

In the northeast corner of the suburb of Laverton, east of Bladin Street and north of Jennings Street, is a residential area where the street names reflect on a time long ago. A time well before Laverton became an official suburb within the western region of Melbourne. If you were to look at the plans of the Parish of Truganina, specifically from the second half of the 1800s, the names of many landholders and graziers are honoured here. So, who were these people, and what was their connection to Laverton to have their names preserved in history?

One of these streets is Cropley Crescent, which runs between Henderson Street and Tarran Street, and also includes the Cropley Crescent Playground/Reserve. The story of the Cropley brothers, as well as their families over several generations, showcase the trials and tribulations of living in this part of Melbourne during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Additionally, there is also a Cropley Court within the Seabrook area, which coincidentally lies in the vicinity of where the Cropley's once had one of their allotments of land.

Chapter 1: New Horizons

Our story of the Cropley family begins in the small farming village of Swaton in the county of Lincolnshire, England, where Thomas Cropley, his wife Elizabeth Cropley (nee Crosby) and their sixteen children originally called home, Thomas and Elizabeth got married in 1821, and soon after, began having children. Their three daughters and thirteen sons born were all between 1822 and 1845. It is presumed that the children experienced a basic education before the boys joined their father working on the land and the girls assisted their mother in undertaking house duties and looking after the younger children. For whatever reason, in April 1850, three of the sons, John (aged 20), Henry (24) and Samuel (18) sailed aboard the *Duke of Portland*, from London and arrived in the port of Adelaide on 9 August 1850. It is believed that after a few months Henry and John returned to England aboard the *Rodney*, but we are not certain whether Samuel returned at this time or remained in Adelaide. On 3 December 1851, Benjamin, John and Henry returned to Adelaide, arriving on 8 April 1852.

The three brothers almost immediately boarded a coastal vessel, the *Lady Harvey*, and sailed to Melbourne. The brothers soon settled in Richmond where Benjamin managed to save enough to purchase a horse and dray to cart goods to and from the Melbourne wharf. However, given that this was around the time of the discovery of gold in Victoria, the brothers took on work carting supplies and merchandise to the goldfields. Benjamin was unfortunate enough to be a victim of "rogues" who took his horse during the night, hid it, and returned it only when they could collect the 15 pounds he offered as a reward! Evidently, this was a common practice on the goldfields at that time. Disenchanted, Ben sold his horse and dray, and bought a team of bullocks instead. Fortunately, the "rogues" found a team of bullocks much harder to steal than a mere horse, for Ben made no mention of further trouble after this incident.

It was during this time that the brothers either sent word back to the family in England or one of them returned there to advise that life in the colonies was very favourable. This news saw four more siblings decide to journey to Australia, with George (20), Thomas (17), Effield (13) and Elizabeth (11) all joining their three brothers in Victoria in about 1853. By this point, Henry and Samuel had taken up land on the Werribee Plains, within a small settlement named Truganina, where they pursued farming interests.



Effield Cropley

Shortly after the arrival of their siblings, John and George, plus Effield and Benjamin, also took up land holdings within the Truganina district. By 1858 they, in total, held four parcels of land each covering between 155 and 159 acres. Much of the land was used for cropping, the growing of hay, and for dairy cattle. The Cropley family members were also active in community life, with George's wife, Catherine, undertaking the early schooling within Truganina before the first purpose school was established.

John Cropley served as the local Baptist preacher, taking Sunday service in the purpose-built chapel. It is possibly within this chapel that the four Cropley brothers married. John married Mary Ann Searle (1855), George married Catherine Salmon Searle (1861), Benjamin married Elizabeth Jane Searle (1861), and Effield married Sarah Grace Searle (1863). Their wives were all the daughters of Simon Searle and Grace Searle (nee Salmon) who had departed Bristol, England, in November 1852 aboard the ship *Elizabeth* and had arrived in Port Phillip on 12 March 1853. The Searle family moved to the small Truganina settlement to live and work soon after their arrival, but we have been unable to locate a purchase of land in their name. It is possible that they undertook a lease of property owned by another landowner. However, we do know that they were in the district, not purely because of the marriages, but also because both Simon and Grace Searle are interred within the Truganina cemetery.

