



## Bess Knight-Brown of Mount Irvine and Blackheath

by Peter C. Rickwood & Joan Steele

### Introduction

One of the many boarding-house proprietors of Blackheath is the lady who became known as Elizabeth Knight-Brown and who resided at *Brooklands*, Warrigal Street, from 1919. The family was originally just 'Brown' the prefix 'Knight -'

“... only being added by mutual consent before Basil (*Elizabeth's brother*) married Julia Holden.”<sup>1</sup>

in 1913<sup>2</sup>. As all of the siblings had 'Knight' as their last given name, really all that was being added was a hyphen!

But who was this person with an uncommon surname?

### Parents

Her father, Edward Knight Brown was born in the second quarter of 1845<sup>3</sup>, christened on 2 May 1845<sup>4</sup>, and educated in Durham, England<sup>5</sup>; he was still there for the Census in 1861<sup>6</sup> but was not for the next Census in 1871.

### Tasmania

On an unknown date between 1861 and 1867 Edward travelled to Tasmania where he is said to have taken up 'pioneering'<sup>7</sup>, presumably farming. The earliest known record of him being in Australia is of his participation in a cricket match on New Years Day 1867 when aged 21. He played in 'Edward Stutterd's Eleven' against 'Joseph Alford's Eleven', those being two sides from the Stanley Cricket Club<sup>8</sup>; he was on the winning side but did not bowl and when he batted he scored a duck! Then on 14 December 1872<sup>9</sup> he sailed on the schooner Annie to Hobart, but it first went to Bird Island in north Queensland to load guano, a journey which took almost 8 weeks! - quite an adventure!

But on completion of that trip Edward cannot have stayed in Tasmania for long as he was in New Zealand on 4 March 1873 when he played cricket for the 'Waikato Settlers' against the 'Armed Constabulary', and later that year he was reported as being the agent in Alexandra (c.30 km South of Hamilton) for the Waikato Times<sup>10</sup>. Two years later he returned to Tasmania (possibly briefly) for on 4 February 1875 he married Lucy Jane Ford (b. 3 June 1853) of Highfield near Stanley in NW Tasmania, his occupation being stated as "Merchant"<sup>11</sup>.

### 1. Gisborne, New Zealand

Shortly after their marriage the couple moved to the Waikato district of New Zealand, where Edward was already established and then later in 1875 to Gisborne<sup>12</sup>, where Edward and his older brother, Wilfred Webster Brown, are said to have run a trading post<sup>13</sup>. The participation of Wilfred in a joint enterprise is dubious for in all of the numerous advertisements printed in the Poverty Bay Herald from 1879 to 1888 only E.K. Brown is named. Indeed, Wilfred seems to have been a storekeeper in his own right in Uawa, Tolago Bay (c.55km NNE of Gisborne)<sup>14</sup> and that inference is supported by Edward being listed on the 1879 electoral roll for Gisborne but not Wilfred<sup>15</sup>.

E.K. Brown's store was on a very prominent site.

"... a large two-storey building had been on the corner section (Section 23) [i.e. of Childers Road and Customhouse Street, Gisborne] from c.1874. ... In April 1875 Edward Knight Brown acquired the section and E.K. Brown's grocery and drapery operated from the enlarged building until at least 1887. Brown also owned Section 22 from 1878, but transferred this and Section 23 to Ellen Donner in 1889."<sup>16</sup>

In Gisborne the first two of five children were born to Edward and Lucy; first Irene Waitangi Knight Brown on 11 February 1876<sup>17</sup> and next Basil Frederick Knight Brown on 3 January 1878<sup>18</sup>. Irene is said to have died in 1880 aged 3 years and 8 months yet is reputed to have been buried on 23 September 1879 in Makaraka cemetery at Gisborne<sup>19</sup>; the 1880 date signifies a considerable delay in informing authorities because that second date is plausible given the age at death and the birth year.

