

THE PIONEER

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William Grigor – Pioneer of Mooloolaba, Buderim and Glasshouse Mountains and founder of Bankfoot House

by Bill Lavarack

William Grigor and his wife Mary (née Fenwick) are well known as the founders of Bankfoot House in 1868, now a popular museum located near the town of Glasshouse Mountains. That story has been told before, but here I plan to concentrate on William's association with the North Coast timber industry and Buderim in the 1860s and 1870s, then leading on to his history at Bankfoot House.

William Grigor (1831- 1907) was born in Scotland. He migrated to Moreton Bay in 1855 on the *William Miles* on which he was listed as a labourer, but able to read and write and of the Presbyterian religion. Mary Fenwick (1834 – 1900) sailed to Australia with her family, on the same ship and at the same time as William Grigor. It seems they met on board.

Mary and William Grigor in later life at Bankfoot House about 1890. No photograph of either, from earlier times, appears to exist. *Photo BHS*

In Queensland William Grigor worked as a pit sawyer, shingle cutter and timber getter on the Pine River and at Moggill. Soon after his arrival he met fellow Scot, James Low. The two became friends and business partners for many years. Their partnership which lasted basically for



the rest of their lives was not formalised but was based on a handshake.¹ They supplied timber to Brisbane mill owner William Pettigrew, another Scot, who became a friend, business partner and employer over the following two decades.

Mary Fenwick worked as governess to the family of Captain John Wickham at Newstead House after arriving in Brisbane. She then accompanied the Wickham family back to England, on the *Duncan Dunbar*, and assisted with the birth of their second child during the sea voyage. In 1861 Mary sailed alone from England to Melbourne on the ship *Oithona*. After travelling from Melbourne to Queensland, Mary took up a position as governess at *Durundur* Station near Woodford.² Mary and William Grigor became re-acquainted, and married in Brisbane on 21 August 1863, eight years after they first met on board the *William Miles*.

In 1861 ex-convict and skilled bushman, Richard Jones, provided Brisbane businessman, Richard Symes Warry, with an optimistic report of valuable timber on the Maroochy River and Warry sent Jones there with a crew. They managed to cut enough red cedar trees from some distance up the river to load several vessels. Warry then convinced the Queensland Government to survey the river so that ships might enter safely and load his timber. In April 1861 marine surveyor George Poynter Heath, accompanied by Warry's men, set out in the Government sloop *Spitfire* to examine the area. Heath's report was not favourable to the harbour of the Maroochy River which had a dangerous bar. Instead he recommended the much safer mouth of the Mooloolah River a short distance to the south.³

Information from explorer Andrew Petrie, his son Tom and from Warry, along with Heath's Report, interested William Pettigrew and he decided to examine the area himself. In 1860, along with partners James Low and William Grigor, he purchased a sixty-foot sailing boat, built in 1856 which had been left lying on the bank of the Brisbane River above Bulimba Creek. Her new owners named her *Granite City* after Aberdeen, the Scottish home town of both Low and Grigor, and Low used her to carry hardwood logs to Pettigrew's mill on the Brisbane River from various parts of Moreton Bay.



Two of Pettigrew's ships berthed at Pettigrew's sawmill on the Brisbane River – *Gneering* (previously *Granite City*) to the left and *Tadorna Radjah* to the right. Photo BHS

In June 1862 Pettigrew and Low, with Aboriginal guides, sailed north in the *Granite City* and spent a week assessing the Maroochy-

Mooloolah area, but saw no useful timber near the sea. At this stage Pettigrew realised that, while Jones had proved there was good timber further up the Maroochy River, its mouth was not nearly as safe a harbour as was the mouth of the adjacent Mooloolah River. Therefore he decided to establish

1 Blyth, Audienne, (2014), *Celebrating 150 Years, James and Christina Low's Story*, 100 pages, publ. by the author, page 10.