Henry Cropley only occupied his property for about ten years, leaving it in tragic circumstances when he and his family were attacked by bushrangers, Thomas Sanders and William Johnson¹, on his farm on the Keilor Plains. The story goes that it was late one evening as the family were preparing their evening meal. The bushrangers had tied up his pregnant wife, Susannah. Johnson stood guard over Henry and his wife, while Sanders raped their servant girl, Mary Egan. Sanders and Johnson also stole about £35 in gold and cash, as well as some of Henry's clothing. Both men were captured within the week and sent to trial where they were found guilty. Because of his crime, Thomas Sanders was sentenced to death and hung at Melbourne Gaol on about 31 October 1861, we do not know what sentence was given to William Johnson. It was during the trial that Henry and Susannah's infant son John Thomas Cropley passed away.

Samuel continued farming the land that would later become known as 'May Farm', which had its entrance on Dohertys Road. It has also been recalled that John Cropley may have run a small mixed store, selling everything from ribbons to window sashes to local farmers. This would have supported the families during the early days of establishing their farm. The remaining brothers may also have continued the previous carting work which Ben had commenced during the gold rush days.



Benjamin Cropley

Chapter 2: Timber Troubles

In 1875, the Cropley brothers had heard about the excellent prospects of land available for selection in the Brandy Creek district in Gippsland. In that same year, Benjamin and Effield Cropley went to Warragul South with their nephews, William (19) and John (17), both sons of John Cropley, and Alfred (18) who was the only son of Samuel Cropley². There, they selected land for themselves and for their nephews. In 1882, Benjamin Cropley also purchased 310 acres of land in Darnum, but did not move onto the property until 1889.

¹ Some newspaper articles of the day reported the bushrangers to be Thomas Saunders and William? Johnson, BDM records Thomas Sanders' death in 1861, aged 45.

² Samuel Cropley married Mary Barnes in January 1857 and Alfred was born in October 1857. Samuel died on 9 March 1864 while gathering wood with his brother George on their property. It appears that as he was loading the wood on the dray, his horse bolted and Samuel was struck down by the dray, falling under its wheel, which then passed over his chest.

A quote from Benjamin's reminiscences published as part of his obituary in the Gippsland Gazette of June 8, 1926, tells of the struggles that the brothers endured after leaving their earlier home at Truganina.

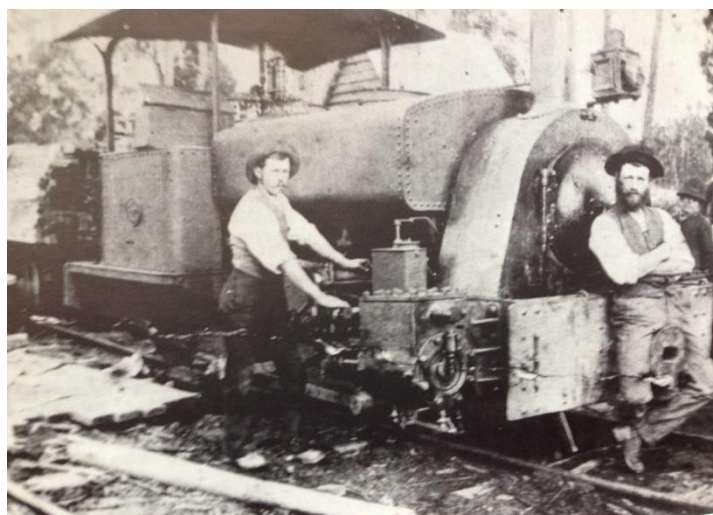
We thought they were the longest miles we had ever travelled. We stayed the night there, and next day made for the surveyor's camp which was on Mr. John Hardie's selection. We wanted five blocks... one each for self and brother, and three nephews. We borrowed a pocket compass from a man in the camp, and got Mr. Hardie to go with us, and took axes to blaze the track and cut the scrub in a line that we went (about two and a half miles) and when it was surveyed our line was but three feet out.

In the winter of 1877, we had about 100 acres of scrub cut, costing one pound per acre, and in the following autumn we got it burnt off, and then had to pick up all the small wood and rubbish and burn it ready for sowing with grass seed. But before we could get the seed to the place, we had to corduroy³ two boggy flats of about a quarter of a mile altogether and build two bridges over creeks.