After that burial Mrs Lucy Brown appears to have travelled alone to Tasmania; she departed from Bluff Harbour on the s.s. Ringarooma on 31 October 1879<sup>20</sup> and she arrived at Hobart on 4 November 1879 in time to give birth to Ida Stanley Knight Brown on 11 January 1880 at Horton, Tasmania<sup>21</sup>. There is no record of the vessel calling at ports further north in N.Z. so how Mrs Brown travelled to the extreme south of South Island from North Island remains to be discovered, but no doubt that would have been an arduous journey for a pregnant lady in the nineteenth century.

"Mrs. E.K. Brown and two children" left Circular Head for Melbourne on the s.s. Argyle on 29 June 1880<sup>22</sup>; obviously one would have been the new born Ida so was the other Basil? Details of the rest of their journey to Gisborne has not been established but the trio had arrived back in time for Lucy to become pregnant again in about July 1881 and then to give birth to a third daughter, Elizabeth Knight Brown, on 28 March 1882<sup>23</sup>. Lucy gave birth to a second son, and her final child, Norman Henry Knight Brown on 28 April 1885<sup>24</sup>, also in Gisborne.

In 1879 Edward was elected to the Borough Council<sup>25</sup> and he was a Mason by 1880<sup>26</sup>. By 1881 he was sufficiently well established to be a representative of the Europeans at a meeting with the Maoris<sup>27</sup>. Significantly, in the space of about six or seven years, Edward had become a resident of some importance as he was Chief Magistrate of the Borough of Gisborne in 1882-1883<sup>28</sup> and in 1882 he was elected "Mayor of the Borough of Gisborne for the ensuing year." which he did not seek to continue in 1884<sup>29</sup>. Next in 1885 he was on the Public Library Committee<sup>30</sup>, and in 1886 he chaired a committee organising the 'Hospital Sports' on St. Andrew's Day<sup>31</sup>. In February 1888 Edward was a member of the Hospital Trustees when he was elected to a seat on the Gisborne Borough Licensing Committee (a position he had held in 1882<sup>32</sup> and subsequently) yet in March he gave plenty of notice that on 1 December 1888 he would be selling up his stock from rented premises in Gladstone Street, Gisborne<sup>33</sup>.

Edward appears to have sailed from Bluff Harbour on s.s. Te Anau on 29 December 1888 and arrived at Hobart on 2 January 1889<sup>34</sup> but he was not accompanied by family members. Presumably they had left Gisborne by August 1889 when tenders were called for the repair of their former residence<sup>35</sup>. Indeed, Lucy (cousin of the bride and sister-in-law of the groom) and Basil (nephew of the groom) were said to have been witnesses at Wilfred's wedding to Mary Bromley King at Devonport, Auckland in 1889<sup>36</sup> despite Basil having only turned 11 in January of that year! In the second half of 1889 Lucy and her children returned to Australia after that

wedding; they landed at Launceston<sup>37</sup> and presumably stayed with Lucy's relatives. But Edward was no longer there when his family arrived!

## **2. Hillgrove, N.S.W.**

Edward took up residence in Hillgrove, N.S.W. early enough in 1889 to have time to form a business and prepare for the launch of the district newspaper<sup>38</sup> (the Hillgrove Guardian) on 1 June 1889<sup>39</sup>. At that time Hillgrove was an expanding, but isolated, gold, antimony and scheelite mining community c.26 km ESE of Armidale with a daily coach service to Armidale for an exorbitant price of 12s 6d return<sup>40</sup>. How and when the rest of the family moved is not known for certain because only Mrs E.K. Brown is listed as having sailed from Hobart on the s.s. Mangana for the north-west coast on 27 November 1889<sup>41</sup>. Basil remained in Tasmania for education but unknown is the movement north of Ida, Elizabeth (Bess, as she was generally called<sup>42</sup>, who was 7 when that move was made) and Norman.

The newspaper office was in Brackin Street but no property purchases are recorded in the name of 'Hillgrove Guardian' nor 'Guardian' so it seems likely that it was established in rented premises but where in Brackin Street has not been ascertained. On 10 December 1894 Edward obtained a "Grant upon Purchase of Improved Crown Lands within a proclaimed Gold Field" that being Lot 17, Section 12 on the north side of Stella Street<sup>43</sup> (now equivalent to number 20). The price of £10 may have been paid in instalments whilst he held a Conditional Purchase, but he on-sold on 19 August 1895 so it seems unlikely ever to have been the family residence. No record has been discovered of any other land purchase by Edward in Hillgrove so he most probably rented the property on which the family lived and where he grew fruit, nuts and vegetables and had cows to provide milk for the family<sup>44</sup>.

