Dr George Cox and the Private Township of Coxton.
by Carol Herben.

For several years two pioneers of the Wollongong district have always fascinated me. They are Courtenay Puckey of “Seafield”, Fairy Meadow, and Dr George Cox of “Summerhill” and the private township of “Coxton” at Corrimal. I have completed the research on Puckey for the society some time ago and now I have completed my work on Coxton.

What do we know of the background history of Dr George Cox and his life in Corrimal? Only that he was not supposed to have practised medicine, was a quiet unimposing man who kept to himself except for his weekly ride in his buggy to Wollongong.

In the Cox documents, now the property of the Illawarra Historical Society, I shall shed new light on the life and times of Dr George Cox and his large family.

George Cox was baptised on 8 May 1806 at South Scarle, Nottingham, the son of Humphrey Cox and his wife Mary Ward, nee Doncaster, who married on the 31 October 1803 at South Wilford, Nottingham. George’s mother Mary was first married to Edward Ward on 20 May 1800 at St Mary’s Nottingham. At the age of 8 George was sent to Oakham School under the charge of his uncle John Doncaster DD.

John Doncaster was baptised on 8-7-1772 St Mary’s Nottingham and was the brother to George’s mother, Mary. Quite a lot is known about John Doncaster who was married twice, first to Elizabeth Wright in 1816 and then to Helen Nettleship in 1843. Being Master of Oakham School he installed around 1815 a fire place in the original small stone schoolhouse.

Under the guidance of his uncle George Cox was educated. When he left school George spent two years in Russia staying for part of the time with a family in Riga. On his return he then settled in Edinburgh Scotland. He studied medicine and graduated in 1830 qualifying an M.D. For several years he travelled on the continent mainly in France, Germany and Italy. He settled in Baden, Germany, for two years where he practised
medicine as a private practitioner for British nobility such as W Saville and the Duke of Rutland. On his return from the continent he made the decision to travel to New South Wales. On arrival in Sydney he went first to the Hunter District before settling in Illawarra.

George Cox was granted 50 acres of land in Corrimal. This land was first promised to James Martin who was ordered to take possession on 23 April 1831, but never did. George Cox was offered to take over the grant. In order for George Cox to accept the grant James Martin had to pay “quit rent” from 1 January 1839. The land was eventually granted to George Cox on 31 August 1840. The grant was registered in the Surveyor General’s book on 1 July 1842. George Cox went about building a large slab house he named “Summerhill”.

He became acquainted with Mary Joyce whom he was not to marry until after eight of their nine children were born. Children born to George Cox and Mary Joyce were Elizabeth c1840, George c1842, Samuel 2-11-1845, Christina 24-12-1847, Zipporah c1849, Mary 25-12-1850, Joseph 31-8-1852, Benjamin 16-11-1854 and Mary Doncaster 4-8-1857.

Elizabeth married Frederick William Cox.
George died in 1847.
Samuel died in 1846.
Christina married Walter Robson and moved to Essex, England.
Zipporah married Henry Edwards. She died in 1918.
Mary died prior to 1857.
Joseph married Mary Jane Nixon. He died in 1929.
Benjamin married Clara Louise Higgins. He died in 1916.
Mary Doncaster married Arthur Midgley and also moved to Essex.

George Cox would have been, what was called a “free spirit”, who virtually did not believe in religion although six of his nine children were baptised in the Roman Catholic Church due to the fact that Mary Joyce, the mother of the children, was of the Roman Catholic faith. Children George and Samuel died at an early age and were buried as Roman Catholics.
From the settlement of the colony of New South Wales the only records for births, deaths and marriages were held by the churches. That was until 1856 when births, deaths and marriages were registered by District Registrars appointed in each district. These District registrars were also given the power to perform marriages.

On 18 August 1856 George Cox and Mary Joyce were married by Dr George Prowd Lambert the first District Registrar in Wollongong (1856-1868) who was empowered to perform civil ceremonies. George finally married the mother of his children without uttering his vows before a clergyman or in a place of religious worship.

Amongst the many families who resided at Coxton was one family Josiah and Maria Wood. Dr Cox was still in practice when he certified the death of Josiah Swain Wood who died in December 1856 and was buried on Coxton estate.

Also living on the Cox estate was Henry Doncaster, a cousin of George Cox. Henry Doncaster was baptised on 21 March 1807 at Norwell & Carlton-On-Trent, Nottingham, the son of Charles Doncaster and Rebecca Thompson. On 21 January 1868 Henry Doncaster died aged 60 years. The informant to his death was George Cox, Landowner. He was laid to rest in the Church of England Cemetery, Wollongong.