It cost about 15 shillings an acre to pick up and clear the land ready for sowing, and about the same for seed. When the land got ready to stock, we put on about 600 sheep and soon afterwards we got them shorn. Then the caterpillars came and ate up all the grass and left it as bare as if the land had never been sown, so the sheep had to live on the scrub until we sold them. When the grass came on again in the autumn, we bought some dairy heifers and cows, intending to go in for cheese-making in the spring, but the caterpillars came again and ate up all the grass, so we had to dry off the milkers and put all the cattle out to graze.

We had the same experience for four years running. Next pleuro-pneumonia broke out in the herd, and the brothers lost some of their best animals before bringing it under control by inoculation. But their troubles were not over. They decided that it was a shame to simply kill the timber on their land, so they decided to mill it.

During the process of clearing away the forest, the Cropleys established a sawmill in 1888. They imported a steam locomotive and built seven miles of tramway in order to transport their sawn timber to the Darnum railway station. The sawmill operated on several sites until it eventually closed in 1903⁴. However, after a running battle with the Railway Department over the cost of rails, as well as with landowners over rental for land the line traversed, they came out of the business poorer than when they began. Times then were indeed hard.



Cropley's Locomotive with Marshall Cropley and Effield Samuel Cropley

³ Corduroy was originally used to provide access through wetlands to areas being logged or mined. Essentially, the technique involved laying a bridge on the ground where the soil would not support a road. Two log stringers or beams were placed on the ground about 8 feet apart. Small-diameter logs or half logs were placed on the stringers, spanning them. The logs became the tread or surface of the road. They were spiked or pinned to the stringers.

⁴ As of 2001, members of the Cropley family were still farming this land holding, Colin Silcock, Warragul Historical Society, accessed 28 September 2023.

Chapter 3: The Next Generation

After discussing Benjamin and Effield's relocation to Warragul, our focus returns to the district of Truganina. Of the three original pioneering siblings in Australia, Samuel was the first to pass away in 1864. He was followed by Henry in 1894 and John in 1898. Their younger sister Elizabeth also died in 1876. It is believed that both brothers Henry and Samuel are buried in one corner of the family property together. With the three brothers gone, it begs the question of what happened to their land? While some siblings had moved on to start their own ventures, George Cropley and his wife Catherine remained in the Truganina area. This next part of the story revolves around them and their offspring.

To recap, by 1861, George and Catherine had just gotten married and were ready to start their family. The first of their eleven children was born in the following year. They would go on to raise seven daughters and four sons, with all but one reaching adulthood. During his early years as a father, George maintained his responsibility of tending to his local land holdings in Truganina. However, this task would soon become more complex. Upon Samuel's death in 1864, his land (May Farm) was passed down to George.



Walter Henry Cropley

Decades later in 1898, upon John's death, George took over his property too. With his children now much older, George was joined by his son Walter Cropley. Together, they shared the ownership of John's property and its farm homestead. By around 1906, Walter appears as the sole owner of the May Farm property as well. We believe this is around the time that his parents retired and moved out of Truganina to enjoy city life in Middle Park. There, Catherine Cropley passed away on 14 May 1905 (aged 66) and George Cropley on 16 March 1924 (aged 90). Even though they had moved away from Truganina, family ties saw them both interred within the Truganina cemetery.



Gravestone of George and Catherine Cropley, Truganina cemetery

Walter ultimately remained in the Truganina area until the early 1950s when he too decided to move on from maintaining his family's properties. There are at least three that we have records on from this time. One was transferred to the Evans family, who were prominent hay farmers and graziers in the Truganina district. Another, May Farm, was sold by Walter just prior to his passing on 11 February 1952. He and both his wives were interred within the Werribee cemetery.

This leaves the third property to explore further. Known as 'Fairview', this property was not overseen by Walter, but actually George Edward Cropley instead, the eldest son of George and Catherine. He too has a significant story of his own that extends the next generation's impact on our local history.

Chapter 4: Fairview and Further Land Expansion



George Edward Cropley

George Edward Cropley was born on 6 October 1869 in Werribee to parents George and Catherine Cropley. He was their sixth child and first son. George Edward's early education would have taken place at the local Truganina State school, before leaving at age thirteen or fourteen to join his father working on the farm. Here, he would have learnt how to grow crops and tend to the livestock around the property. For young George Edward, this was likely the perfect opportunity to show his father that he would one day be capable of taking over the farm. The main crops grown on the Cropley property were barley and oats, as well as producing hay and chaff. They also had sheep flocks and a small amount of cattle.

