

# The Downers of South Australia



*Alick Downer*



THE DOWNERS OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

The Downers  
of  
South Australia

*Alick Downer*



Wakefield  
Press

Wakefield Press  
1 The Parade West  
Kent Town  
South Australia 5067  
[www.wakefieldpress.com.au](http://www.wakefieldpress.com.au)

First published 2012

Copyright © Alexander (Alick) Downer, 2012

All rights reserved. This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part may be reproduced without written permission. Enquiries should be addressed to the publisher.

Edited by Laura Andary

Cover design by Alice James

Typeset by Wakefield Press

Printed by Openbook Howden Design & Print, Adelaide

ISBN 978 1 74305 199 3

*To my grandchildren*

Henry Philip Clauson

Arabella Mary Clauson

Betram Alexander Havelock Steens

Georgina Mary Beatrice Downer

# Contents

	Foreword by Alexander Downer	ix
	Preface	xi
I	Origins	I
2	Pioneer Ancestors: Henry and Jane Downer	5
3	Charles Downer and his Descendants	11
4	Second Pioneer Son: HE Downer MP	15
5	Family Head: Alexander George Downer	24
6	Amelia 1842–1916	31
7	The Hon Sir John Downer KCMG, QC, MP 1844–1915	35
8	Harold Field Downer 1847–1887	76
9	Frank Haggard Downer, LLB 1863–1938	81
10	Alderman Sir Harold Downer, LLB 1871–1935	86
11	John Henry Downer 1872–1911	92
12	James Frederick Downer LLB 1874–1942	96
13	The Hon Sir Alexander (Alick) Downer KBE, LLD, MA 1910–1981	113
14	Thomas Edward Downer 1913–	186
	Index	188

# Foreword

My father, Sir Alexander Downer, wrote this book in the years before his death in 1981. He often described himself as an amateur historian and his love of history extended to the history of his own family.

For years, Sir Alexander – or Alick as he was known – tried to find the precise origin of the Downer family. The first chapter of the book describes his quest to find the roots of the family. Since his death, I have been able to discover the exact origins of the South Australian Downers.

Henry Downer and his bride Jane Field were married in the parish church in Alverstoke in Hampshire. The church itself was rebuilt between 1863 and 1865. Alverstoke these days is a middle class suburb of what has now become the Portsmouth/Gosport conurbation.

When I visited Alverstoke some years ago I came across the parish priest. I told him my great grandfather had married in the church. He regarded this as a great coincidence. A distinguished South Australian, Sir Henry Ayers, had been married in the same church. That may not, of course, have been the coincidence it appeared to be. The Ayers and Downer families may well have known each other and the Downer's successful transition to Australia may well have played its part in encouraging the Ayers to migrate.

Portsmouth was and still is Britain's great naval base. Sailors would have returned to Portsmouth with reports of Australia and the other corners of the third world. Henry Downer, who was a naval tailor, must have thought things could only get better if he tried out South Australia. It was a brave and risky decision but it worked for him.

Alick Downer was a family man. Not only was he a loving father and husband, but he also swore by the old aphorism 'Man is an omnibus in which all of his ancestors travel.' He believed family personality traits were passed down from one generation to the next. In the case of the Downers, he was something of a chauvinist; he believed that on balance the Downers were a good and able people.

That is certainly true of some of them. But his vision of the family

was, perhaps, a little dewy eyed. Faults were varnished into minor peccadilloes and family members of rather average ability were upgraded to able! There's no harm in that; he was immensely proud of his family.

The Downer family has been seen by the community as part of the backbone of conservative South Australia. An intensely political family who saw public service as public duty, they were certainly believers in King or Queen, Empire and country. No Downer is recorded as being a passionate republican. The Downers also saw themselves as British in a broad cultural sense and were proud of that British heritage. And none would have relished the decline of the British Empire.

Beyond those verities, the Downers were nevertheless reformers when they believed reform was needed. And they were not a family driven by intolerance and bigotry. They were, for their times, entirely reasonable people.

Alick Downer's book is an interesting historical study of a family whose views have, of course, evolved as circumstances and values have changed. That must be true of every family. But this book helps to explain how that has happened.

