

LEGETT'S GANG

Mike Brogden

The following article is based upon information in Rollo Arnold's "The Farthest Promised Land." This book explains the enthusiasm amongst farm labourers for emigration to New Zealand in the early 1870s and describes in some detail the favourable conditions that the emigrants met. Amongst the Oxfordshire farm labourers who emigrated was William Brogden from Cogges who sailed with his wife Elizabeth and their six children on 25 February 1874 as part of "Leggett's Gang."

Joseph Leggett was from 1872 - 1874 the Oxford District Secretary of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union. The early 1870s were a lively and troubled period in which some Oxfordshire farmers, as did farmers in other parts of the country, locked out workers who joined unions or had the temerity to ask for more pay. Landlords such as the Duke of Marlborough (of the Blenheim estates) encouraged their tenant farmers to resist the union. The Duke took a particularly unpleasant line by transferring the renting of many of his allotments and cottages to the farmers so that their employees could be threatened with eviction if they did not conform.

At Ascott-under-Wychwood an agricultural workers' strike became notorious when in 1873, 16 of their womenfolk were imprisoned for between 7 and 10 days of hard labour for picketing in support of their husbands. The two presiding magistrates, both clerics as well as wealthy landowners and farmers (one with 8 servants and a butler), showed no mercy. Mary Pratley, for example, was imprisoned with her 10 week old child. It is no wonder that she and her husband later joined the rush to emigrate to what promised to be a fairer society.

The chairman of the branch of the NALU was Christopher Holloway, who had visited the home of the Pratleys and of another family from which a child had to accompany the mother to prison. Holloway wrote that many of the Ascott cottages were "simply horrible and a disgrace to a Christian country." The families' homes were in a block of three cottages:

"Imagine a narrow place, like a coal cellar, down which you go two or three steps, no flooring except broken stones, no ceiling, no grate, rough walls, a bare ladder leading to the one narrow bedroom about 6ft. wide, containing two bedsteads for a man, his wife, and three young children, the whole place as wretchedly bad and miserable as imagination can conceive, and only divided by a rough wooden partition not reaching to the roof, but over which you may look into the bedroom of the next adjoining house, equally wretched and miserable, and with the additional evil that the only way to the bedroom of a third house is through the bedroom of No. 2 house, and that in No. 2 live a man, his wife, and six children, and till recently the third house (one room down, one up) was occupied by a man, his wife, and also six children ..."

Holloway had found that prior to the appearance of the union, agricultural wages in Ascott were 9 shillings a week in winter and 10 in summer, with no wages if work could not be done because of wet weather and bonuses of 2 shillings per week in busy seasons when the hours could be between 12 and 16 a day. The Ascott strike was for 14 shillings per week but the local farmers refused to pay and agreed with one another not to relent.

In these circumstances, the news from New Zealand was very attractive. George Smith from Burford who had emigrated on the Herald wrote in May 1873:

"If any of you are willing to come out to this sunny land you don't need to fear the sea; if you have a passage like ours it will be quite a pleasure trip. The day we arrived in the port of Hawke's Bay we had a first rate dinner on board — fresh beef, young potatoes and carrots. I had no difficulty in getting work. I was employed soon after I got here. I am now working on the road for the Government. I have 6s. a day from eight o'clock in the morning to five in the evening. If I had been in Bourford I should have worked three days for that. Working men in this country don't believe in much walking; I have a horse and new saddle and bridle to go to my work on. I bought the horse for £4, and saddle and bridle for about £3, so you see I got rigged out very soon; and now I am about getting a cow; my wife has got her fowls. The house we are living in is a two roomed cottage with a garden. I give 5s. per week, and I have firewood and the food for my cow for that. You must understand that we burn nothing but wood. Most provisions are cheap. Flour is about the same as at home; beef is threepence or fourpence per pound, and mutton, 2½d. We used to be told that the beef and mutton of this country were not so good as at home; come and try them, and I assure you will find out your mistake. We thought it a fine thing to get a pig's cheek or three or four pounds of bacon in old England; but now I can have half a sheep at a time, and sometimes a whole one, and about 80 or 90 pounds of beef. We can sometimes get a leg of mutton for sixpence. This is really the land of Goshen, and if you acted wisely you would come; there is plenty of work for you. Shearing is a fine trade in its season; a good shearer will get £1 a day. A shepherd with not more than one or two children will get from £60 to £70 a year, and all found. Clothing is a little dearer here, but not a great deal. If you come, provide yourselves with a good supply, but if you cannot, still come, and you will soon get clothes when you get here. I will send you a newspaper, and enclose two papers showing you how you can come. Read the papers well and lend them about, and please send me a newspaper sometimes; you can send one for a penny stamp. George has been to school, but he has now gone to work. He has 6s per week and his food. I am very glad I came here, I wish I had come years ago. I have no anxiety now about how I am to get food and clothing for myself and children. . . I have not been to class yet out here, but as I am now living within five miles of Waipawa, where the class is held, I intend to go and give my name as a member with the United Methodist Free Churches. The minister comes to Kaikora to preach every fortnight, and at Waipawa every Sunday night. Be sure to write and tell me how the Union is getting on, and how you are getting on with your chapel affairs."

The Brogden company (not related to the Oxfordshire Brogdens) [see articles in this website on John and Alexander Brogden and the "Brogden Navvies"] had been recruiting for emigrants in Oxfordshire and they too had sent enthusiastic letters to their families and friends. Rollo Arnold's book contains many examples and descriptions of the life in New Zealand.

