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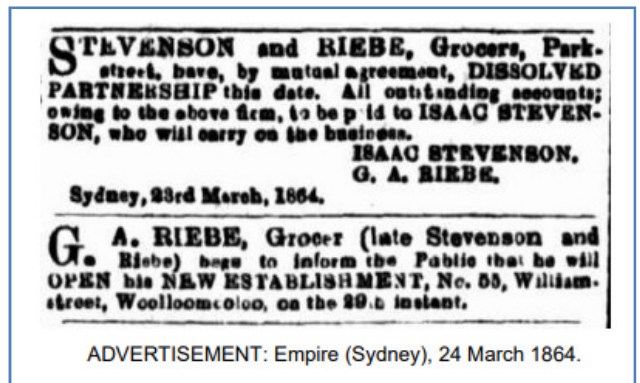
Gustav Adolph Riebe

by **Bill Lavarack**
with assistance from
Helene Cronin OAM

Gustav Riebe was born in 1838 in Pressburg (now known as Bratislava in Slovakia), Hungary. His father was a doctor. Gustav died in Brisbane in 1917.¹ He worked his way to Australia as a steward on the *Damascus* arriving in Sydney on 1 March 1862. He was naturalised, becoming a citizen of New South Wales on the first of February 1871. In Sydney in partnership with Isaac Stevenson he opened a grocery store, then in 1864 set up his own grocery on William Street Woolloomooloo (see opposite).

In May 1871 he married Harriet Stubbs (1844 – 1931) and they went on to have four children,² two of whom (Clara and Edwin) died before they were two. Their surviving children were William (1872 – 1903) and Amy (1874 – 1964).

Gustav was an avid, conventional Quaker (a group also known as ‘the Society of Friends’). A few Sydney Quakers led by Alfred Allen, finding the Sydney Quaker community too restricting and too conservative, moved to Brisbane. Allen and his friends were seeking the chance to form a Quaker community in a remote area and lead peaceful, religious lives. Allen’s group included Arthur Wood, Joseph Dixon and Frederick Horsenail. They already knew the Brisbane Quakers and found Brisbane a convenient place from which to start their search for a site for their proposed utopian community.



¹ Some sources state that Gustav Riebe died in 1907, but this is an error – it was 1917 (see note on page 5).

² Metcalf, William, J, 2028, *Friends Farm: Australia’s First Quaker Commune*, *Journal of Religious History*, 42, (1), page 107.

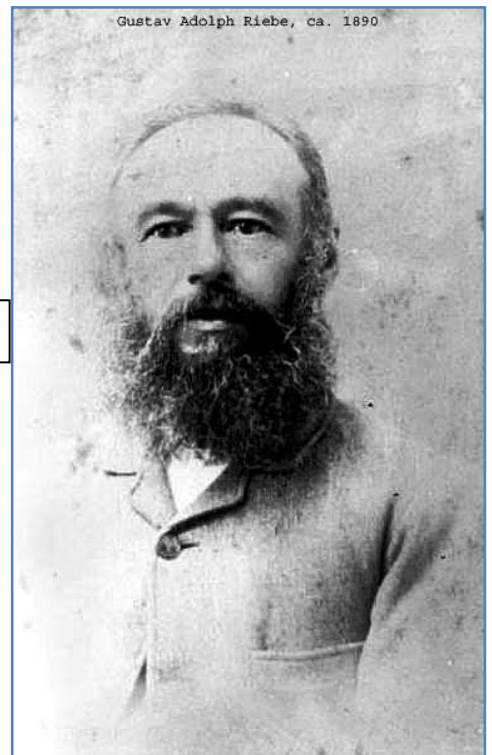
Joseph Dixon, then a young and radical Quaker, recorded coming with Alfred Allen to Queensland in 1868, where they joined local Quaker Herbert Everett and set off, ‘like the Israelites of old, [to] spy out the land’. On horseback they rode north from Brisbane, camping at Burpengary Creek, crossed the Caboolture River by punt, with their horses swimming, then rode through the forests of the Glass House Mountains at which they greatly marvelled. They employed William Grigor, who ran the Cobb and Co station at Bankfoot House, as a guide (Grigor has been covered in a previous Occasional Paper (no. 31) .