In 1894, George Edward Cropley married Mary Kerr, the only daughter of John Kerr and Helen Kerr (nee Steele), who were living on the Werribee Plains. Mary was the last child born to John and Helen, some two years after her six siblings died from diphtheria⁵. Such was life in those times, unfortunately. Illnesses that we consider treatable today had devastating effects on families in the late 1800s and first half of the 1900s.

George and Mary took up residence at 'Fairview'⁶. George had taken over this property from his parents, who had by this time, retired to Middle Park. The couple had three children: Mary Victoria (born 1895), George Oliver (born 1900), and Doris Elsie (born 1907).

There are indications that George Edward frequented the newly formed township of Laverton as he had various dealings with Harry and Elizabeth Rhoades. They ran the Post Office and General Store in the early years of Laverton's



Mary Cropley (nee Kerr)

establishment. It had also been written that George Edward and Mary were the first people in the district to have owned a motor vehicle, so the farm must have been providing well for their family. During World War 1, Mary Cropley organised the Red Cross effort within Truganina to assist Mrs Chirnside and the Werribee sub-branch. While none of the Cropleys living in the Truganina area served during World War 1, several of their cousins living in Warragul served within the army during the conflict.

In 1922, George Edward expanded his property portfolio by purchasing a further 259-acre allotment on Point Cook/Aviation Road in Laverton, which also bordered Skeleton Creek⁷, and covered land east to the southern end of Merton Street. The property was purchased from Alexander Robertson, who had held a purchase lease agreement over it since 1913. The property was part of the land acquired from the Chirnside family due to the introduction of the Closer Settlement Act of 1904. The introduction of this legislation was in response to social problems resulting from the economic depression in the

1890s. The Victorian Government legislated in 1904 to purchase private estates from landholders such as the Chirnside family and subdivide this to make the land available for farmers of limited means. Thomas Bent, who was the Victorian Premier at the time and a prominent land developer himself, referred to this action as providing rich land for poor people.

⁵ Diphtheria is a serious bacterial disease that causes severe inflammation of the nose, throat and windpipe.

⁶ The Cropley homestead, known as Fairview, stood until 1969 when it was destroyed during the tragic bushfires that swept through the area, originating from Lara.

⁷ Skeleton Creek originates as a series of often dry watercourses in a rural area near Mt Atkinson (a low lava cone), west of Ravenhall, and runs through Truganina, Tarneit, Hoppers Crossing, Point Cook, Seabrook, and Altona Meadows. It was originally referred to as Skeleton Water Holes Creek or Skeleton Chain of Ponds Creek. The reference to 'skeleton' is said to go back to earlier times when numerous bird skeletons were found on the dry creek bed during a dry season.

The Government Closer Settlement Board ultimately acquired 9,400 hectares of Werribee Park Estate from George Chirside for a total payment of £301,781. The Act stipulated that farmland to the value of £1,500 was all that could be purchased by one individual. The Department of Agriculture sought to diversify farm production right across the state away from a reliance on sheep, wheat, and wool, and into more general, small-scale food production. It is believed that George Edward personally managed usage of the Laverton property.



Grave of Mary and George Edward Cropley, Truganina cemetery

George Edward Cropley continued to operate Fairview, with the assistance of his son, George Oliver (more on him next), until his sudden death on 20 August 1929. He was sixty years old. Whilst the property was left to both Mary and their son, George Oliver, Mary used funds from her share of the estate to purchase a house in Wedge Street, Werribee, where she resided until her death on 2 November 1935. By this stage, all three of their children had married, but not all were interested in maintaining the family's property portfolio. This left and George Oliver Cropley as the only third generation Cropley to run the property started by his grandfather over seventy years prior.

Chapter 5: Their Legacy

Now let's rewind the clock one final time to draw our focus to George Oliver Cropley. He was born on 10 October 1900 in Werribee and was George Edward and Mary Cropley's only son. The following image shows a very young George Oliver at school in Truganina. He is the fifth child in the front row, second from the end on the right.



Children of Truganina School 1910
 Back row L-R: Murlie Peacock, May Missen, Duncan Hopkins, Henry Robinson, Stan Robinson, Doug Robinson
 Middle row L-R: Dolly Boundy, May Harrison, Jean Didier, Olive Peacock, Maisie Didier
 Front row L-R: Tom Robinson, George Harrison, Alan Missen, Reg Peacock, George Cropley
 (Photo courtesy Wendy Bitans)

The following image is of the annual picnic sports conducted by the Truganina debating society and was held on Friday, 28 October 1911.

