

PRISONER TO FIRST POSTMASTER

Isaac Nichols (1770-1819)



Celebrating 200 years of postal services (2009)

A convict from England arriving in Sydney aged 21 years old in 1791, Nichols, by honest and diligent work, rose to become a favourite of the colony's Governors. The subject of jealousy and bigotry he was unjustly convicted and sentenced to Norfolk Island. Fortunately, Gov. Hunter intervened and he was subsequently pardoned by Gov. King..

Nichols was one of the earliest recipients of land grants in the colony, including major tracks of land across Willoughby. These grants he later sold, mainly to north shore developers Richard Hayes Harnett and Alexander Stuart. The first Chatswood commercial centre was located on former Nichols' land at the corner of the Lane Cove Rd (Pacific Highway) and Mowbray Rd. Later, the Chatswood Central Business District evolved on Nichols' former Kings Plains grant around the Chatswood Railway Station.

In 1809 Nichols was appointed the colony's (and hence Australia's) first Postmaster. A position he held until his death in 1819.

All of Chatswood's Post Offices were located on former Nichols' lands. Firstly at Sanday's near the first Chatswood, then at three locations in Victoria Avenue West, later in Victor St and finally at the Chatswood Transport Interchange.

For the Willoughby District Historical Society & Museum, Chatswood

© Terry Fogarty, 2021

ISAAC NICHOLS 1770 - 1819



Isaac Nichols

During the early years of the 19th century, Isaac Nichols was one of Chatswood and Lane Cove's most prominent landholders. His properties were pivotal in the development of Chatswood and Willoughby.

Nichols was a farmer, publican, ship builder and public servant. He came to the colony as a prisoner, he left as Australia's first Postmaster.

Born in Wiltshire, England, Nichols arrived in the colony of New South Wales as a convict on the *Admiral Barrington* in 1791 (aged 21 years). He had been found guilty of stealing and sentenced to seven years transportation at the Warminster Sessions, Wiltshire, England.

Nichols' story in Australia is somewhat tumultuous. He enjoyed the confidence of the colony's Governors but found himself again convicted with a poor prognosis for his future, only to be saved by his friends.

Obviously he had sound abilities and inherent decency.

After Nichols' original seven year sentence finished in 1797, Gov. Hunter granted him 50 acres of land in the Concord district where he established a successful farm. Between 1797 to 1815 he secured further properties in the Concord District, Hunters Hill (a former name for Willoughby & Lane Cove) and Petersham. At this time his holdings were around 1,400 acres (of which around 900 acres were in Willoughby & Lane Cove).

Initially Nichols' life in a convict colony followed a similar trajectory to many other convicted felons. However, what was to happen next could only be described as bizarre.

In early 1799 Nichols was brought before a Criminal Court charged with having received stolen property. After a trial lasting four days he was convicted and sentenced to fourteen years on Norfolk

Island. *Gov. Hunter was most dissatisfied with the trial, being convinced that the verdict was the

result of perjury by a witnesses and prejudice (because Nichols was a former convict). So he suspended the sentence and referred the matter to England. There the papers remained, pigeon-holed for nearly two years. In early 1802 Gov. King was directed to grant Nichols a full pardon in relation to the 'trumped up' charges.

**Heading to jail
again after a
strange twist of
fate!**

After leasing a small allotment at Sydney Cove (Warrane) near the hospital wharf, in 1802, Nichols built a substantial property and later a shipyard. He built a number of ships that he used on the Coal River (Newcastle), Hawkesbury and the Bass Strait crossings to Tasmania. The next year he obtained a

spirits license, the first of several, and opened an inn in George Street, Sydney.

After a few years in the nascent colony it is reported that:

“his (Nichols’) ability, diligence and sobriety so impressed Gov. Hunter ... that the governor appointed him Chief Overseer of the Convict gangs labouring round Sydney”.

Dictionary of Biography

Nichols became overseer for George Johnston (a prominent landholder in the

colony) who later said that his convict labourers:

“used to behave very well, and the only reason I can give for that is, that I had an excellent overseer, who used to make them stick to their work ... if they neglected it I made the overseer turn them back from the beginning and make them do it over again, in consequence of which they did it very well.” Report of Select Committee of

Transportation cited in Ferguson, J.A.

Bibliography of Australia,

PROMINENT CHATSWOOD LAND OWNER

294	Isaac Nichols	8.12.1805	230	King's Plains straddles Pacific Highway; takes in Chatswood Railway Station.
295	Isaac Nichols	1.1.1810	380	Best Street Lane Cove, through Epping Highway and Mowbray Road into Chatswood.