His will dated 30 November 1863 appoints Arthur Todd Holroyd and William Love as Trustees and were to receive and pay rents due to Mary Cox for the duration of her natural life. Immediately after the death of said Mary Cox his said Trustees would seize upon the trust for five of the children of the said Mary Cox called and known as Elizabeth Cox wife of Frederick William Cox, Christina Cox, Zipporah Cox, Joseph Cox, and Benjamin Cox. The will went on to say that if any children should die prior to their mother then their share shall be divided amongst the remaining children. It is also interesting to note that children Mary Doncaster Cox (born 1857) was not mentioned nor was Mary (born 1850). So we can be assured that Mary (born in 1850) had died before 1857 and the making of the will, although no record can be found of her death.
Who were the Trustees of Henry Doncaster's will? Arthur Todd Holroyd (1-12-1806 - 15-6-1887) obtained his degree as a Doctor and Surgeon in 1830 in Edinburgh at the same time as George Cox. Arthur Holroyd also studied law and on graduating in London was admitted to the Bar in 1843. He arrived in Sydney in 1844. It did not take long for him to built up a successful legal practice which also entailed acting as Crown Prosecutor on occasions. In 1851 he entered NSW Parliament and remained there until 1864. The other Trustee was William Love (1-1-1810 - 31-1-1885) who arrived in NSW in 1840 entering NSW Parliament in the 1860s. Probate on Henry Doncaster's will was granted on 28 February 1868.

An organisation called the “Society of Friends” became associated with the Cox family. It has been described that they were similar to the Quakers.

There were some changes made within the family as far as religion was concerned. These can be seen at his children's marriages. Despite that most of his children were baptised Roman Catholic some chose to marry in a civil ceremony and then take their vows again with the “Society of Friends”.

Christina Cox married Walter Robson first in a civil ceremony at the Registry Office in Sydney on 5 November 1869. Being husband and wife in the eyes of the law they then adjourned to the “Friends Meeting House” in Devonshire Street where they stood up before the gathering declaring their vows. Walter uttered: “Friends, I have taken my friend Christina Cox to be my wife and in the fear of the Lord, and before the assembly, I promise to be unto her through Divine assistance, a loving and faithful husband, until it shall please the Lord by death to separate us”. The bride then uttered the same vows.

After the marriage Walter Robson returned to England with his bride. After some 10 years in England Walter was a grocer and draper and the family resided at “Illawarra Cottage” Debden Road, Saffron Walden, Essex, where they had six children Mabel, Arthur, Ethel, Sydney, Ida and Sybil.
Next was Mary Doncaster Cox who married Arthur Midgley on 5 April 1876 in a civil ceremony at "Summerhill", the Cox family home. By 1881 Arthur and Mary Midgley were living in London Road, Saffron Walden, Essex, with two daughters Mary and Irene. Arthur Midgley was a gentleman living comfortably off his means by the time he was 28 years old.

After residing for some 40 years at Coxton George Cox passed away on 23 July 1880 aged about 75 years. His funeral service was performed by Joseph Neave, the representative of the "Society of Friends", and he was laid to rest on a grassy knoll on his estate.

It was only 7 years after the death of Dr Cox that his small grandson was buried at Coxton. Joseph and Mary Jane Cox's little son, George Doncaster Cox, died on 23 June 1887 aged 5½ years and was buried with his grandfather.

The will of George Cox dated 29 May 1880 states:

Did devise his farm Summerhill wherein he then resided with the buildings thereon and household furniture and effects therein and the live stock, farming implements and utensils used therewith at his decease and his vehicles to his wife Mary Cox during her life and subject to the before mentioned gifts and life interest and to the payment of his just debts, funeral and testamentary expenses.

All his real and personal Estate whatsoever unto and for the benefit of his children Joseph Cox, Benjamin Cox, Elizabeth Cox wife of Frederick William Cox, Christina Robson wife of Walter Robson, Mary Doncaster Midley (sic) wife of Arthur Midley (sic) and Zipporah Edwards wife of Henry Edwards as should be living at his decease and such of the issue then living of any child or children of his dying in his lifetime as either before or after his decease should attain the age of 21 years or marry as tenants in common.

On 22 September 1880 Mary Doncaster Midgley signs over her portion of Coxton estate "thenceforth remain and be to and for the sole and absolute use and benefit of her husband the said Arthur Midgley his heirs
executors administrators and assign respectively”.

The same day Christina Robson signs over her share of the estate for sole and absolute use and benefit of her husband.