Edward was included in the 1890-91 Electoral Roll for New England<sup>45</sup> which records the registration of "Brown Edward Knight" enrolled by reason of "residence Hillgrove" [note not ownership]; that entry was repeated in the next three Electoral Rolls so lastly in 1893-94<sup>46</sup>. Then there is a gap until he is next listed in the 1898-99 Electoral Roll for Armidale<sup>47</sup> but now as "Journalist". His name appeared as publisher and printer of every issue of the Hillgrove Guardian newspaper from the first issue in 1889 until 30 November 1901 when, at the age of 57, he signed off after twelve and a half years<sup>48</sup> so it seems probable that Edward was living in Hillgrove for the whole of that period. Indeed there are records of many of his activities in the township during those years. Thus in April 1896 he was appointed Magistrate and Justice of the Peace in Hillgrove<sup>49</sup> and in May 1896

"... deputy licensing magistrate of the licensing court for the licensing district of Hillgrove ..."<sup>50</sup>.

Then in September 1898 he was promoted to being a member of the Licensing Court<sup>51</sup>. But he was also active in volunteer organisations, being for several years Treasurer and then Secretary of the 'Hillgrove Temporary Common Trustees'<sup>52</sup>, Treasurer of the Parochial Council of the Parish of Hillgrove<sup>53</sup>, Master and then Chaplain of the Masonic Lodge<sup>54</sup>, a member and auditor of the Manchester Unity Independent Order of Oddfellows<sup>55</sup>, a member, and then chairman, of the Cemetery Trustees<sup>56</sup>, Trustee of the Hillgrove School of Arts<sup>57</sup> and an Executive Committee member of the Taylor Memorial Fund<sup>58</sup>. Obviously he was so busy in the community that he would have had little spare time neither for his family nor for the reputed agricultural pursuits. But why a person upholding such responsible positions failed to register as an elector is unfathomable.

At some stage in late 1891, or early 1892, Lucy and a child went back to Tasmania for on 18 May 1892 they sailed on the s.s. Pateena from Launceston to Melbourne<sup>59</sup>. No reason for that journey nor the date of the return trip have been discovered.

Little is known of Bess during her childhood but being aged 7 when the family arrived in Hillgrove she probably attended Hillgrove Public School which had been established in the previous year. Clearly she accompanied her mother back to Tasmania for a while as in May 1894 Bess won prizes at the Circular Head Horticultural and Produce Show for a wool mat and plain needlework and her mother for “Pair Gents knitted socks”<sup>60</sup>. However in relation to her teenage years, a report in December 1899 describes an event of

“... the Infant School conducted by the Misses Brown ... at the School-room in Stella Street. Over 30 children were present.”

prizes were awarded and

“Miss Bessie Brown afterwards gave a charming exhibition of her pupil’s skill ...”<sup>61</sup>

Bess would have been 17 earlier in that year. No mention is made of elder sister Ida but the wording clearly indicates the involvement of both sisters yet when the school re-opened in 1901 the singular was used viz:

“Miss Brown’s private school for infants will resume duty on Monday.” (i.e. 29 January)<sup>62</sup>.

In 1900 at least, “Miss Knight Brown’s School” was used by the ‘Ladies Guild’ for their weekly meetings<sup>63</sup>.

Both girls were musically talented, Ida being the organist for the Church of England<sup>64</sup>, and Bess was a singer<sup>65</sup>. When Bess was aged 19 she was the sole bridesmaid at the wedding of Ida to the Reverend Edwin Dodd in Hillgrove on 17 July 1901<sup>66</sup> after a ‘whirlwind’ courtship, the groom only having arrived in Hillgrove (nine months previously) in September 1900<sup>67</sup>. Significantly the report makes no mention of the bride’s mother nor of her brothers; most probably Lucy and Basil did not travel from Mount Irvine but the whereabouts of 15 year old Norman has not been established.