Early Willoughby land grants



Nichols' involvement with what was to become the City of Willoughby began in 1805 when he was granted 230 acres of land on what became known as 'Kings Plains'

This grant straddled the Pacific Highway and took in much of today's Chatswood including Chatswood Railway Station. Then in 1810 he received another grant of 380 acres stretching from Best St, Lane Cove through the Epping Highway and Mowbray Roads into Chatswood. This grant stretched south and east of this block to about Anderson Street. Today, that part of the West Ward of Willoughby north of Mowbray Road and east of Greville Street lies on part of Nichols' three hundred and eighty acre grant; the remainder, between Greville Street and the Lane Cove River, consists of land granted to early settlers such as George Stubbs, Robert Ball and Thomas Woodhouse. Later, it is reported that Nichols purchased various allotments of around 900 acres previously granted to other settlers in the area that is now Lane Cove.

Nichols had accumulated his lands through grants made directly to him and by buying up grants given predominately to the soldiers who guarded the convicts. One such landholding that Nichols acquired was that of James Wiltshire, an early settler who had acquired four 30-acre grants (48.5 hectares in total) in the area by 1803. In September 1804, one of Wiltshire's holdings was attacked by over 200 Cameraygal, (Sydney Gazette, 2 September 1804, p 2) and in November 1804 bushfire destroyed about 17 acres (6.8 hectares) of his wheat crop. (Sydney Gazette, 11 November 1804, p 2). By 1806, he had sold his four farms to Isaac Nichols (Woodford Street, Longueville was originally known as Nichol's Wharf Road). Dictionary of Sydney (Lane Cove).

Nichols was opportunistic when it came to his lands. It appears that once he had been granted land he would then try to sell it.

"Newspaper circulation on the North Shore goes back to the pioneer Sydney Gazette (1803-1842); the paper carried advertisements offering farms for sale in the area as early as 1805; Isaac Nichols used it to advertise for sale his "hundred acres of land in the District of Hunter's Hill" "five hundred acres of Land in the District of Hunter's Hill, a part of which is on a profitable tenantry; also 20 young oxen, 15 heifers, and about 100 ewes, all healthy, and in good condition".

Sydney Gazette, 1806 June

AUSTRALIA'S FIRST POSTMASTER

In 1808 during the William Bligh rebellion Nichols took the side of the insurrectionists. Then in 1809 he was appointed Superintendent of Public Works and Assistant to the Naval Officer. It is believed that his 'naval' role related to identifying fraudulent activities by convicts and settlers with the distribution of incoming mail by boat from England. Deceptive persons would pose as a recipient for the mail and take off with the proceeds. In April 1809 Nichols was appointed to the Office for Distribution of Parcels and Letters arriving in the Colony (Postmaster).

For convicts, settlers and officials in the early colony of New South Wales, letters were the only way to maintain a connection with Britain. Ships arriving in Sydney were mobbed by people looking for mail, money and valuables. Fraud, mail theft and extortion were rife.

Complaints having been made to the Lieutenant Governor, that numerous Frauds have been committed by Individuals repairing on board Ships, on their arrival at this Port, and personating others, by which they have obtained possession of Letters and Parcels to the great injury of those for whom they were intended".

Sydney Gazette, 30 April 1809



Australia's first Post Office, George St, Sydney

A requirement of Nichols' appointment as Postmaster was that he was to establish the

first post office in the colony. He did this in his home on High (George) Street, Sydney, where letters could be picked up and the collection prices would be fixed. On 26 June 1809 Isaac Nichols boarded the brig *Experiment* and collected the first bag of mail from Britain. This is recognised as the birth of the postal system in Australia.

In 1810 Nichols position as Postmaster to the colony was ratified. Being Postmaster for NSW at the time meant he was actually Postmaster for the whole of what then was Australia.

END OF NICHOL'S STORY

In his final years Nichols enjoyed the friendship and esteem of most leading people in the colony. His home was the scene of many social functions, including the Bachelors' Ball and the annual dinners to celebrate the foundation of the colony. He was a major supplier of meat to government stores and a generous subscriber to public causes. Everything he attempted was carried out with thoroughness and precision. When Nichols died on 8 November 1819, the Sydney Gazette spoke of his devotion to his public duties, his worth as a farmer and his contributions to the improvement of colonial gardening, and of his activities as a shipowner.

FIRST CHATSWOOD TOWNSHIP BUILT ON NICHOLS' LAND

The land around the intersection of the Lane Cove Rd and Mowbray Rd appears to have derived its name of Chatswood when in 1871 Richard Hayes Harnett opened up the area with a subdivision he called 'Chatswood'.

