Chatsworth House on Hopkins Hill
by Jim Kent

Some forty kilometres south east of Hamilton situated between Caramut and Wickcliffe is a small settlement called Chatsworth. There is not much there, just some old public buildings, a new CFA shed and some dwellings. Nearby runs the Hopkins River which arises in the Pyrenees mountains near Ararat, then wanders down over the western plains to enter the Southern Ocean at the city of Warrnambool.

Just on the outskirts of this small village is a sign attached to a mail box with the wording Chatsworth House. A road leading off up the hill will conduct you to a very fascinating collection of buildings. I first visited this property some fifty years ago with a vintage car club. From memory it was then in a rather derelict state, its huge garden greatly overgrown and for some reason this property remained in my memory, quite often surfacing to mind as on the screen of a computer.

A few months ago the Casterton Regal Pipe Band was commissioned to play for an elaborate wedding at the property. To give you some idea, the budget for the wedding was $100,000 and we were handsomely paid for our service on the day. What interested me most was the fact that this wedding was to be at Chatsworth House. Over my lifetime I have participated in numerous weddings, from simple to elaborate, but this once eclipsed all the previous ones. The bride arrived in a horse-drawn carriage and the groom in an enormous 1920s American limousine. We piped the bride down through the garden to her awaiting groom.

There you have the reason for my second visit to Chatsworth House and because of this my naturally curious mind again became agitated and to satisfy my curiosity I had to do research as to how and when this property came into being. Its origins go back to Dunbartonshire, Scotland, when Mary Moffat, the wife of John Moffat, gave birth to a son in the year of 1817, his parents christening him John. This son of John and Mary Moffat was to have an amazing though short life on this earth, his span from 1817 to 1871.

Our subject, John Moffat, migrated in 1839 from Scotland to Van Diemen’s Land, now known as Tasmania. He then moved to Port Phillip, now Melbourne, to take up a job as a shepherd for the huge agricultural land holding company known as the Clyde Company. This firm had large landholdings in the western district of Victoria, one of these being known as Hopkins Hill after the river that ran through it.
A William Lonsdale had a large run known as The Grange situated where the city of Hamilton is now. John Moffat worked at Hopkins Hill as a shepherd and shearer and through diligent work practices he came to The Grange run in the capacity of Overseer. Captain William Lonsdale, in the year 1854, sold The Grange property to John Moffat, and he proceeded to buy more land around it, becoming the owner of the largest amount of land in what is now the Hamilton district. In around 1851-2, he bought Hopkins Hill station from the Clyde Company and it was on this station in 1859-60 he had built his magnificent residence, which he named Chatsworth House, at a cost of twenty thousand pounds.

Some twenty two rooms have sixteen foot ceilings, long corridors, walls lined the Sienna marble, and huge marble mantle pieces surround the fireplace of this single storey bluestone mansion, which is sheltered by iron decorated verandas. The mansion looks out over the range of red gums outlining the course of the Hopkins River and is surrounded by what I consider a magnificent garden, beyond my capacity to describe. The gardens are a wonderful mix of thousand of plants, hedges, various conifers and other types of trees which were procured form countries around the world and it really has to be seen to appreciate its beauty. Sufficient to say, John Moffat, at one stage fenced off 100 acres for his garden and driveways. Adjacent to the mansion is a huge long bluestone building which was the staff quarters, and at right angles to this is another huge bluestone stables and coach house, a school and a church, all in this complex.

John Moffat not only specialized in the breeding of sheep and cattle, he had a stud of thoroughbred racehorses with which he won numerous races on Melbourne and other city racecourses. Sadly, he never married and died on board a boat on its return journey from overseas where he had been buying more bloodstock for his studs. He was only 54 years of age when he succumbed to a fever and died. He is buried in Ceylon. His estate was left mainly to his brother, William, who emigrated with him. William in his own right was a successful land owner in the Avoca district. At the time of his death John Moffat owned 133,000 acres of land and his personal estate was valued at 396,000 Pounds which would be an enormous sum in today’s currency. He not only owned Hopkins Hill but also considerable land in the vicinity of Geelong and Inverleigh. Originally there was 18,000 acres on the Chatsworth property and it currently contains 6,000 acres and is owned by a family named Jones and managed by Mr Trent Adams who produces prime lambs ad cropping products, and the massive garden in cared for by a professional gardener.

Rumour has it that at one time a Frenchman bought Chatsworth House and spent three million dollars on its restoration. John Moffat entertained English royalty in its hallowed halls. Today it is let out for occasions such as the wedding we attended. A bus trip to this property by our Society would make an excellent social occasion.

I am indebted to Darryl Povey for his assistance in compiling this article.
21st September, 1966

Mr. KIM said that his father had come from China to this district in 1884 and worked at Runnymede. (1966 Cr H D MITCHELLS) father gave Mr. KIM a horse and cart to begin a vegetable garden at “Runnymede”.

He later had a garden in Casterton and built up a thriving greengrocers business which is now carried on by his son Mr. Fee KIM.

(notes: Homestead now owned by J A T LAIDLAW (note this is correct at time 21/9/1966, J A T LAIDLAW now deceased and property now owned by J A T LAIDLAW’S son Timothy LAIDLAW)

19th October, 1966

Papers were read by Mr. J GORMAN prepared by Mrs. Jean MURRAY.

Mr. HUTCHISON bought “Runnymede” in 1848, when it consisted of 22,000 acres. A fine woolshed and homestead built by Messes HUTCHISON and MURRAY is still in use at “Runnymede”, now owned by Mrs. J LAIDLAW.

In 1851, February, one of the worst bush fires ever took place with great loss of sheep and cattle. This came to be known as Black Thursday.

When the property was divided and sold the homestead was purchased by Mr. J B GILL.

In 1868 there was a big flood of Coleraine, in which 10 men were drowned including Mr. DRUMMOND, uncle of one of our members, Miss. Gordie LEAKE, Mr. HUTCHISON, who owned “Runnymede”, Miss Jean MURRAY’s father’s uncle. The first Kelpie sheepdog ever bred was at “Warrock”, Mr. GORMAN read about George ROBERTSON who came from Van Diemans Land in 1831. In 1843 he bought “Warrock” for 300 pounds (with the land which was crown land).

Interesting paragraph was read from a book written in 1922 on the early days. Memorizing a journey by coach (really a wagon?) from Portland in 1864. She pulled up at Glenelg Inn when Mr. DYSON was the landlord – thence by spring cart and draught horse to Chetwynd. Very bad roads. George GORDON lived near the author in Chetwynd, the PO he was in charge of in Harrow. The CUSSENS were also residents (this Leo CUSSEN is a descendent, also MATHESONS).

(notes: John ROBERTSON of “WANDO VALE” bought “WARROCK” for £300.00 for his cousin George ROBERTSON)

20th March, 1968

A most interesting talk was given by Mr. Ellis TICHLER of Brit Brit, a member of the Balmoral Historical Society in “Shipwrecks along the coast”.

Mr. TICHLER said that shipping was very important in the early days when roads and bridges were non existent and that ships formed a vital link in the daily well being of the settlers.

Mr. TICHLER covered the Ports from 1802 to the end of the century and many vessels “Casino”, “Devon”, “Ardmella”, “Marina” and many others.

On 1844 “Casterton News” loaned by Mrs. RANKIN had advertisements covering service of these vessels.

15th May, 1968

An interesting talk was given by Mr. Jack GORMAN on the 1946 floods and many photos were produced. This was the largest flood since 1906.

Members recalled experiences of 1946 floods Mr. GORMAN has sent this paper to “Parade”.

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