

Sheet 246 Mrs T Robinson, Brunnerton Anna Robinson nee Smith:-

Born 12th December 1858 to Peter Smith, a slate miner and Elisabeth (Charlton) in Scotisfieldburn, Stanhope, Hunstanworth, Co Durham.

Anna was the oldest of their 4 children and grew up in the Weardale area, above Hunstanworth in the Derwent Valley. In 1861 she was living with her parents at the house off her widowed maternal grandmother in Chapel Row, Stanhope. In 1871 they were living at Whiteheaps.

Anna married Thomas Robinson, a coal miner, whose birthplace was Leicester, in 1878 on 13th March at the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel in Crook, Auckland, Co Durham. He was aged 26 she was 19.

In 1879 they came out to NZ on "Opawa" with his brother James, his sister Mary Mercy Varley and her husband Paul, and their two children. The men were to be employed by the Westport Coal Company but the company had diverted the ship in anticipation of further Union trouble from the mainly Methodist immigrants and they landed in Nelson to find there was no work.

The family continued south, to Kowai Pass (Springfield), Canterbury, where the men worked on farms nearby.

In 1882 Thomas's brothers, Dan & Harry, sister Ellen, and mother Hannah, joined them, listed as passengers on "Rakaia".

In 1886 the family travelled across the Alps by coach to Brunnerton, near Taylorville, on the West Coast of the South Island where the men were employed at the Brunner Mine.

Life for the family of a miner was hard, there were constant threats of disputes and strikes, and the work itself was dangerous. The climate of Grey Valley was very trying, with high rainfall and bitter winds sweeping through.

When the skies darkened over New Zealand in 1886 with the Mt Tarawera eruption, Anna dressed the children in their best clothes put them outside with pillow and blankets to await their fate. She said "if we are about to be taken, we will go in our best". They thought the world was about to end.



A tram track to the Marney's Sawmill passed along the front of their section. When the children went into the bush to play, they had to wear a whistle on a string round their necks in case they got lost. The whistles hung on the hooks alongside their coats. They attended the Taylorville School.

Dissatisfied with working conditions Thomas pulled his sons from mine work and set up a cordial factory, firstly in Taylorville, later in Hokitika.

On the day of the explosion on 26 March 1896, however, they helped with the rescue and Thomas gave evidence at the Inquiry in April of that year. Older children acted as runners, between the Post Office and the mine.

Anna bore Thomas six children, John b 1880 Charles William b 1882, Lilian, my grandmother, born in 1883, Alfred b 1885, Oliver b 1888 and Thomas, the youngest b 1896.

Anna died at Brunnerton 13 May 1897 aged 38 and is buried in the Stillwater Cemetery. On her death, Lilian aged 14, gave up her schooling to stay home and care for the family. Her younger brother Tommy, was not yet two. Thomas's mother, who lived with them was in failing health, and died the following year.

Lilian had 10 children of her own after her marriage to HWR Sweney, representing Westland Branch at WCTU Conferences for several years, a fitting tribute to her mother's memory.

Diane R Johns nee Sweney, great grand daughter.

References:

Compiled largely from notes left me by my grandmother Lilian Sweney (nee Robinson), my father H M (Merle) Sweney, and my uncle Ray Sweney.

Dates verified where necessary from 1837online.com, and Censuses of England & Wales.

Canterbury Museum Passenger Lists.

Copies of BDMs of NZ and England & Wales obtained through NZSG service.

NZ Papers Past: Grey River Argus Account of Mine Disaster.: Thomas's evidence at Enquiry and letters re Brunnerton.

Reference to "Opawa" passengers' dispute with Westport Coal Company from lecture on Methodism at Nelson branch of NZSG given by Jean Coulthard.

Photograph from Family Collection.