These days, the Downer family is less South Australian and more Australian than ever before. An inevitable consequence of technology and globalisation. In my direct family, only my mother – the author's widow – and I live in South Australia. Two of my sisters live in Sydney and one in America. Two of my children live in Sydney, one in Tokyo and one in London.

That may say something about the Downer family; they are, in the main, people of honest ambition, pragmatic and contributors to building Australia in many different ways.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Alexander Downer". The signature is written in dark ink on a white background. Below the signature is a horizontal line.

Alexander Downer, October 2012



# Preface

The purpose of this book is to tell my children, grandchildren, and those who come after them, something of the lives and careers of their antecedents. For the past forty years, I have tried to gather information about my family; a task made more difficult by their lack of records. Most of what they left has been lost, destroyed or burnt. In my youth, elderly relations willingly gave me recollections from childhood, and things told to them by their parents. In England, I have researched periodically within my means, and this I will continue, but genealogy nowadays is an expensive occupation. In Australia, the Archives Department in Adelaide, early newspapers and the National Library in Canberra have proved useful; so has the family tree compiled by my cousin Tom Downer together with his lively interest in our forbears.

A good deal of what follows is autobiographical, being an interpretation of my relations I knew best. A disproportionate amount is about myself, which I regret: had I possessed more material on the pioneer Downers and our English origins, more justice would have been done to these courageous personalities. Perhaps my own political and diplomatic career may interest sections of the public as well as my own descendants; certainly the distinguished life of Sir John Downer is of importance to students of Australian history and politics.

I am indebted to Dr John Playford of the Politics Department, Adelaide University, for his help in recent years, to my daughter Stella Stevens who typed part of the first draft of the manuscript and to Mrs Heather Simpson for her excellent typing and secretarial assistance. If some of my more remote connections feel aggrieved by not being included, I apologise in advance; my intention throughout has been to concentrate principally on those Downers who have engaged in public affairs.

## Chapter 1

# Origins

Downer is a name of ancient origin in England, if not of any notable distinction. The earliest references I have seen are in the fourteenth century to Robert le Downer, Ralph le Douner, and Stephen le Downar, the latter in 1327. Researchers into English surnames say it means 'a dweller by the downs'. Sir Phillip Kerr, then Garter King of Arms, told me in 1938 that at first the name would have been 'Down': the suffix 'er' being added later. This is also the view of PA Reaney in his *The Origin of English Surnames*. Apparently, the 'er' along with other appendages, became usual to describe a man's place of residence; it was applied particularly to country names borne by smaller farmers and rural workers in Kent, Sussex and Hampshire.

In Henry VIII's reign, the name is variously mentioned. At Eltham in Kent, John Downer was buried in 1516 near to the high altar. In his will, tapers were to be burnt to various saints; he left his house and croft to his wife Margaret with remainder to his son Robert. He mentions his daughters Elen and Eleanor; a little house adjoining the kitchen is given to the parish clerk of Eltham to dwell in forever. Again, in 1526, another John Downer of Eltham made bequests to his wife Agnes, his son John, and a house and land to his daughter Agnes. Later, in 1544 in a will proved at Rochester, John Downer declared his wife Elizabeth to have tenement and lands in Eltham for ten years; they were then to go to J Petley and his heirs.

A publication in the Bodleian Library entitled *Alumni Oxonienses, members of the University of Oxford 1500–1714*, a matriculation register, mentions Thomas Downer of London, St John's College, taking his BA degree in 1604, followed by his MA in 1608, and then becoming a parson. Howard, son

of Edward Downer of Southampton, is recorded as studying as Balliol, later at Wadham, with similar academic success in 1681 and 1684. Another Thomas Downer, of Berwick, Northumberland, matriculated in 1626.

For centuries the name has occurred in the southern countries of England. For example, in the village churchyard of Kirdford. In Sussex, there were several old Downer graves when I first visited it in 1938. Nearby, at Marshall's Farm, the tenant farmer, a Downer, told me that his forbears had rented this farm from the Leconfield Estate since the seventeenth century. There have been families in the neighbourhoods of Arundel, Storrington, Chichester, Southampton, the Isle of Wight, Downton in Wiltshire (a picturesque thatched roof house near the centre of the village bears the name *Downers*), Hertfordshire, and elsewhere. But according to Sir Anthony Wagner, the recent Garter King of Arms, it seems to be essentially a local name concentrated in West Sussex, Hampshire and East Wiltshire.