Dixon later reported as follows:

*We wound our way through the gum trees & forest to the Mooloolah plains a large expanse of open grass country. The scrub or soft wood forest and vines comes up to the grass and is like a wall of trees it is strange it cuts off so straight like a wall. We camped for the night rolled in our blankets. . . We examined the plain about a mile wide and some miles long down the river. We were pleased with the country as it was ready for the plough. . . . The country was uninhabited except for some tribes of blacks and a few timber getters. The blacks are tall athletic fellows — live by hunting & fishing & possums, native bears who live in trees & eat gum leaves.*¹

They admired this land on the southern bank of the Mooloolah River because it was open grassland free of trees or vine scrub and ‘ready for the plough’. They ignored evidence of significant flooding which must have been apparent. They sailed back to Sydney and arranged their personal and financial affairs before coming back to Queensland in late 1869. By then, Alfred Allen’s party had increased to include Joseph Dixon, Herbert Everett, Frederick Horsnail, Gustave Riebe and Arthur Wood.

Gustav Adolph Riebe about 1890. *Photo: BHS.*



Under the recently passed *Crown Lands Alienation Act 1868*, they selected land on the south bank of the Mooloolah River, on the treeless Meridan Plains. Their objective was to grow sugarcane and prosper as an independent communal venture, following ‘true Quaker’ ideals and practices.

On 1 November 1869, Alfred Allen, on behalf of Arthur Wood, Gustave Riebe, and himself, selected 375 ha of land within a curve of the Mooloolah River, while Dixon and Everett selected 260 ha a bit downstream. Allen, Wood and Riebe moved on to their selection in December 1869, naming it ‘Friends Farm’ and building a large communal house. Alfred Allen was the first of these would-be communards to move onto their land on 1 December, followed not long after by Wood and Riebe.

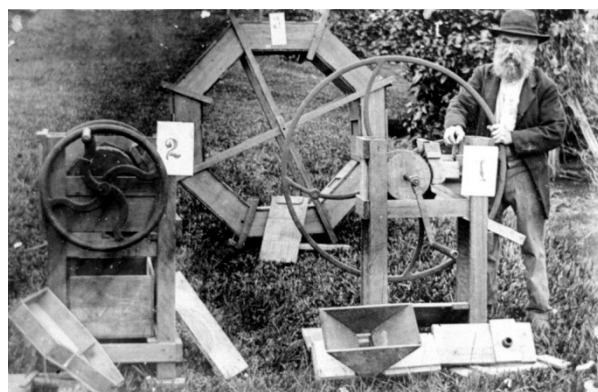
In late May 1870 the first of a series of floods struck Meridan Plains, flooding Dixon and Everett’s place to the ceiling of their house. However at Friends Farm, while the crop was flooded, the house on slightly higher land survived. In the second week of July 1870 another severe flood event occurred forcing Dixon and Everett to walk off the property and return south. Those at Friends Farm fared better and soon were operating well, with good sugar crops and adding beef cattle to their farm. Things now went well until early March 1873 when successive floods again destroyed the crops at Friends Farm, forcing the partners to abandon the farm. Alfred Allen hung on until June 1873 when the farm was yet again flooded, marking the end of the commune.²

¹ Dixon, Joseph, *Diary and Reminiscences* (Reminiscences section), page 9, John Oxley Library, Box 8948; OM75-117. (from Bill Metcalf).

² Metcalf, William, J, 2028, *Friends Farm: Australia’s First Quaker Commune*, Journal of Religious History. **42**, (1), page 112.

Gustav Riebe moved to Brisbane and in 1874 he opened a grocery business on Queen Street (see opposite). He lived with his family at Red Hill. He was a tea merchant offering a variety of teas for sale at his 'Oriental Tea Warehouse'. He showed his humanitarian or 'Friends' side by taking part in the Early Closing Association which was devoted to giving workers more free time, and he was also involved with other humanitarian groups.

