

Our Benefactor

John Villiers

The John Villiers Trust was established on the death of John (Jack) Villiers in Yeppoon, Queensland on 11 July 2002. Under John's Will, he left the whole of his Estate to form a philanthropic Trust in perpetuity, to benefit public charitable institutions solely in the State of Queensland.

John Villiers was born an Englishman but became a proud Australian, and more importantly, in his later years became a proud Central Queenslander. To his family and his Melbourne friends, he was known as John Villiers, but in Queensland he was affectionately known as Jack Villiers. To avoid confusion he is referred to throughout this biography as John.

The Boy born John Villiers-Tuthill

John was born John Villiers-Tuthill on 17 August 1912 at 24 Arlington Road, Eastbourne, Sussex, England; now the site of Marwill Rest Home. Both his father, Thomas Vernon Villiers-Tuthill (1883-1951), and his mother, Mary Ida Porter (1888-1963) came from proud family backgrounds, but John, in his usual modest way, rarely made reference to this. The hyphenated surname apparently arose from a marriage between George Tuthill and Dorothy Villiers in 1740, and was bestowed upon their son, John (1744-1814). John's father made a significant family decision on 21 October 1914, when, by Deed Poll, he officially dropped the "Tuthill" part of the family surname after becoming tired of people misspelling it. From then on, John and his family were known simply as "Villiers".

John's Parents

John's mother, Mary Ida, was born at "Hartpury", on the corner of Tennyson and Milton Streets, Elwood, Melbourne, child of wealthy property owner George Edward Porter (1856-1906) and Catherine Isabella Barbara Macvean (1856-1927). Catherine was born in Phillipstown (now part of Brunswick), Melbourne, where her Scottish father, the Reverend Allan Macvean, first preached from a blacksmith's shop in 1854; the anvil serving as an altar. He was briefly Moderator of the Presbyterian Church (1880-81). Catherine's grandparents, John Macpherson and Helen Watson, are also those of Helen Macpherson Smith (1874-1951), who left £275,000 to establish a philanthropic trust which today is worth \$100 million and greatly benefits public charitable institutions in the State of Victoria.

John's mother was educated at Fairlight private school in East St Kilda, Melbourne. At some stage, her mother took her and sister Katie to England for a holiday aboard a vessel of the P&O Steamship Company. On board Mary met Thomas Vernon Villiers-Tuthill, a 4th Officer, and a ship-board romance bloomed. They married on 17 March 1910 at St Andrews, Marylebone, in London and remained in England.

John's father was an Englishman. His grandfather, Egerton Johnson Villiers-Tuthill (1841-1893) had married Alice Hudson Porter about 1869, and his great-grandfather, Johnson Villiers-Tuthill (1816-1867) had married Jane Anne Porter in London on 1837. Jane was apparently a descendant of Endymion Porter, and historically the Villiers and Porter families had intermarried on several occasions.

In early 1914, before the start of the Great War, John's mother left England for a trip home to see her family, accompanied by her three year old daughter Mimi and her third child, George, whilst John stayed in England with his father.

As war commenced John's father enlisted in the Royal Air Force. John Villiers remembered living in a flat at 1 Northwich House in St John's Wood Road, next to Lord's Cricket Ground, and being cared for by a nanny called Lizzie while his father was away on service. He recalled bombs dropping close by, as

Lord's was being used by the Army at the time, although Lizzie, being a little deaf, often did not hear the explosions! John also recalled the door to the St John's Wood flat being opened one day to see his father swathed in bandages after being shot down on a mission over the English Channel.

John Villiers' mother and the two children returned to England in late 1914 on the RMS "Osterley" on a memorable voyage. The "Osterley" was a Royal Mail Steamer which generally carried mail between England and Australia, and occasionally a few passengers, but on this voyage, troops as well, being part of the Anzac convoy of ships heading for Gallipoli. The ship sailed from Melbourne in November 1914 and was accompanied by a Japanese cruiser and the HMAS "Sydney". John recalled his mother saying that she saw troops all gathered around playing Two up.

John's father remained in the Royal Air Force for the duration of World War 1, but after being shot down, he became involved with the synchronising of aircraft guns, and later, he was an RAF recruiting officer based at Bristol.