There was also an emigration of Downers to the United States as early as 1650. At the beginning of the 1900s, a society was formed called 'The Downers of America' with headquarters at Ann Arbor, Michigan. Its objects were 'To unite in closer bonds all Downers and especially the descendants of Robert Downer of Newberrypoot, Massachusetts'. Writing to me in 1955, the Director of the Michigan Historical Museum said that the Downers who came to America arrived in 1650 and originally lived near Salisbury, Wiltshire. He added that there are records of eleven families having settled in Washtenaw County, Michigan. Downersgrove, a town some thirty miles from Chicago, was founded by Robert Downer's descendants.

An echo of this occurred in 1909. Frank H Downer, in a letter from London on 30 December to his uncle Sir John in Adelaide wrote:

I sometimes meet in the City a Mr Davis ... and the other day he told me an amusing coincidence. Davis was staying

at a hotel on the Continent and he there noticed a clean shaven, strong faced man whose face seemed familiar, and he noticed that this man was continually looking at him. Afterwards, the stranger spoke to him ... Davis asked his name and he said it was George William Downer. This chap said he was an American. He knew all the names of the Downers in Adelaide and of their family, and said that he had traced up the families and he had learnt that one family went to Australia, and the other (his) to America. Davis said he was very much like you.

None of my inquiries had been successful in ascertaining whether the 'Downers of America' still exists as an organisation. But it is interesting to note that they display the same coat of arms as used by South Australian Downers and as recorded in *Robson's British Herald of the Armorial Bearings of the Nobility and Gentry of Great Britain and Ireland*, published in 1830. The presumption is that we are descended from the same stem, but the evidence is too sketchy to claim this with certainty.

One of the difficulties in writing about our ancestors is the absence of records. They must have been modest people who went to South Australia in 1838, unaware of their historical importance as pioneers of part of what was destined to become one of the great countries in the world. Whatever they left behind, apart from some fine pieces of furniture, has either been lost or destroyed: I regret to say that until my own time, most members of our family have been lamentably careless in maintaining records of their activities.

Who were our forbears before embarking for the infant colony of South Australia? My father, Sir John, used to say that they were yeoman farmers in the south of England. My cousin, Marion Downer, thought so too, believing they came from Wiltshire, but so far I have not succeeded in tracing where they lived. The earliest member of our family of whom we have any sure knowledge is Mary Ann Downer, mother of Henry Downer. She was born in 1792 and came to Adelaide to look after her son and his children in the early 1860s, following Mrs

Henry Downer's death in 1861. Mary Ann lived in the family house on South Terrace until her own demise on 27 July 1868. Henry, who was born in 1811 when she was only nineteen, was probably her eldest child; her husband's Christian name has vanished. I do not know for certain whether there were other children from her marriage. Marion Downer, when an old lady, told me that there were two other sons who subsequently came to South Australia. One was named Edward, who settled in Port Pirie. If this is so, I have never heard any of my relations refer to them.

My knowledge of Mary Ann is confined to what my mother told me; of how my father complained about always being given one of the last cups of tea from the pot – a fate, no doubt, shared by many a second youngest boy in a large family. I gather he rather resented her taking, in some degree, his mother's place. But whatever her merits and defects, she must have been a woman of courage and devotion to undertake the long, uncomfortable voyage from England in 1862, at the age of seventy, doubtless convinced she would never see home again, resolved to keep house for her bereaved son and those of her grandchildren who were still unmarried, notably two brilliant school boys, John and Harold.

## Chapter 2

# Pioneer Ancestors: Henry and Jane Downer

It must have been 1837 when Henry and Jane Downer decided to uproot themselves from all they had been accustomed to in English life, and embark for a little known distant land. The South Australian Foundation Act had been passed by the British Parliament in August 1834. Delays arising out of dissensions between the Colonial Office, the Board of Commissioners established by the Act, and The South Australian Company, resulted in the Colony not being proclaimed until the arrival of the first Governor, Captain John Hindmarsh RN, in HMS *Buffalo* on 28 December 1836. By this time some publicity had been given in England to the activities of the Commissioners in their endeavours to settle the Colony by the then novel idea first suggested by Edward Gibbon Wakefield of selling the land for a nominal sum and using the proceeds to bring out emigrants.

