

I end the story of Ernest Skyvington's adult existence at this point, and move back (in the next chapter) to his boyhood in London. The childhood of my grandmother Kathleen Pickering will be presented in chapter 5.