PRELIMINARY NOTICE.—LANE COVE ROAD.
—CHATSWOOD, adjoining the Wesleyan Chapel, will be offered for **SALE** shortly, in small allotments, suitable for artisans and others. Purchasers on becoming ratepayers will be exempt from toll. Finest climate in the world.

Sydney Morning Herald, 2 December 1871 p.3

Adjoining the Wesleyan Church meant that the land was actually within the confines of present day Lane Cove Council area (which was part of Willoughby between 1865 to 1895).

In 1860, John Bryson purchased land on the north-east corner of Mowbray Rd and Lane Cove Roads. This lot was formerly part of an Isaac Nichols' land grant. Bryson built a house at this location. This area then became the focus for Chatswood's first Central Business District (CBD).

CHATSWOOD POST OFFICES



1. 1879 - 1886: The first Chatswood post office operated on the Lane Cove Road at Sandays (next to John Bryson's house). James Montgomery, storekeeper and builder, was the first postmaster. Sandays was licensed to sell stamps from this location in the late 1890s.

2. Late 1880s - mid 1890s: A Post Office was located on the south-eastern corner of Lane Cove Rd and Victoria Ave. It was opened to service the men engaged in building the railway line.

3. Mid-1890s – late 1890s: The Post Office was operating from a small weatherboard cottage on the southern side of Victoria Avenue West near the railway station.

4. Late 1890s: The weatherboard Post Office was replaced by a brick shop building prior to 1900.

5. 1903 – 1966: A two storey brick building of standard design was located in Victoria Avenue on what is now the RSL site.

6. 1966 - 2014: A three-storey post office building was built in Victor Street.

7. 2014: The current Post Office was opened in the Chatswood Transport Interchange

For a time (1964- 1974) there was a branch Post Office in Fullers Rd at Greville St and a Business Post Office on the corner of Help St and Railway St.

NICHOLS' ESTATES POST 1865

In 1865 the Municipality of North Willoughby was proclaimed by the NSW government. This covered the area of the current day City of Willoughby and the Municipality of Lane Cove.¹

Much of Nichols' former estates were purchased by prominent land developer Richard Hayes Harnett from the estate of Mrs Isaac Nichols. It seems that when Harnett

purchased Nichols' properties the land was pristine, rugged bushland.

Harnett had first used the name 'Chatswood' for an estate he opened up near the corner of the Lane Cove Road and Mowbray Rd West in current day Lane Cove. Another of Harnett's Chatswood Estates was later purchased by the Department of Railways for the construction of the station, railway line and goods yard.

¹ Lane Cove was part of Willoughby until 1895.

After 1865, when Willoughby was being developed, there were many requests for Council to take action by building roads through the former Nichols' Estates.

In 1886:

"the Secretary of the Universal Land Building and Investment Society requested (Willoughby) Council to clear the Government road running through the Nichols Estate. The (Council) Clerk responded that the streets should be widened before the Estate was subdivided for sale. Harnett and Stuart also asked for Council to take over certain roads and ask the Government to align them."

Sydney Morning Herald, 8 September 1886

Also in 1886 Alderman Welch presented a petition from thirty-three property holders of River Ward (Lane Cove after 1895) requesting the Council to have the road from Nichols Wharf Road to the boundary of Berry's Estate, and to have it stumped and cleared.

The Globe Thursday 8 April 1886 p.3

In 1887 there were requests to survey, clear and align Rd on the Nichols' Estate (including Fleming St, Lane Cove).

The Daily Telegraph, 20 January 1887 p 3

The number of requests for roads within the former Nichols' Estates is not surprising given the large tracts of land involved and the fact that they were central to the development of Chatswood's commercial areas.

NICHOL'S LEGACY

From a Willoughby perspective, Nichols' legacy of being Australia's first postmaster is peripheral. There is no evidence that he ever lived in the Willoughby local government area. Rather, his legacy derives from the fact that two of the earliest land grants he owned in the Willoughby/Chatswood area were pivotal in the establishment of Chatswood – first at the intersection of the Gordon Rd (Pacific Highway) and Mowbray Rd, and later around the Chatswood railway station.

REFERENCES

- Booker N. & Bennett I. (1988) The West Ward, Council of the Municipality of Willoughby
Fogarty T. (2021) Chatswood Post Offices (unpublished), Willoughby District Historical Society & Museum
Fogarty T. (2021) The naming of Chatswood (unpublished), Willoughby District Historical Society & Museum
Leplastrier C. (1915) Willoughby's fifty years, Council of the Municipality of Willoughby (photograph) p.62
Phillips V (1981) The good old days (photograph) p.28.2
Russell E (1965) 'Mails' in Willoughby a Centenary history, The Council of the Municipality of Willoughby pp.92-94