In 1881 he took up land on Buderim (portion 46 of 80 acres for which he paid £60), and built a house which he named *Palmyra*¹ on what is now Orme Road. He farmed at *Palmyra*, for 20 years between 1881 and 1901. Reibe made an application to select 320 acres under the 'conditional purchase clause'. In June 1881 it was reported that this was accepted by the Land Court. (See *The Queenslander*, 5 August 1882).



Left: Coffee bushes growing amongst bananas at Buderim. Right: Gustav Riebe with his coffee husking machine. Photos from BHS

Sugar cane was the predominant crop on Buderim in the 1880s, but Riebe's land on the northern slopes of Buderim was too steep for cane and he turned to other crops including bananas. In 1872 Joseph Dixon had obtained some coffee plants from a garden on the Brisbane River. In the early 1880s Reibe obtained and planted coffee plants from the Acclimatisation Society in Brisbane. In many ways Gustav Riebe was the original pioneer of the coffee industry on Buderim and in Queensland, although others who followed immediately after had much larger plantations.

Coffee beans drying in the sun. Photo BHS



He found that coffee flourished in Buderim's warm subtropical climate and on Buderim's rich volcanic soil, if planted in the shade of his bananas. He was soon Queensland's (and possibly Australia's) first commercial coffee grower. He built a machine to remove the skin from the bean. Sugar mill engineer Price Jones made a much improved machine for Riebe and it doubled the output. The beans were then sun dried in shallow trays.

¹ There are two possibilities about the name *Palmyra*. Peter Wise in his book, (*This land is my Land!*, publ. by Peter Wise 2013), claims that Frederick Wise named the property *Palmyra* after a ship which carried immigrants to Australia, when he purchased it in 1901. Buderim Historian Stuart Weir states that Gustav Riebe named it in 1881. This could have been after the archaeological site of *Palmyra* in Syria.

He was a frequent contributor to newspapers, such as the *Brisbane Courier* and the *Queenslander*, both while living at Buderim and later while living in retirement at Red Hill in Brisbane. One of his topics was the problems that Buderim growers had competing with coffee from countries with cheap labour that produced an inferior product. He suggested a government subsidy to combat this, but was not successful. Another topic was the *Defence Act*. Most other letters were on religious matters.

He was a member of the Acclimatisation Society which encouraged the introduction of exotic plants and animals. He planted many exotic fruit and nut trees, such as tamarind, Madagascar plum, bunya pines, coconuts and date palms, some of which are still growing on *Palmyra*. He planted an avenue of mango trees leading up to his house and this still exists. Seeds of several plants were given to Gustav by his seafaring son William, who collected seeds from around the world. Gustav was also a member of the Natural History Society, attending meetings at the Museum in Brisbane, at one of which he exhibited a box of insect specimens collected at Buderim. Over the years he became a prominent Buderim citizen involved in community groups such as the Acclimatisation Society, Fruitgrowers Association, and the Queensland Farmers and Selectors Association, often as local chairman.

Gustav Riebe was appointed as a Justice of the Peace in about 1891 and resigned in 1902. In his capacity as a JP, one of his tasks was to hold an enquiry into the death of John Snook, an employee of William Pettigrew, who died when a crane struck him as it fell into the Maroochy River.¹



Left: Riebe house *Palmyra* built in 1882, from a painting by Riebe himself. Photo BHS.
Right: Gustav and Harriet with daughter Amy. Photo: Sunshine Council Library.

In line with his Quaker faith, he wrote numerous, often lengthy, letters to the editor of newspapers on religious matters. Some very long such as his letter on 'The Fall of Man'. He published a small book in 1898 entitled '*Lifting the Veil or Modern Thoughts On Genesis with an address to the Israelites.*'² This book drew both favourable and unfavourable comments from reviewers. The following reviews from the *Australian Town and Country Journal* and the *Queensland Times* explain Riebe's ideas as expressed in this booklet:

*We have received a copy of 'Lifting the Veil, or Modern Thoughts on Genesis, with an Address to the Israelites,' by G. A. Riebe (Queensland), published by Muir and Company, Brisbane. The long title of this booklet explains its import, which the author further expounds in the preface, when he says that 'the plans on which this little volume is arranged is to show that the current belief that scientists must of necessity be disbelievers is quite erroneous, and that the first few chapters of Genesis, if correctly understood, are perfectly consistent with natural laws.'*³

¹ *William Pettigrew 1825 - 1906 Sawmiller, Surveyor, Shipowner and Citizen: an immigrant's life in colonial Queensland*, 2004, page 265, a thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics University of Queensland by Elaine Rosemary Brown M.A. (U.Q.), Grad. Dip. Lib. (Sturt).