Grandparents and Forebears

George Edward Porter was the son of John Alfrey Porter (1824-1882), prothonotary of the Supreme Court of Victoria from 1852 until his death; and grandson of George Porter (1800-1849), one of Melbourne's pioneers, who arrived with his family of six children in 1839. English-born George Porter had joined the East India Company Army when only sixteen and was despatched to Calcutta in 1817. By a stroke of good luck he accompanied botanist Nathaniel Wallich to Penang (Malaysia) in 1822 where he stayed until 1834, amassing a fortune which he brought to Sydney, Australia with his young family of six children in 1835. Taking advantage of public auctions of Melbourne land held in Sydney, he acquired a number of strategic properties in the newly surveyed township (predominantly on Stephen Street, now Exhibition Street), as well as two large acreages in Heidelberg on Melbourne's eastern outskirts.

John Alfrey Porter built on the wealth and property left by his father, and from a substantial estate inherited by his wife, Ellen Cussen, daughter of one of Melbourne's first medical superintendents, Dr Patrick Cussen, enabling him to leave a substantial estate to his son, George Edward Porter. The wealth built in these early years was invested in trust for future generations, one of the beneficiaries being John Villiers, assisting him in accumulating the capital which now forms the basis of the John Villiers Trust.

Sisters and Brothers

There were four children by the marriage between Thomas Vernon Villiers-Tuthill and Mary Ida Porter, namely Mary Edith (Mimi), John, George, and 13 years later, Richard Massey. After John's mother returned from Australia, the family lived in Putney, where the children commenced school. John first went to school at Mimi's girls' school in Putney, where First Grade comprised both girls and boys. After that he went to Putney School, and at age 13 attended Dean Close School at Cheltenham, Gloucester for two years, where he joined the Officer Training Corps.

Both George and Richard were killed on active service during World War 2. George was a Battle of Britain pilot in the Royal Air Force and on his last mission before being promoted to Lt Commander, his plane was hit over Rotterdam, Holland on 31 August 1940, killing all three of the crew. A ceremonial sword acquired by George when he became a sub-lieutenant at age 21, and a telescope he had owned in his teens were presented by his brother John to the Mackay Sea Cadets T/S "Pioneer" in February 1975.

Richard volunteered for army service as soon as he turned 17, rather than be conscripted. He became a 2nd Lieutenant in the Royal Sussex Regiment and was sent to Germany in the army of occupation. Sadly, Richard was killed on 19 September 1947, the day after his 20th birthday, at Iserlohn, whilst rounding up Germans who had "gone underground".

Maritime Career

As John's father had been an officer in the P&O Line, it was not surprising in that exciting maritime era, that John should contemplate a similar career. At age 15, he won a P&O scholarship and spent two years at the Incorporated Thames Nautical Training College on the naval training ship "Worcester", moored in the Thames river opposite Gravesend. A three-year apprenticeship followed on P&O passenger and cargo ships. During that time, John spent two years on the far-east run to Singapore, China, and Japan, and also twelve months on the England to Australia run. John had fond memories of visiting his uncle George Parbury in Singapore, who was a much respected man in the rubber industry, and known as the "rubber king of Singapore". John was always met by George's limousine and driver, and looked after far more than the average mariner crewman would have been when in port. In Melbourne, there were many people to greet him from his mother's Porter family, and the Parbury and Macvean families.

Then the depression struck and two-thirds of the merchant navy found itself with no business. Some 60,000 seamen were unemployed. John undertook a further twelve month course at the King Edward VII Nautical School in London's East End but was still unable to find work. He asked P&O to repatriate him to Australia but they refused. So John, vowing never to travel on P&O again, worked his passage in March 1934 aboard the British naval vessel "Jervis Bay" to Colombo, Ceylon, where he visited his sister Mimi and her husband Cliff. From Ceylon he travelled on the "Esperence Bay" to Australia, to join his mother, sister, and brother Richard in Melbourne. During World War 2, the "Jervis Bay" was an Armed Merchant Cruiser, and while escorting a fleet of 38 ships was attacked by a German warship on 5 November 1940. Captain Fegen headed the ship directly at the attacker, drawing fire and allowing 33 of the ships to escape. Unfortunately the "Jervis Bay" and crew were lost, and the Captain was posthumously awarded the VC for his actions.