### **3. Mount Irvine, N.S.W.**

While studying at the Hawkesbury Agricultural College in 1897, Basil Knight-Brown was one of the three founders of Mount Irvine<sup>68</sup>; on Portion 26 he constructed the house *Painui* (now 281 Mount Irvine Road), and subsequently he became a well respected early resident. A turpentine bark humpy was constructed in 1898<sup>69</sup> in which both Basil and his mother Lucy lived while the house was being built<sup>70</sup>; consequently Lucy became the first female resident of the village! In November 1901<sup>71</sup> Edward ceased publishing in Hillgrove and it has been reported that the remaining members of the family moved to *Painui* at Mount Irvine in that year<sup>72</sup>. However, Edward Brown was still in Hillgrove in January 1902 to receive a send-off from the town on Friday 17th, another from the Oddfellows on the 18th, then several other departure ceremonies and finally one from his former employees on the 22nd<sup>73</sup>, the day it was reported that he was due to leave town<sup>74</sup>. Bess received a separate send-off function from her friends on the 24th as she was departing on the 25th to travel to the Blue Mountains with one of them<sup>75</sup>. Thus Edward, and presumably Norman, travelled separately to Mount Irvine!

### **Bess Knight Brown**

At the time of that move to Mount Irvine, Bess was almost 20 and described as being

“tall and very fair” with “a pink and white complexion”<sup>76</sup> (Figure 1). “... she was active in everything and always bright and optimistic.”<sup>77</sup>.

In December 1907 Bess and her mother travelled to Tasmania<sup>78</sup> and stayed at least until 4 March 1908 when Bess was a bridesmaid for a cousin of similar age. That was the marriage of (Elizabeth) Eleanor Smyth to Robert Stuart Rankin in St Paul's Church, Stanley, Tasmania, the evening wedding reception being held at *Highfield*, the residence of Henry Flinders Ford, the bride's uncle<sup>79</sup>.

In 1911 Bess resided at Bell and worked in a family dairy<sup>80</sup>. At the age of 35 she was still unmarried when her fiancé (Phillip) Vernon Harris<sup>81</sup> of Bell was killed in France on 11 June 1917<sup>82</sup>; for the rest of her life she remained a spinster.

**Figure 1.** Bess at *Painui*, Mount Irvine c.1900s<sup>83</sup>.

At various times Bess operated guest houses at *Painui* - Mt. Irvine in 1912<sup>84</sup>, *Campanella* - Mt. Wilson in 1918 and latterly at *Brooklands* - Blackheath<sup>85</sup>. Nothing definite has been found relating to the guest house business at *Painui* although one author wrote

"It was early in January 1912 that my Mother, brother and I first came to Mt. Irvine to stay as paying guests with the Brown family at "Painui"<sup>86</sup>.

and in 1914 a clergyman wrote<sup>87</sup> of staying there but he did not mention payment so he might have been just a family friend. A resident subsequently wrote

"... Miss Brown developed a paying guest house which became very popular. She was a very popular and entertaining hostess."<sup>88</sup>.

But

"Conditions for Miss Brown were very trying at this time. The roads were very bad and transport for her guests very difficult."<sup>89</sup>.

Under Bess's direction the *Campanella* business in Mount Wilson was advertised in the local press from early April 1918<sup>90</sup>, and was getting glowing praise<sup>91</sup>; curiously, from September 1918<sup>92</sup> until March 1919<sup>93</sup> that advertisement was issued under the name B. Knight-Brown yet elsewhere at the end of February 1919 the business was still listed as being run by "Miss Knight-Brown"<sup>94</sup>.

Sand's directories did not include Country Commercial listings until 1901 and they did not list Mount Irvine until 1908 and then only with a single resident until 1917<sup>95</sup> ! But in 1918 an entry "Brown Edward K. ... Settler" appeared<sup>96</sup> and was repeated in successive issues including 1926<sup>97</sup>. Basil and Norman continued to be listed thereafter, but not Edward so probably he and Lucy left in that year, or early 1927, to join Bess in Blackheath for their latter days, her father dying there on 14 August 1929 aged 85<sup>98</sup>.