It seems that the Downers were attracted by these ideas. Probably a spirit of adventure more than any other motive, induced them to try their luck in the new world. Not that England in 1837 would have been unpleasant for living. The turbulence caused by the Napoleonic Wars, which had ended some twenty-two years before, had subsided. The long struggle for parliamentary reform had been finally won in 1832. What was to prove a new era of monarchy began in June, when the eighteen-year-old Victoria succeeded her bluff, amiable, but rather bawdy uncle William as a sovereign. The government was led by Lord Melbourne, a statesman who, if inclined to indolence at least showed a wisdom and tact lacking in some of his twentieth century successors.

There are no records to show their permanent home at this period, but there is some evidence to suggest that they were living in Portsmouth where their second son, Henry was born on 22 March 1836. It was from Portsmouth that they sailed in the *Eden* on 24 February 1838.

The *Eden* was a barque of 527 tons under the command of Captain J Cook. From Colonel Light's drawing of her at anchor in Port Adelaide, she showed graceful lines. She carried fare-paying passengers together with emigrants proceeding under the Wakefield scheme. Henry Downer was a man of some substance; he and his family paid their own way. The ship must have been crowded with two hundred and twenty five passengers in all, but amongst them were people who became well-known early settlers as well as family friends: Philip and Edmund Levi, John Moses Phillipson, Joseph Brooks, JS Bagshaw, John Ragless and Charles Beck.

The voyage was made via the Cape, and the size and complement of the ship would have heightened the discomfort. The Downers had two children on board: Charles, their eldest boy born in 1834, and Henry. In those days, passengers were expected to furnish their own cabins for the most part, but even personal possessions could hardly relieve the tedium of living in cramped quarters in the company of so many for so long a time. It was winter when they sailed; it was the southern winter when they landed at Holdfast Bay on 24 June 1838, exactly four months after sailing down Spithead.

Unhappily, we are deprived of letters and diaries which might have recorded their experiences of their final parting from England and of life at sea. Henry and Jane were never to see their home country again. What, in particular, did Jane Downer feel as the *Eden* coasted past the Isle of Wight whence she came? Her maiden name was Field, and she was between four and five years older than her husband, being born in 1806 or 1807. The Fields lived on the Isle of Wight, and had some interesting connections. One was the poet Thomas Chatterton;

another named Field, a cousin, was a member of the House of Commons in the latter part of the nineteenth century. As to her appearance and character, I know little. She must have been a woman of great spirit with a warm nature and deep love for her family. She became the mother of seven children, was a loyal and devoted wife to Henry throughout his various vicissitudes, and was to die prematurely in Adelaide when only fifty-four years old on 4 January 1861. Across the chasm of one hundred years and more, which divided Jane Downer from my generation, I have often felt a strong attraction towards her. Unquestionably she contributed great qualities to her children and all of us who are her descendants. Though neither she nor Henry lived to see it, the future was to show that in their sons, they give Australia attributes of mind, talent and achievement, such as happens only rarely in any country in a single generation.

When the Downers landed at Holdfast Bay, near what Governor Hindmarsh not long before had christened 'Adelaide', the total population of the colony numbered little more than four thousand. The Union Jack had been hoisted only eighteen months previously; houses and buildings were few, amounting to merely three hundred and fifty; most of the incoming settlers perforce had to accommodate themselves in tents. I do not know for certain where Henry and Jane first lived, but it was said to be near Hindmarsh, across the River Torrens. Life must have been more difficult in the months that followed, for during the voyage, Jane had become pregnant in addition to having to care for Charles aged four, and young Henry aged two. What is certain is that by 1839, Henry had established himself in business as a tailor, occupying premises at the corner of Rosin and Hindley Streets. Hindley Street was the earliest commercial centre of Adelaide, bordered here and there by graceful little buildings designed in the late Georgian fashion. Although by 1844 Adelaide had developed considerably, ST Gill's print in that year conveys an impression of its pristine character and charm which, as the century proceeded, it was soon to lose.



To what extent Henry engaged in tailoring I do not know. In the South Australian Archives there is an account of his petitioning Colonel George Grey, the Governor at the time, protesting against the behaviour of his cutter in assaulting himself and Jane, and asking for the man's punishment. Henry's plea was rejected, on grounds not stated, but doubtless conducting a business in an embryonic, quickly growing community attracted many problems.