2 Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bankfoot_House

3 Heath, G.P. 1861, Report on the New Harbour, *The Courier*, 3 June, 1861, page3.

a base on the Mooloolah River, and in October 1862, he applied to purchase 320 acres, part near the Mooloolah Harbour and part on Alexandra Headland under the *Crown Lands Alienation Act of 1860*. His solution to the problem that the good timber was on the Maroochy and not on the Mooloolah, was to request a rail line to transport logs between the mouths of the two rivers, but this was refused by the Government and he was told that any such project would have to be privately funded.⁴ In February 1863 Pettigrew had the *Granite City* extended by 18 feet and converted to a stern wheel paddle steamer which he re-named the *Gneering*. This ship was to become an important part of life on the North Coast until she was wrecked on the Maroochy River bar in 1893.

In 1863 Pettigrew advertised that he urgently needed bullock drivers, timber getters and raftsmen. William Grigor and others who had worked for Pettigrew at Moggill, were employed. In early 1864 William and Mary Grigor were among a small group who arrived at Mooloolah Heads on the *Gneering*.

Audienne Blythe, a descendent of James Low, vividly describes the situation as follows:

*1863 could have been likened to a gold rush. Cedar was the red gold and this was the timber most desired in the markets of Australia and overseas. Such was the demand that R.S. Warry and William Pettigrew advertised for extra vessels to bring log cedar from Mooloolah. The cedar was spoken of as the best ever seen.*⁵

Pettigrew developed a depot on the Mooloolah River on the site that is now Charles Clarke Park. By the end of 1866 he had spent over £500 on draining and fencing the land and building a large store shed and two houses, one of which was occupied by James low and his wife Christina and family of two, and the other by William and Mary Grigor. There logs (mainly red cedar) were loaded on the *Gneering* and other vessels bound for Brisbane. James Low operated the store at Mooloolah Heads, while William Grigor with his wife, Mary, took charge of the transport of logs from the Maroochy River. These were dragged by bullock team along the beach and over the headland to the Mooloolah River from a landing near the mouth of the Maroochy River.⁶

William and Mary Grigor gave birth to nine children, only six of whom survived, these being: John (1864, the first white baby born at Mooloolaba), Janet (1866), William (1867) and James (1869) all born at Mooloolah Heads. Two more children followed: Kenneth (1871) and Clementina (1878), born after the family later moved to Glasshouse.⁷

In 1863 while the *Gneering* was loading timber at Mooloolah Heads, Pettigrew and Grigor climbed to a vantage point on Buderim Mountain and Pettigrew was able to report that there was 'enough good red soil to provide eighteen farms'.⁸

Low and Grigor established timber depot, store and post office on the north bank of the Maroochy River opposite Dunethin Rock probably in 1868.

4 Brown, Elaine Rosemary, (2005), *William Pettigrew 1825 - 1906 : sawmiller, surveyor, shipowner and citizen : an immigrant's life in colonial Queensland*, PhD Thesis, School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics, The University of Queensland., page 156.

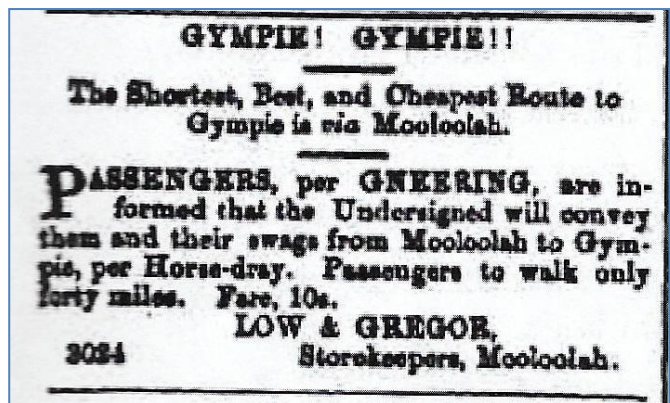
5 Blyth, Audienne, (2014), *Celebrating 150 Years, James and Christina Low's Story*, 100 pages, publ. by the author, page 14.