#### 4. Blackheath

A Miss Sparke was advertising *Brooklands*, Blackheath, for sale in December 1918<sup>99</sup> and "Elizabeth Knight-Brown of Turrumurra, Spinster" purchased it (1 ac (0.405 ha), parts of Sec.6, Lots 2 & 3), the date of transfer being 16 August 1919<sup>100</sup>; subsequently a new Certificate of Title was issued<sup>101</sup>.

In April 1919 Bess left *Campanella*, Mt. Wilson<sup>102</sup> but ownership of her next home (at 38 Waragil Street<sup>103</sup>) did not occur until August; where she lived temporarily is unknown.

The entry "Knight-Brown Miss .... "Brooklands" " first appeared in Sand's Directory, Country Commercial Section in 1923<sup>104</sup> and was still being listed in the final issue of that publication 1932-33<sup>105</sup>. That clearly was a business and one that was in operation for at least a decade, for Bess is

recorded as having been the Guest-house Proprietor there between the World Wars until 1938<sup>106</sup>. But there is some doubt as to the actual operator of the business at various times. Thus in 1922 it was an A. de Saville who advertised for paying guests at *Brooklands*<sup>107</sup> so that person may have been a manageress (or manager). From 1919-1937, inclusive, Bess paid the rates; the property was in her name at the time of the valuation in May 1937<sup>108</sup> but on that record her name is struck out and there is an undated, and hand written, insertion "NICOL, Beatrice Marian (Mrs)" and "Guest House Proprietress"; curiously the house name *Brooklands* is also struck out! At the next valuation in February 1940 the Rates Record<sup>109</sup> is in Mrs Nicol's name (although the surname is amended to Tiller) but she may only have been a tenant for the Certificate of Title<sup>110</sup> confirms that the property was still held by Bess Knight-Brown at the time of her death in 1942.

During the early part of her residence at Blackheath, Bess advertised from *Brooklands* seeking three lost rings<sup>111</sup>, she was judging scones at the St. Aidan's Show<sup>112</sup>, corresponding with the editor of the Sydney Morning Herald<sup>113</sup> and by 1931 she was an established member of the community when she became Convenor of the Blackheath Branch of the Nationalist Association<sup>114</sup>. Unclear is whether Bess still resided there after 1938<sup>115</sup>, and if she departed from Blackheath in the late 1930s to where - her property in Turramurra Avenue, Turramurra (see below) perhaps; if so then why was she still on the Blackheath Electoral Roll?

Bess advertised the boarding-house for sale shortly after the death of her father<sup>116</sup> but from the Certificate of Title<sup>117</sup> it is clear that no sale of the property eventuated. As indicated above, she still owned it when she died and then on 1 December 1942 it was transferred to her brothers, Basil and Norman Knight-Brown, they being listed as joint tenants. But these new owners only held it briefly, selling on 2 April 1943. The house was destroyed by fire on 22 May 1967<sup>118</sup> and on 12 June 1968 the Council issued a defect notice<sup>119</sup>; when assessed on 16 February 1971 the Unimproved and Improved values were the same<sup>120</sup> signifying that the building had been demolished.

### **Parish of Gordon**

The Turramurra address on the Certificates of Title<sup>121</sup> for *Brooklands* was puzzling but proved to be 8 Wolsten Avenue (north side) - Lot 34 of 1 rod 17¼ perches (*0.149 ha*)<sup>122</sup>. It was still a vacant area in 1920 when Bess advertised a "building block" at Turramurra for sale<sup>123</sup>. In Wise's 1921 directory<sup>124</sup> there are no listings for that street, and in the 1926 directory<sup>125</sup> very few, so it would seem that it was undeveloped land that Bess owned until she sold on 8 February 1927<sup>126</sup>. She was a bit naughty to have given that as her place of residence for that block was still undeveloped in 1943, so she cannot have actually 'lived' there unless in a tent!

On 9 October 1922 Bess bought a second property in Turramurra<sup>127</sup> being 30 perches (*0.076 ha*), part of Lots 27 & 28, part of Portion 400, Turramurra Avenue (W side, now no.14, opposite Nulla Nulla Street<sup>128</sup>). Following her death, it was transmitted to her brothers Basil and Norman Knight Brown who became the registered proprietors on 1 December 1942. There was a building on that site when on 10 March 1943 they transferred the title to Norman Henry Knight Brown; there being a reciprocal transfer of property in Park Street, Collaroy (see below). Norman retained it until 30 January 1952.