² A copy of this book is held in the National Library - ID 4319325.

³ *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 10 September, 1898, page 51, *New Books and Publications*.

The quote above highlights much about Gustav Riebe. While deeply religious, he had an enquiring mind and was always prepared to try new things, accept new ideas and experiment and innovate.

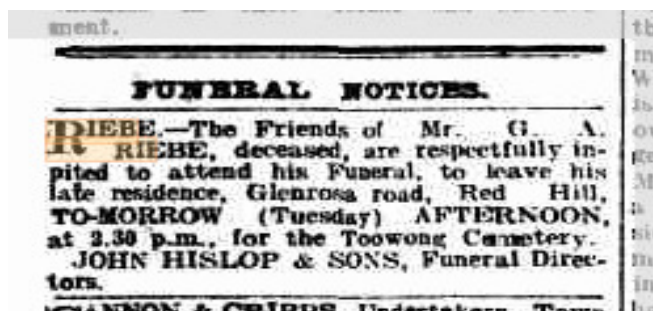
Another Review which appeared in the *Queensland Times* on 4 October 1898 is less enthusiastic:

This is an ambitious kind of book by Mr. G. A. Riebe, of Buderim Mountain, near Woombye. The egotism of the author is apparent. He thinks that he has accomplished what the great specialists, after years of scientific research have failed to do - namely, the discovery of "a more rational explanation of the second and third chapters of Genesis." And he has got it all "out of his own head," so to speak. He is confident that he has attained unto the truth concerning the matter. For the sake of the honest motive which we believe to have actuated the writer, we have tried our best to think well of the book; but we have not succeeded. The author has had a sniff at physics, obtained a smattering of geology, glanced at palaeontology from afar, with this result - a wordy exaggeration. We are afraid that he has lifted, not the veil to which St. Paul referred, hut something which has permitted us to see a writer who is absolutely devoid of a single ray of humour.

In November 1934 Prince Henry, Duke of Gloucester, son of King George V, visited Buderim, staying overnight at Buderim House. He was accompanied on this visit by Sir Leslie Orme Wilson, Governor of Queensland. To mark this royal occasion the name of Maroochydore Road was changed to 'Gloucester Road.' In addition the short road that lead from Bell Road to Riebe's property was changed from 'Riebe's Road' to 'Orme Road' and the name of a deserving pioneer was lost to history.¹

Gustav sold the farm to Frederick Wise for the sum of £800 in 1901. Riebe's house on Buderim fell into disrepair, but was recently renovated by the late Peter Wise as a gift to the Buderim community.

In several places the year of Gustav Riebe's death is given as '1907'. However he was actively writing 'letters to the editor' of Queensland newspapers up to about July 1916. He was buried in Toowong Cemetery on 13 February 1917, as recorded in *The Telegraph*, 12 February, 1917, on page 6 (see opposite).



Gustav Adolph Riebe died in February 1917, in Brisbane, Australia, at the age of 79, and was buried in the Toowong Cemetery, Brisbane. Harriet Riebe died in May 1931 at the age of 86 and was also buried in the Toowong Cemetery.

They are buried in the same grave as baby daughter, Clara. Toowong Cemetery. Plot MON 13 – 49/#7.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Author's note- acknowledgement of assistance from Helene Cronin OAM.

When this paper was virtually complete I received an email from Helene Cronin generously making available her research on Gustav Riebe. As usual her work was more complete than mine, but not overwhelmingly so. In fact I had covered most of what she sent. I have incorporated some relevant bits of her research which I had overlooked.

I would like to acknowledge her detailed work on Gustav Riebe.

¹ Weir, S.P. 1986, *Beautiful Buderim Origin of the Street Names*, Buderim Historical Society Inc., 28 pages.