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Joseph Dixon – Buderim's First Pioneer

by Bill Lavarack

Joseph Chapman Dixon was the first to select a block of land on Buderim in 1870. His life is well documented in several places, so what follows is not original research, but rather an attempt to bring together a concise story of his life, particularly as it involves Buderim.

Joseph Chapman Dixon was born in Bradford, West Yorkshire on 28 August 1841. His parents were Thomas Dixon and Jane Dixon (born Chapman). His family were members of the 'Society of Friends' or Quakers. He emigrated to Australia aged 22 in 1864 on the full-rigged ship 'Tornado', landing in Melbourne in June 1864. He worked in a grocery store, then moved to Sydney where he eventually became proprietor of a grocery business in Pitt Street. After five years he moved to Brisbane where he became friends with other Quakers.¹

In 1868 a sugar farming industry was developing on the Queensland coast and Dixon, along with Quaker friends Albert Allen and Herbert Everett, hired bushman William Grigor to guide them to possible good farming land on the Mooloolah River north of Brisbane. Here they found extensive grasslands at the foot of Buderim Mountain and adjacent to the Mooloolah River. They were impressed by the absence of trees and failed to see evidence of previous flooding.

Dixon commented that there were some Aborigines (he called them 'blacks') and a few timbergetters in the area and said that 'the blacks are tall athletic fellows'. After 'spying out the land' the party returned to Brisbane and some to Sydney.²

¹ *Notes of Joseph C. Dixon's Reminiscences and Journal of Canambie Plantation*. The Reminiscences cover the period from his departure From England in 1864 to 1928, but mainly concern his Life on Buderim from the time he took up land in 1870. The Journal was written at intervals from 1875 to 1890 and was continued by his daughter from 1893 to 1895. A photocopy of the Journal and Reminiscences is in the possession of the Buderim Historical Society and one is held by the Oxley Library.

² *Nambour Chronicle*, 10 August, 1923, p. 7, Our Pioneers, Joseph Chapman Dixon.

In 1869 Dixon and Everett returned to the Mooloolah Plains. Dixon wrote:

Our party was some friends A. Allen & A. Wood and a Hungarian named G. A. Riebe – and Herbert Everett & myself selected lower down the river our object was sugar cane growing. The three higher up called their place of 640 acres 'Friends Farm'.¹ The novelty of starting in a new country and industry was interesting. Friends Farm built a house and had a black ships cook. We also got some men at work and built a cottage of spilt timber called slabs and it was roofed with shingles. It looked quite nice on a small elevation not far from the Mooloolah.²

Dixon then writes:

As the house was nearly finished we had land ploughed and some cane planted which grew well – when sudden disaster fell on us. We had heavy rain for a couple of days and as we had no high land the water surrounded us. We got the punt up to the house and although we had the house 4 feet high, this fresh brought the water up to the floor. We could not do anything with the flood water over the land. Everett and I went to see how our neighbours on Friends farm were getting on. While their farm was covered with water in places the ridge on which the house was built was dry. On our way we could see that our plant cane was 2 feet underneath our punt. In considering the position we were obliged to give the place up as it would not do with no dry place for the homestead.³

Dixon and Everett abandoned their farm and travelled to Maryborough where they heard some land was available for selection, but were too late. They travelled back to Mooloolah River through heavy rain and found the flood water up to the ceiling of their house and that everything had floated off. Thoroughly discouraged they returned to Brisbane. Dixon then worked on a cane farm at Doughboy Creek, which he presumably owned or had a share in, as he states: *'we then sold out to Everett and I nearly recouped my first venture on sugar.'* The other Quakers on the Mooloolah River did not last much longer, giving up in 1873 after repeated flooding.

Dixon later commented:

When we were on the river an old timber man said to me 'What did you select down on this place for. You might know it would be flooded. Now if you had selected on Buderim Mt about five miles off you would have had a place. I've seen them digging sawpits 6 ft deep and good soil all the way. The old steam boat comes to the Mooloolah bay and there you are.' However we had to pay for our inexperience – and I never forgot the old man's remarks on Buderim and shortly after selected a homestead on it and spent 25 years there.⁴

Dixon took up adjoining portions 44 (80 acres) and 53 (30 acres), on the eastern end of Buderim Mountain, parish of Mooloolah, in June and August 1870 respectively. He erected a slab hut as his first residence on portion 44.⁵ He later commented: *... not having any training as a carpenter I made many mistakes but found that it was wonderful what one can do when one tries.⁶*

¹ Metcalf, William J., 2018, *Friends Farm: Australia's first Quaker Commune*, Journal of Religious History, pp 99 -119. Metcalf, on page 107, says: *On 1 November, Alfred Allen, on behalf of Arthur Wood, Gustave Riebe, and himself, selected 375 hectares of land within a curve of the Mooloolah River, while Dixon and Everett selected 260 hectares a bit lower down the river.* (375 ha = 927 acres; 260 ha = 642 acres)

² Joseph Dixon, *Diary and Reminiscences*, p. 14 of Reminiscences section, John Oxley Library, Box 8948; OM75-117. Copy provided by Dr William Metcalf.).