Having arrived in Australia John found a job with the AUSN (Australian United Steam Navigation Company) shuttling up and down the east coast of Australia, and Melbourne to Perth on the SS "Ormiston" as an Able Seaman. John's family had moved to Perth to live. Then a seaman's strike, which lasted upwards of twelve months, was the last straw for John and he decided to give up the sea and try his luck on the land. This was about 1934.

Pastoral Career

John's new career on the land resulted in him becoming a proud Queenslander. His first job was as a Jackaroo on his uncle Norman Parbury's farm at "Caprioli", near Stanthorpe, Queensland. On a subsequent visit to Melbourne he was offered a choice of two stations to work on as a Jackaroo; Mt Gipps Station near Broken Hill or Lansdowne Station in Tambo, Queensland. Mt Gipps was one of three stations purchased by William Smith, director and later Deputy Governor of the Colonial Bank of Australasia, who had married Christine Elizabeth Macpherson, the second youngest daughter of pioneer Scottish grazier, John Macpherson, grandfather of one of Victoria's later major philanthropists, Helen Macpherson Smith. John was a great-great grandson of John Macpherson.

But John chose Lansdowne, and spent two years there, leaving when he realised that they had a policy of not promoting their Jackaroos. At the end of 1936, John's mother and his brother Richard returned to England, at which time John was Jackarooing at "Warrama" in Moree. He spent time working on other stations, including "Ayrshire Downs" owned by Q N Pastoral Company, firstly in 1937, and after spending a holiday in Colombo at his sister's home, from late 1938, spending six months pumping water for stock during the drought. He later worked at Oondooroo Station between Winton and Hughenden. In 1939 he and several others were driving a large flock of sheep from Oondooroo, heading for Jundah south-west of Longreach, and had reached stockyards in Winton at sundown on 19 September. Just as they had the sheep ready to pen, six Wirraway aircraft flew low overhead scattering the sheep. After they had finally secured them, the men walked into town, where John noticed a newspaper poster which said "British Aircraft Carrier Sunk". They were stunned to find out that World War 2 had broken out over a fortnight beforehand! They all immediately went and enlisted that night at North Gregory Hotel. John was called up to the 26th Battalion before they could get the sheep to their destination, being sent by troop-train to Townsville, Queensland.

After his discharge from the RAAF, John returned to the land, working at Darr River Downs at Morella, between Winton and Longreach. He then purchased a 300 acre farm on the north coast of Queensland, between Mackay and Sarina and ran Illawarra Shorthorn cattle for beef and milk. His father joined him there and between them they ran the property. John remembered milking 80 head of cattle by hand. Thomas Vernon Villiers, John's father, died of a heart attack in 1951. Part of the farm was later excised for a Post Office, before the government resumed the whole property as the site for the Hay Point Coal Terminal.

War Service

John remembers his two-year army career as being fairly monotonous, as he was placed on garrison duty for most of that time. He spent 14 months at Fort Cowan on Moreton Island, where they guarded the Fort and its two 6" naval guns. In early 1942 the Queensland Main Roads Commission was directed to erect buildings, anti-aircraft gun emplacements, command and battery observation posts, underground plotting room, magazines, accommodation for officers and men, a 20,000 gallon concrete tank, and a 20-bed hospital at Cowan Cowan (aboriginal Kau-in Kau-in) on Moreton Island. They were also instructed to build a controlled mines station with accommodation for officers and men of the Australian Navy. The former Navy Signal Station at 25 Dorothy Newnham Street, Cowan Cowan (Fort Cowan) is listed on the Heritage Register of the Brisbane City Council (ID No. 601097).

Wanting a change but being over the acceptance age for the Navy, John joined the Air Force as a general hand and guard, being told he could change later, which proved to be false information. During this time he spent ten months at Parkes guarding the air navigation and wireless school, then in charge of the bomb dump at Townsville. His rank was elevated to Sergeant and he was sent on an RAF operation to occupy and hold a radar unit in the Torres Strait. Here he developed severe dermatitis and malaria and was evacuated to Cairns. The new wonder-drug Penicillin cured his ailments and he was sent to Brisbane to guard a large storage depot on the Brisbane River until the war ended.