The continued lock-out in some farms, the good reports from New Zealand and the introduction of free passages in October 1873 by the New Zealand government resulted in a growth of interest in emigration. Lectures were held on the benefits of life in New Zealand: about 600 people attended one in Milton-under-Wychwood on 14 November 1873. Advertisements were placed in the unions newsletters.

Christopher Holloway led a party of about 80 which sailed from London on the Invererne on 22 November 1873, including several families from Wychwood villages. He spent an exhausting time travelling in New Zealand to see for himself how well immigrants settled and how rapidly the country was developing. He also met Julius Vogel, the New Zealand premier who had promoted the policy of immigration. Holloway returned in March 1875 and continued his promotion of emigration to New Zealand, armed with local knowledge.

Joseph Leggett decided to lead a party and become an emigrant himself. He held a public meeting on 2 January 1874 at Benson (in south Oxfordshire) and another in Islip on 27 January and his personal reputation (also used in NALU advertising) prompted an even greater flood of volunteers. 41 sailed on the Atrato in February 1874, mostly from south and east Oxfordshire. He had intended to join this party but sailed on 4 March on the Ballochmyle with 111 emigrants and their families (502 in total), including 3 families from his old home village of Milton-under-Wychwood and one family of Brogdens from Cogges, near Witney.

Of 81 ships that sailed for New Zealand in 1874, 67 carried a total of 150 members of Oxfordshire families. In May 1874 New Zealand welcomed a total of 4720 immigrants. It was the peak year – and these figures for emigration do not include all those who went to Canada and Australia.

The effect of the drain of labour on the previously recalcitrant UK farmers was to force them to increase wages and conditions and, coupled with the economic down-turn in New Zealand towards the end of the 1870s, this encouraged a much reduced flow of emigrants.

The Ballochmyle with “Leggett’s Gang” aboard, reached Christchurch in New Zealand on 1 June 1874, to be welcomed by Christopher Holloway who took Leggett and his family to stay with him and found Leggett a job at his old trade of carpentry, building a school in the town. Leggett soon became a landowner in Ashburton, growing 30 sacks of potatoes and owning “a horse, three pigs, two sheep, two cats, a dog, seven children and some fine fowls” as his wife, Ann wrote home to her mother.

Rollo Arnold traces similar successes for other passengers on the Ballochmyle, including the Brogdens (although he misspells their surname as Bragden).

William Brogden, his wife Elizabeth (Neville) and their six children came from Cogges, near Witney. William, born in South Leigh in 1835 had married Elizabeth in 1858. He was the fourth generation of Brogdens from South Leigh and Stanton Harcourt who can be traced back to George, the first recorded Brogden in the area. William was probably the first to take the adventurous step of emigrating. Rosa, the eldest child (born in 1860 at Cogges), died in an accident when she was thrown from a buggy near home in Temuka, New Zealand. Harry (born 1862; Cogges) married in Temuka. His wife Mary Ann (Robinson) had emigrated with her family in the same year as the Brogdens. Edwin (born 1864; Cogges) married Rhoda Emma Burton in Temuka and had several children before being killed in a logging accident in 1912. Ada Lizzie (born about 1868, probably at Cogges) married Horace Colville in Temuka. George William (born 1870 in Cogges) became a plant breeder and farmer, marrying Rose Olif Uden in 1892 and living to a great age until 1964. Nora Jane was the youngest of the six who travelled on the Ballochmyle, being born in the year before they emigrated. She married Donald Sutherland in Temuka.

William and Elizabeth had two children in New Zealand. Forence Rosa was born in 1876 and Charles John in 1880. He became an agricultural contractor and is said to have become the oldest road roller driver in New Zealand. William and Elizabeth prospered. After a year or two of labouring at Temuka, he became a farmer in his own right, leasing a property of 400 acres in the area. This would have been an unattainable ambition back home with land ownership where the Brogdens were employed in Oxfordshire being almost entirely in the hands of the Duke of Marlborough, the Earls of Macclesfield and of Abingdon and Lord Harcourt and wages being too low for farm labourers like William to save enough to take on farm leases.

Rollo Arnold describes the arrangements in the Temuka area which supported small “cockatoo” farmers and which avoided some of the problems experienced in other provinces when harder economic times arrived because the settlers were not greatly in debt. Families such as the Brogdens were placed in village settlements in which the land was allocated in sections of between a half and 2 acres from which the family could subsist whilst the menfolk laboured elsewhere. First, whilst the women and children stayed in a depot on rations provided by the provincial government, the men (also on rations) built a sod hut for each family, guided by an experienced ganger. The turf walls were plastered with clay with a low pitched, thatched roof. These houses were very cheap to build and were rent free in the first year and 2 shillings per week after that. This scheme provided a good start for the immigrants who, because they were not faced with large repayments of loans, were able to save enough to set out on their own within a few years. Even a sod hut sounds a better proposition than the cottages where the Pratleys lived in Oxfordshire.

Frederick Pratley, whose wife Mary had been imprisoned in Oxford, emigrated later in 1874, went to Temuka and took labouring work for three years until he was able to lease his own farm and later another nearby. As Ann Leggett wrote to her mother about another family, “they should want five thousand a year for them to live upon if they came back (to Oxfordshire) again.”

Sources:

- Rollo Arnold: *The Farthest promised Land*; Victoria University Press; 1981
- Mike Brogden: *the Brogden family tree (on-going)*
- Grace Morrow (a Brogden descendent in NZ): *family tree (on going)*