³ Ibid, p. 16.

⁴ Joseph Dixon, *Diary and Reminiscences*.

⁵ Website *Queensland Family Trees – Joseph Chapman Dixon*, Cultural Heritage Significance Canambie Homestead, Sunshine Coast Regional Council (author).

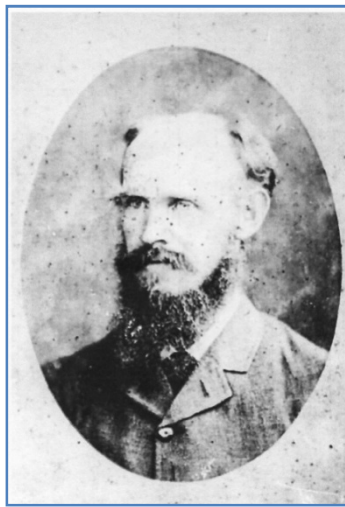
⁶ Joseph Dixon, *Diary and Reminiscences*.

He stated in his *Reminiscences*:

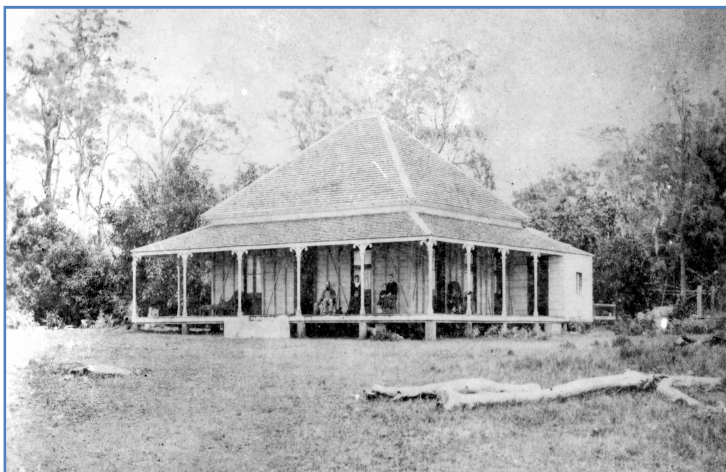
It was a lovely place with no settlement. – the land was the best volcanic and eventually when the scrub was felled gave a beautiful view of the ocean & Mooloolah bay. I also took up grass land on the mountain flat – for some cattle and they did very well. The bullocks got fat and I killed them for beef and my neighbours took a quarter of the carcase each and they worked for me as payment. I increased my team of bullocks and got a man to drive them timber hauling to Mooloolah bay. In this way I was able to keep things going.¹

Dixon cleared his land, selling any worthwhile timber to William Pettigrew. He planted sugar, maize and coffee. In 1873 Joseph Dixon married Elizabeth Alice Fielding of Eagle Farm, Brisbane. He brought his bride to his slab house which he described as ‘comfortable enough with its big fireplace’. Dixon then described their honeymoon:

After the ceremony & breakfast we rode on horseback 42 miles to Glass Mtns hotel² – I had a very fine horse for Alice to ride and a new saddle which I gave her ... I have often wondered how Alice felt riding into the bush with a man and not know where she was going. Next day we got home and no-one to receive us a neighbour had fixed the place up & left a loaf of bread – so much for our humble start in life.³



Joseph and Alice Dixon.
Joseph Dixon photograph
about 1880, Alice
probably about the same.
Photos: BHS.



*Canambie - right very early days;
left about 1890. Photos BHS*

¹ Joseph Dixon *Notes of Joseph C. Dixon's Reminiscences and Journal of Canambie Plantation*. The ‘Reminiscences’ cover the period from his departure From England in 1864 to 1928, but mainly concern his Life on Buderim from the time he took up land in 1870. The Journal was written at intervals from 1875 to 1890 and was continued by his daughter from 1893 to 1895. A photocopy copy of the Journal and Reminiscences in the possession of the Buderim Historical Society and one is held by the Oxley Library, p. 20.

² The ‘Glass House Mtns hotel’ was ‘Bankfoot House’ a coach stop run by William Grigor of whom we have already heard.