More interesting historically than whether Henry Downer prospered or otherwise as a tailor is the fact that during those years in Rosina Street, all his Australian children were born. First, and destined to be regarded as head of the family until his death in 1916 was Alexander George, on 28 January 1939 (by happy coincidence, my eldest child Stella Mary was born in North Adelaide on the same date one hundred and nine years later). AG, or Uncle George as he came to be known, was followed by the Downers only daughter Amelia in 1842. Then came their most celebrated son John William on 6 July 1844. Two years later, another boy appeared, Frederick Field, only to die on 2nd April 1847. Undaunted, Jane gave birth to her seventh child on 5 November 1847. He was christened Harold Field, and in the eyes of his brothers, sister and contemporaries, grew to be the most brilliant of them all.

Henry Downer forsook tailoring in 1847, and went into partnership with a Mr Graves in a general importing and wholesale grocery enterprise, trading under the caption Downer and Graves. This lasted until 1852. The firm also conducted their business in Hindley Street. But 1852 found Henry again in one of his adventurous moods. This was the year of the dramatic gold discoveries at Ballarat and Bendigo. The effect on youthful Adelaide was magnetic; half the male population made the long trek to try their luck, and amongst them was Henry Downer, taking with him his two elder boys Charles and Henry, aged eighteen and sixteen respectively. The Gold Rush was an episode when many were called but few were

chosen. Our ancestor may have enjoyed the experience, but he returned home empty handed. By now, for it was 1853, his partnership with Graves had been dissolved, and he tried his hand at another venture. This time he took over a hotel, the *Blenheim*, situated like his other businesses in Hindley Street. He could not have cared for the role of a colonial entrepreneur, because in 1854 he was out of it, although between 1859 and 1860 he gave it another try. There is a lull in his activities between 1854 and 1859. By 1860, he retired from business which was probably as well since he does not seem to have displayed any commercial acumen, or an aptitude for that kind of life.

What sort of man was he? As with all the pioneers who voluntarily set out for scarcely settled, distant lands, he must have held enterprise high in his ears, and been possessed of strong courage. It seems he was a well read, indeed quite a Shakespearean scholar. His eldest son Charles, according to his daughter Marion, always spoke of him in a kindly way, saying he had plenty of ability which, in latter years, became marred by a weakness for drink. His domestic life was happy – he was certainly fortunate in his choice of a wife; he enjoyed a reputation for honest forthrightness, though perhaps inclined to be quarrelsome. He was fond of his children, although his failure to make much money curtailed his capacity to advance their interest. It was not Henry but his third son George who assisted the younger brothers with their education, and to whom they looked for guidance.

Misfortune struck at him in 1860. In the late 1850s, Jane suffered trouble from her eyes. The winged chair, with its candle sockets on each arm, in which she used to read is now in my home *Martinsell* in the Barossa ranges. Doubtless because of insufficient medical knowledge at the time, perhaps on account of a paucity of capable doctors in Adelaide, the disease assumed a more sinister aspect. Her condition worsened; the doctors called it 'Marasmus' and on the 4 January 1861, she died.

Deprived of Jane, Henry appears to have lost any ambition

for further activity. He retired to the foothills and lived in a house in a rural setting called St Bernard's near Magill. Today it no longer exists; probably it stood in what is now St Bernard's Road. There he remained throughout the 1860s until 25 September 1870 when, in the words of the press notice in Adelaide's leading daily the *Register*, he died 'after a long and painful illness in the fifty-ninth year of his age'.

The bodies of Henry and Jane, together with his mother Mary Ann and their infant son Frederick, lie in the West Terrace cemetery, Adelaide, surmounted by a tasteful Georgian memorial in stone. When the day comes for this necropolis to be returned to what Colonel Light intended, a public park for the West End of Adelaide, it is to be hoped that monuments like this will be preserved as remembrances of those who helped to create South Australia.

### **The Children of Henry and Jane Downer**

Charles Downer	1834–1903
Henry Edward Downer MP	1836–1905
Alexander George Downer	1839–1916
Amelia Rivaz	1842–1916
The Hon Sir John William Downer KCMG, QC, MP	1844–1915
Frederick Field Downer	1846–1847
Harold Field Downer	1847–1887