6 Brown, l.c. page 152.

7 Queensland Family Trees website, Family: Group sheet for William Grigor/Mary Fenwick (F118), married 1863

8 Brown, l.c. page 149.

In 1868 Pettigrew, along with Low and Grigor, saw the new Gympie Gold Rush as an opportunity. The overland coach route from Brisbane to Gympie was extremely difficult as it went over mountainous country travelling to *Durundur* Station, then to Conondale and along the Mary River to Gympie. As an alternative Low and Grigor advertised the 'Shortest, Best and Cheapest route to Gympie via Mooloolah.' Travellers were to sail to Mooloolah Heads via the *Gneering*, then walk or ride along the beach to the Maroochy River, then by boat upstream to the Low and Grigor timber depot opposite Dunethin Rock, then by dray on a road that James Low had marked to Traveston and on to Gympie. The *Gneering* fare was ten shillings.⁹ The scheme did not prove profitable.



Newspaper advertisement from 1868.

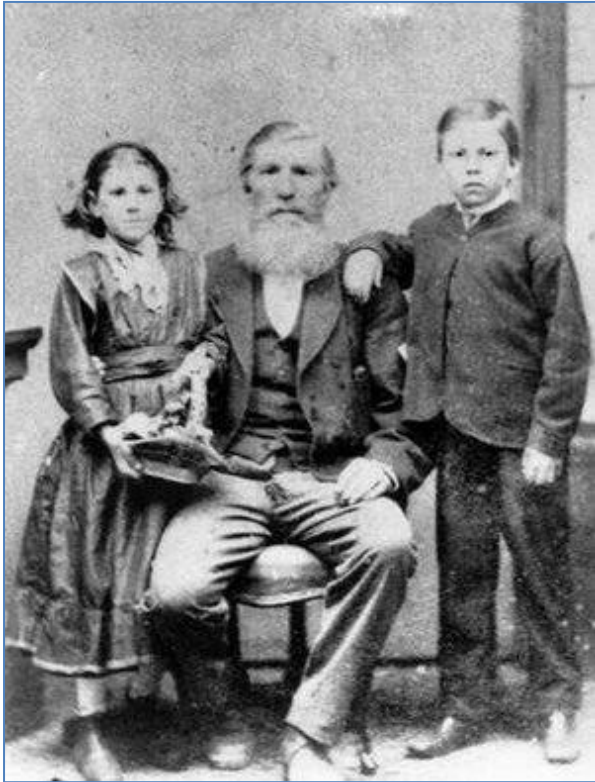
The timber business went well enough for Low and Grigor at Mooloolah Heads until 1865/66 when there was a downturn in the timber industry which, 18 months later, was to send their business into insolvency. Pettigrew helped them by purchasing their assets and then employing them to provide his mill with timber as before.

Foreseeing that the future for the timber industry was bleak, and also aware that the Government was developing a more direct coach route to Gympie, Grigor took action. In October 1868, under the *Crown Land Alienation Act 1868*, he selected Portion 1, Parish of Beerwah on the Gympie Road (now Old Gympie Road) near the present town of Glasshouse Mountains. He was the first white settler in the district. This selection was on the new coach road to the Gympie goldfields and William and Mary opened a coach stop there which they named 'Bankfoot House', after Mary's home village in Scotland. The site was well-placed being halfway between coach stops. It was on level ground with a good water source from Coonowrin Cheek and scenic views of the nearby Glasshouse Mountains. It was also a post office and a Cobb & Co lunch stop. In addition to the coach visitors, they provided all meals, accommodation and stables for other travellers.



Bankfoot House about 1875. Mt Tibrogargun in the background.

⁹ Brown, l.c. pages 199/200.



The original Bankfoot House building was narrow and about 18 metres long with bedrooms and a hall on the northern end and a dining room on the southern end. The original red cedar table which seated 16 guests, is still at Bankfoot House. Beech was used for walls and red cedar for doors and window fittings. The shingled roof overlapped front and rear verandahs. The rear verandah was enclosed.¹⁰

For reasons similar to those of Grigor, James Low opened a coach stop where the road to Gympie forded the Maroochy River. These moves by Grigor and Low were effectively the end of the partnership between Pettigrew, Low and Grigor.