Back row: Mrs. G. Cropley, John Robinson, J Hegarty(?), R.D. Hopkins, J. Woods (of Woods Lane). R. Peacock, Wm. Robinson, J. Eades, G. Cropley, W. Cropley, R. Hopkins.

Middle row: Mrs. R. Peacock, Mrs James Robinson, Mr & Mrs G. Missen, Mrs. James Johnson, Mrs Harrison, Mrs. Wm Missen, Mrs W. Leake, Henry Robinson.

Front row: Mrs. R. D. Hopkins, Mrs. D. Taylor, J. Pitson, D. Taylor, J. Johnson, James Robinson, W. Missen, A. Leake, H. A. Davis, **Lying along front row:** George Harrison



In the 1920s, many third generation Cropley children got married. Firstly, it was George Oliver's older sister Mary Victoria (born 1895), who tied the knot with William Albert Wills in 1924. Next, Doris Elsie (born 1907), his younger sister, who married Harold Herbert Fisher on 19 March 1930⁸. Both daughters, and their families remained living within the Werribee district. Incidentally, George Oliver also married in 1930, just prior to his sister, to one Agnes Irene Cameron. Agnes was the daughter of early Laverton residents Alexander John Cameron and Agnes Cameron (nee Spitty). The Cameron family also owned property across Laverton and were farmers grazing sheep in the area now known as Seabrook. So, it would have been inevitable that the two families met either at church service or community forums. George Oliver and Agnes Irene Cropley had at least three children together, all of which were daughters.

Like his parents, George Oliver Cropley was community minded and had himself, purchased land in Laverton, in what is today known as Altona Meadows. This was prior to inheriting several other properties following when his parents passed away. He was also frequently in the news for one reason or another. In November 1933, it was reported that

⁸ Werribee Shire Banner, 27 March 1930 p 2

George Oliver was out riding his motorcycle, which had a sidecar attached, with his two-year-old daughter as a passenger. As they slowed to turn into a property, a car that was following them clipped the motorcycle, causing it to overturn. The car itself overturned too. Luckily, the only damage done was to the car, which broke its windscreen, and no one was hurt.

In September 1936, at the Cropley Quarry that was being operated from the Aviation Road property, an accident occurred whilst employees were preparing explosives to remove rock from a wall. While placing the explosive charges within pre-drilled holes, one charge exploded without warning, causing 100 tons (about 91,000kg) of rock to come loose and fall to the bottom of the quarry. One employee who was working about 15 feet (4.5 metres) from the rock wall was buried by the rock fall and died. Whilst no charges were laid against any employee, further safety measures were put in place for the laying of explosive charges.

In 1937, the Defence Department wrote to George Oliver advising that they wished to purchase a 40-acre portion of the Aviation Road property for the purpose of installing a wireless telegraphy transmission station⁹ on the site. While no reason for the installation was given by the Department of Defence, it was clear that it was in anticipation of conflict in Europe and the Pacific region. None of George Oliver's immediate family served during World War 2, though many of his relatives from Warragul did.

On 19 May 1959, George Oliver Cropley passed away and was interred within the Altona Memorial Park. At the time of his death, he was still farming grazing sheep for wool and had a small herd of cattle on the family property in Laverton, near Skeleton Creek. His eldest daughter, Nancy Leeson and her husband occupied one fifth of an acre on this property. The remainder of the estate, valued at some £11,766, was left to his wife Agnes Irene Cropley. Agnes remained living in Laverton, where she had grown up, until her death on 7 July 1982. Agnes was interred within the Altona Memorial Park next to her husband, George Oliver.



Plaques - George and Agnes Cropley, Altona Memorial Park

In 1980, apart from Agnes Irene Cropley, there were still members of the Cropley family living within the Hoppers Crossing and Werribee areas. George and Agnes' daughter, Elma Florence Murphy, and her family were living in Aviation Road, Laverton, continuing the family connection to the area. There is no denying that the Cropley family contributed to the development and progress of both the Laverton and Altona Meadows areas and are deserving of being acknowledged in the naming of two streets in their name.

⁹ Wireless telegraphy or radiotelegraphy is transmission of text messages by radio waves, analogous to electrical telegraphy using cables. This station was vital for communication to both RAAF bases, Point Cook and Laverton, and even more so with a second world war imminent.

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