Probate was granted on 27 November 1880 to Frederick William Cox and Joseph Cox (leave being reserved to Arthur Wood and Benjamin Cox) his executors.

By October 1886 Joseph Cox signs over his share of Coxton Estate for £250 to his brother Benjamin Cox. Benjamin Cox then declares that he is desirous of making some provisions for his wife Clara Louise Cox and their issue has purchased said reversionary interest of said Joseph Cox. Then Benjamin Cox declares that he desires to sell the reversionary shares that he purchased from his brother Joseph. Income from such shares was to be paid to Benjamin and Clara Louise Cox. Should the estate or estates become divisible or be by law Equity-decreed to become divisible under the recited wills then Clara Louise and Benjamin Cox that their share shall be invested in real estate and income applied.

On 19 March 1887 Joseph Cox, Timber Merchant of Wollongong, was made insolvent in the Supreme Court. Edward Milner Stephen was the official assignee of the Insolvent Estate of Joseph Cox. Edward Stephen declared that by virtue of all rights and powers vested in him that he treats absolutely void a certain conveyance dated 23 October 1886 executed by Joseph Cox Timber Merchant of Wollongong in favour of Benjamin Cox Gentleman and Clara Louise Cox of Wollongong. It was found that Joseph Cox whose inheritance had come from the estates of Henry Doncaster and George Cox and to avoid creditors claiming upon these estates that he transferred his inheritance to Benjamin and Clara. The Court vested the portion of the estate back into Joseph Cox’s name for the benefit of his creditors. Joseph Cox was declared insolvent retrospective to 1 February 1887 the date Edward Milner Stephen was appointed Official Assignee of Estate and effects of insolvent Joseph Cox.
By 1 May 1888 Benjamin Cox (1st part), Edward Milner Stephen (2nd part) and Joseph James Neave (3rd part) to the transfer and ownership of Joseph Cox’s portion of the estate. By doing so Joseph Neave was to pay £250 to Benjamin Cox and £500 to Edward Milner Stephen. Joseph Neave of the “Society of Friends” now became a part owner of Coxton Estate.

It was not until 14 November 1888 that Frederick William Cox and Joseph James Neave accepted all powers to manage the trust of Dr Cox (including shares and real estate). The real estate comes from the rental from Coxton. Makes one wonder if the influences of Walter Robson and Arthur Midgley in Essex did not in some way influence that Joseph Neave would now provide the finances to clear the debts of Joseph Cox and then become part owner of the estate and a trustee whilst in Mary Cox’s lifetime. The Robson and Midgley families convey their share to Frederick William Cox and Joseph James Neave.

Benjamin Cox sells out his portion of Coxton to Joseph James Neave for the sum of £320 on 23 May 1889. It was noted on the 12 June 1889 that Joseph and Benjamin Cox have assigned all their share of George Cox’s estate. Mary Cox still retains her lifetime share of the portion of Coxton known as Summerhill. Zipporah and Henry Edwards only have a vested interest in the portion that they share. A separate deed had been registered for Henry and Zipporah Edwards on 5 September 1889.

Mary Cox, widow of George, passed away on 10 December 1896 aged 77 years and was laid to rest in Corrimal Roman Catholic Cemetery.

Isabella Waldron, widow of Adolphus Charles Waldron (who died on 28 December 1899 and whose probate was granted on 16 February 1900) becomes the next owner of George and Mary Cox’s home Summerhill when it was conveyed to her by Frederick William Cox and Joseph James Neave on 26 January 1901 for £150.

Frederick William Cox signs a Statutory declaration on 24 April 1902 declaring that all debts of the late George and Mary Cox have long since been paid. This declaration of Frederick brings about a new era in the
subdivision and ownership of the Private Township of Coxton.

By 1902 Frederick William Cox was residing in North Sydney, Joseph James Neave in Lane Cove and Zipporah Edwards in Sydney.

When James Wilson, Engineer of South Clifton, purchased lots 18 & 19 facing Princes Highway near Robson Street on 12 May 1902 for the sum of £32 it started the gradual sell-off and closure of the “Private Township of Coxton”.

In recent years the wrought iron surround and the headstone have been removed from the grave of George Cox to make way for a tennis court. There have been many reports that his bones had been dug up and that they had been shown around.

It makes one wonder how George Cox would feel today if he knew his headstone had been removed from his own gravesite and that a plaque was placed for him in the Roman Catholic Cemetery at Corrimal.

The names of streets in Corrimal skirting Coxton are Robson, Midgley and Doncaster Streets.