William Grigor with the two eldest of his children, Janet and John. Probably early 1870s.

Gympie Road, never in good condition, deteriorated rapidly and Cobb & Co ceased passenger operations in 1876. However Bankfoot House had sufficient

travellers separate to those from the coach, on horseback and even on foot, that they continued to prosper. Prices for meals, a bed and horse feed were each one shilling, so that for five shillings a traveller could get dinner, bed and breakfast, two feeds for one horse, and overnight stabling. In 1878, business was so good that a new building (the core of the current house) was added behind the original accommodation house.

In 1870 William Grigor was among the first to select a block on Buderim as soon as Buderim land was opened for selection. The land he selected was portion 50 of 80 acres. This block was located where Amaroo Drive is at present and it is clear he knew the area well, as it has been described by Buderim historian Stuart Weir, as 'some of the best land on Buderim'. William built a small cottage and lived there with four of his sons while they cleared the block and planted sugar cane. His house was typical of Buderim houses of the time. It was built with timber from his block and had a front verandah, a central corridor, a detached kitchen and a shingle roof.¹¹ Over the years he sold off portions of land and finally left Buderim with his sons in the 1890s to live permanently at Bankfoot House which was operating well as accommodation for travellers.

When the railway came through in the early 1890s, Bankfoot House was by-passed. The mail contract transferred from coach to rail and the postal service was relocated to Glasshouse Railway Station. William Grigor officially became the postmaster there up until his death in 1907. Due to an increased demand for accommodation, a second dwelling was built in 1878. The original house was demolished in 1930 and the timber recycled and used in refurbishments on the 1878 building which was constructed behind the original Bankfoot House.¹² Today's Bankfoot House stands on the original site and includes the central section of the 1878 residence.

¹⁰ Website, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bankfoot_House Bankfoot House.

¹¹ Weir, S.P. (1983), W. Grigor's House, Queensland Historical & Industrial Archaeology Research Group, c/- Qld. Museum, Fortitude Valley, 4006, copy held by Buderim Historical Society Inc., Buderim, 2 pages.

¹² Website: <https://heritage.sunshinecoast.qld.gov.au/bankfoot-house/bankfoot-house-stories/pioneers>, 2018 marked the 150th anniversary of the founding of Bankfoot House .

Mary Grigor passed away on 12 June 1900 age 65 and was buried in the Nundah Cemetery, Brisbane.

William Grigor passed away on 15 July 1907 age 76 and was also buried in the Nundah Cemetery, Brisbane.

Descendants of William and Mary lived at Bankfoot house until 2002. The house and all its contents were purchased by the Caloundra Shire Council (now part of the Sunshine Coast Council) in 2004. It is situated on Old Gympie Road and is Heritage Listed. It is now a museum and is well worth a visit.

Further reading

Brown, Elaine Rosemary, (2005), *William Pettigrew 1825 - 1906 : sawmiller, surveyor, shipowner and citizen : an immigrant's life in colonial Queensland*, PhD Thesis, School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics, The University of Queensland.

Blyth, Audienne, (2014), *Celebrating 150 Years, James and Christina Low's Story*, 100 pages, publ. by the author.

Weir, S.P. (1983), *W. Grigor's House*, Queensland Historical & Industrial Archaeology Research Group, c/- Qld. Museum, Fortitude Valley, 4006, copy held by Buderim Historical Society Inc., Buderim, 2 pages.

Wikipedia (26 July, 2023), *William Grigor's House*,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Grigor's_House.

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Modern Bankfoot House Heritage Precinct -

Managed by Sunshine Coast Council as a museum, with the help of volunteers from the community.

Note: *Mt Tibrogargun*, one of the Glasshouse Mountains, in the background.

Open hours
Wednesday to Sunday
10am to 3pm