³ Joseph Dixon, *Reminiscences*

Joseph and Alice lived in the original slab hut until about 1883 when they built a house typical of the period, which they named *Canambie*.¹ It was on part of what was formerly portion 53 and had

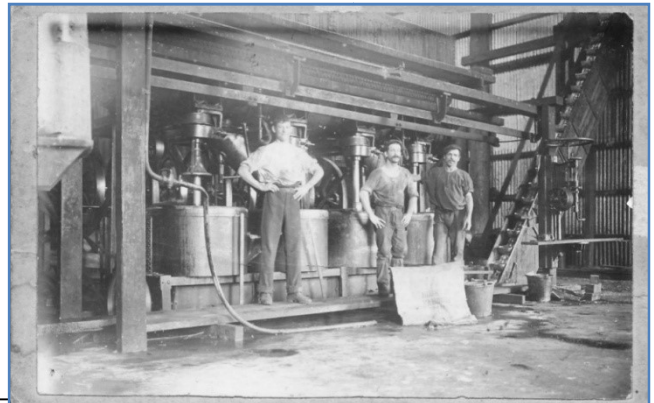


four rooms and a surrounding verandah. This house is still in use at 12 Dixon Road – the oldest house remaining in use on Buderim.

Canambie in recent times.

They were to have six children - Elsie Jane Burnett (born Dixon 1874-1954); Thomas Dixon (1876-1876); Alice Olive Southers (born Dixon 1879- ?); Eva Gertrude Ruddle (born Dixon 1882- ?); Joseph Clarence Dixon (1885- ?); Percival Dixon (1888-1961)

Sugar cane was suited to Buderim's conditions and soon the settlers were growing cane, but with no mill, the only option was to send it south to Brisbane for crushing on one of Pettigrew's ships. This proved unreliable and it became clear that a local mill was highly desirable. In 1875 Dixon went into business with his father-in-law John Fielding, and they built a mill which comprised machinery purchased from another Buderim pioneer, Stephen Fountain who had a mill at Burpengary. Fountain dismantled the machinery, including the large evaporating pans made of cast iron and the large boiler which weighed five tons. All this was loaded on to a steamboat at Coochin Creek, which then sailed to Mooloolah Heads. It was then dragged up the mountain to the present Mill Road by the Chambers Brothers who had two teams of bullocks. The mill was completed and operating in mid 1876.



Left and right the Dixon – Fielding sugar Mill. About 1890. *Photos BHS.*

For most of the year the growing and harvesting of sugar cane was a labour intensive business and finding men of European origin willing to work in the hot conditions was a major problem. Dixon and Fielding solved this in 1877, by importing indentured workers (known as 'kanakas') from the Pacific Islands. While this has been described as 'kidnapping' and even 'slavery' by some modern writers, it was a scheme which worked well if the master was a sympathetic man, as apparently Dixon and Fielding were.

The first group were landed in Brisbane and were brought to Buderim. Dixon organised a second group to be landed at Maryborough and then on to Gympie by train from where they walked to Buderim, a distance of some 40 miles. Dixon reports that, much to his surprise, this group included a mother and baby. Dixon loaded these two on his horse and walked with the men. From all accounts the workers were looked after well and a small school was built for them near the mill. The workers received 8/- per week and rations, which consisted of 10 lb. of flour, 10 lb. beef, 2 lb. sugar and 1 lb. tea. Later it was found best to bake the bread at the mill, as the Islanders made a poor job of their baking. The overall impression of the Islanders was that they were hard working,

¹ 'Canambie' is reputedly an Aboriginal name for the black plum.

religious and caused few problems. It would seem that Dixon's workers were accepted as part of the Buderim community.

By 1881, JC Dixon was one of the largest landholders on Buderim Mountain, having acquired the freehold of nearly 480 acres and the leasehold of another 80 acres, and was in partnership with John Fielding in the freehold of another 200 acres, as well as the three acre mill site. By the mid-1880s he had acquired another 1000 acres of scrub land running down the southeast side of the mountain to Mountain Creek. At this time Dixon operated a farm on contiguous portions 24, 44 and 53, a total of 130 acres. He was important member of the growing Buderim Mountain community, being one of the founders of the Buderim Mountain Provisional School, a Justice of the Peace and was running the post office. In August 1888, he was appointed a trustee of the new Buderim School of Arts.

The sugar industry on Buderim went well, reaching a peak in 1883, with some 45 men employed at the mill. However the situation deteriorated in the mid 1880s due to a depressed world sugar market. In February 1886 the Dixon and Fielding partnership was dissolved and Dixon operated the mill on his own in an increasingly difficult situation.