He spent six years four months' service, but found it hard to be discharged. A points system allowed family men out before single men, and the officers were under an incentive system whereby they held their rank by the number of men under them, so they were reluctant to release them. He was asked to join the permanent airforce or the Japanese occupation force, but declined. In January 1946 John discharged himself from the RAAF after hitching a ride with an army truck to the discharge centre for all the armed forces at Redbank, Brisbane.

Retirement Years

In 1966, John decided to retire to Yeppoon, a quiet place on the coast east of Rockhampton, Queensland. He lived there for many years, then moved into Rockhampton in 1982, before moving back to Yeppoon in January 2000 to live at the Capricorn Adventist Retirement Village until his death.

The Gentleman and Philanthropist

John never married, but he made many friends in many places. He lived a simple life, but behind his quiet modesty lay great qualities – a sincere caring gentleman, and a generous man to those in need. During his lifetime he made many gifts to charitable organisations. Two of his favourite charities were The Autistic Children's Association of Queensland (now Autism Queensland Inc) and the Royal Queensland Bush Children's Health Scheme, each of whom made him an Honorary Life Member. In his Will, John asked that "...my trustees should have particular regard" for each of these charities. John's association with Autism Queensland (AQ) went back to the early 1980s, and he was a regular generous donor. On visits to Brisbane, he visited the Sunnybank Hills Special School of AQ. He was a guest speaker at an AQ Annual General Meeting around mid 1990s, and enthused the members about the need to be better supporters through donations of money and time. Whilst in Brisbane he also called in at the Royal Queensland Bush Children's (RQBC) Health Scheme for morning or afternoon tea to pass on a wealth of information about the Rockhampton area. At that time RQBC provided residential services at a Yeppoon centre, where children from rural areas were referred with a range of medical conditions which were unable to be treated locally. John joined a small Bush Children's Committee firstly in Rockhampton and later in Yeppoon which actively supported the Yeppoon centre through fundraising ventures. He was a willing giver of his time, as he was aware from his years living in various rural locations of the isolation and hardships faced by many young people.

In later life he suffered from osteoporosis of the spine and prostate cancer. He died peacefully on 11 July 2002, 37 days short of his 90th birthday, to which many of his friends were looking forward to celebrating with him.

His Graveside Service at the Yeppoon Cemetery on 16 July 2002 was attended by many friends. The cover of the program for the service most aptly had the caption "A True Gentleman", and showed a hearty photograph of John with sleeves rolled up and raising his big Akubra hat in a final farewell to us all.

John's Lasting Legacy

The story of John (Jack) Villiers could have ended there but for the fact that under his Will he bequeathed his total estate of approximately \$6.75 million for the benefit of Queensland charities. Probate of his Estate was granted in the Supreme Court of Queensland at Rockhampton on 11 September 2002.

Following its establishment in 2002, the John Villiers Trust has experienced good capital growth through investment in listed equities. As at 30 June 2008, the capital value of the Trust had grown to \$13.5 million.

Ironically, part of his Estate included a more than modest shareholding he had held for some years in The Lansdowne Pastoral Company Pty Ltd, where he had worked as a jackaroo. That shareholding was sold by the trustees through a buyback offer in December 2005 for \$526,500, which would have delighted John and more than compensated him for his lowly earnings during jackaroo days.

The trustees resolved in May 2004 that grants during the early years of the Trust "should be for the benefit of eligible charitable organisations operating within Central Queensland, being where John Villiers lived for many years in both Rockhampton and Yeppoon, and where he supported many local charities during his lifetime". A secondary emphasis will be for the benefit of eligible charities operating within Northern Queensland and Outback Queensland, where John Villiers worked for many years in the pastoral industry, and was supportive of charities in those regions. Ultimately all charities throughout Queensland are to benefit from grants.

Grants have been made so far to five Queensland charities, including Autism Queensland Inc, one of John's favourite charities, to enable the acquisition and renovation of a Rockhampton property to become the new AQ regional centre for Central Queensland. It will be known as the AQ John Villiers Centre of Excellence.

Although the trustees are currently dedicated to growing John's benefaction in Central, Northern, and Outback Queensland, being areas which also have severe limitations in their donor markets, the generous benefaction by John (Jack) Villiers, being perpetual, will continue indefinitely for the benefit of future generations of all Queenslanders.

For further information about the John Villiers Trust:

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