### **Parish of Manly Cove.**

"During her later years ... Bess bought several cottages and upon her early death from Cancer, her two brothers inherited them - Basil getting "Cooinda"."<sup>129</sup>

That is not strictly correct. She did buy two properties in the northern beaches area of Sydney, but none in Mount Irvine a location where Bess never owned land. Moreover she seems never to have leased any for there are no Rates records for either Mt. Irvine or Mt. Wilson in the name of Elizabeth Brown nor Elizabeth Knight-Brown.

One property that Bess bought late in her life was on the west side Park Street, Narrabeen (now Collaroy), Parish of Manly Cove; it was adjacent to the northern side of Clarke Street so seemingly is now 50, Park Street. It is part of Lots 27 & 28 *Cooyong* and was acquired on 14 June 1941<sup>130</sup>. From that house name it seems likely that there was a building in existence at the time of purchase, and there definitely was one in 1943 when an aerial photograph was taken. On 1 December 1942, following Bess's death, it was transmitted to her brothers Basil and Norman, however on 10 March 1943 they transferred it to Basil Frederick Knight Brown; there being a reciprocal transfer of property in Turramurra Avenue, Turramurra (see above). Basil retained it until 8 December 1965.

The second purchase was made on 13 June 1941, it being Lot 6 (part of Portion 1217) Ocean Street, Narrabeen, Parish of Manly Cove<sup>131</sup>. The sketch map in an earlier deed for that property<sup>132</sup> indicates it to be just south of Clarke Street so due to street re-naming it is now 1245 Pittwater Road. On 1 December 1942, following Bess's death, it was transmitted to brothers Basil and Norman Henry Knight Brown who retained it for 18 months, on-selling it on 6 August 1943.

### Deaths

Bess's mother Lucy died at Deewhy on 26 October 1940 aged 87<sup>133</sup> but she was not buried at Blackheath until 2 January 1941<sup>134</sup>. That place of death may actually have been her son Basil's intending place of retirement at 50 Park Street, Collaroy although he is reputed not to have been in residence until about 1950 (pers. comm. Julia Reynolds 30 August 2014) and he is not listed on the relevant electoral rolls<sup>135</sup>. If it is correct that she was living with Bess when she died, then a temporary absence would explain why she is not on electoral rolls for Warringah/Deewhy & Warringah/Narrabeen<sup>136</sup> but it does not account for Lucy's omission from the Blackheath electoral rolls, female enfranchisement having commenced in 1902!

Bess died at Turramurra<sup>137</sup> on 23 April 1942<sup>138</sup> and that presumably was at her property in Turramurra Avenue. The Sydney telephone directories of that period do not contain an entry for her - not as Brown nor as Knight-Brown - so she did not have that service. In 1941 she was still on the Blackheath Electoral Roll<sup>139</sup> so it is understandable that she is not in the successive relevant electoral rolls for Turramurra<sup>140</sup>. Technically therefore, her residence would appear to have remained as being at Blackheath despite her name disappearing from Rate Records, her death from cancer<sup>141</sup> occurring at Turramurra, and Turramurra being the location given on the application for probate on her will<sup>142</sup>. But where did she actually live from 1938 to 1942?

Like her parents, Bess is buried in the Blackheath Cemetery, Church of England section, Row 4, Nos.30 & 31<sup>143</sup> (Figures 2-4).

*Photo. Peter Rickwood August 2014.*

**Figure 2.** The Knight-Brown grave site, Blackheath Cemetery.

*Photo. Peter Rickwood August 2014.*

**Figure 3.** The headstone of Elizabeth (Bess) Knight-Brown, Blackheath Cemetery.

*Photos. Peter Rickwood August 2014.*

**Figure 4A & B.** The headstones of Edward and Lucy Knight-Brown, Blackheath Cemetery.

[Note that the headstone for Edward Knight-Brown gives a death date of 1931 whereas he actually died in 1929.]

### Acknowledgement

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