By late 1889 these circumstances had forced Buderim sugar growers to move to other crops and only Joseph Dixon remained. But he was fighting a losing battle, and in 1896, he closed his mill. Later he reported that his 25 year venture into sugar at Buderim resulted in a severe loss.

In the early 1890s he selected land at Flaxton on the Blackall Range, and planted coffee and orange trees, although he did not live there initially. In 1892 he moved to Gympie where he invested in a boot-manufacturing store. He was backed by his brother Thomas Coar Dixon who had done well in the boot-making and retailing business in Brisbane. After eleven years in Gympie, Joseph Dixon returned to live at Flaxton where he built a fine house that he named *Chermside*. It still stands on Flaxton Road. He developed a dairy herd and an orange orchard and was a Maroochy Shire councillor.



Islanders cutting cane ca. 1882.
Photo: BHS.

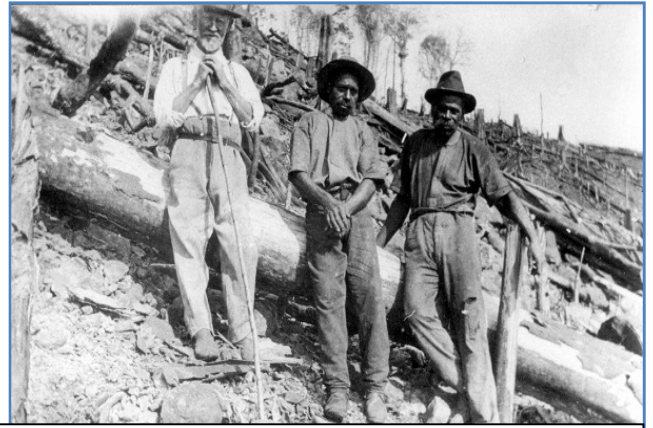
Alice passed away on 28 February 1927 and Joseph passed away on 29 October 1929. Their well kept graves are beside Flaxton Mill Road and are well worth visiting.



Joseph Dixon in later life. Photo: BHS



Graves of Joseph Chapman Dixon and Elizabeth Alice Dixon, beside Flaxton Mill Road, Flaxton



Left: *Chermiside*, the Dixon home on Flaxton Road. Right: Joseph Dixon with Islander workers clearing land at Flaxton. (Photos from 'Picture Sunshine Coast', Sunshine Coast Council.)

Further Reading

- Buderim Historical Society Inc., 1995, *South Sea Islanders came to Buderim*, Buderim Historical Society Inc., 64 pages, printed by Inkspot.
- J.C. Dixon, *Notes of Joseph C. Dixon's reminiscences and Journal of Canambie Plantation*, The Reminiscences cover the period from his departure From England in 1864 to 1928, but mainly concern his life on Buderim from the time he took up land in 1870. The Journal was written at intervals from 1875 to 1890 and was continued by his daughter from 1893 to 1895, typescript copy held by Buderim Historical Society Inc. and by the John Oxley Library in Brisbane.
- Lavarack, Bill, 2021, *The Sugar Industry on Buderim*, Occasional Paper no. 2, Buderim Historical Society Inc., 8 pages.
- Metcalf, William J., 2018, *Friends Farm: Australia's first Quaker Commune*, Journal of Religious History, pp 99 -119.
- Website: 2013, <http://www.queenslandfamilytrees.com> Queensland Family Trees – Joseph Chapman Dixon.
- Website, 27 March 2019: <https://www.sunshinecoast.qld.gov.au/news/backward-glance-songs-echoed-over-the-fields> Sunshine Coast Council, Heritage Library.

Newspaper articles.

This story includes several newspaper quotes. The reference to each is given in the text. In addition to these, the following newspaper articles were accessed through *Trove*:

- *Moreton Mail*, A Fruitful Land, 22 January, p. 6, 1897.
- *The Telegraph*, Sugar growing at the Buderim Mountain, 19 February, p.2, 1880.
- *Brisbane Courier Mail*, Mooloolah [from our Correspondent], 18 January, p. 6, 1883.
- *The Queenslander*, The Buderim Mountain District, 7 November, p. 760, 1885.
- *Nambour Chronicle and North Coast Advertiser*, Our Pioneers Joseph Chapman Dixon, Buderim Pioneer, 10 August, p. 7, 1923.

Acknowledgements

Most of the photographs in the story above came from the collection of the Buderim Historical Society Inc. Two on this page are from 'Picture Sunshine Coast' as captioned.