

WILLIAM & JOHN DEANS

Canterbury Pioneers

William (1817-1851) and John Deans (1820-1854), were the sons of John Deans, a notary, and Catherine Young, were born in the parish of Kirkstyle, Riccarton, Scotland. Both trained as lawyers but they became interested in the plans for settlement in New Zealand and were placed on good Scottish farms to prepare them for colonial life.

William bought his land orders for Wellington from the New Zealand Company in 1839 and sailed from London in one of the earliest company ships, the *Aurora*, arriving at Port Nicholson (Wellington) on 22 January 1840. He found on his arrival that much of the land was under heavy bush, that the Maoris were often unwilling to sell, and that the New Zealand Company had not completed its purchases and was much behind with its surveys. Being a vigorous and energetic man, he set out on various expeditions in both island and at the end of a year could say that he knew more of the country than any other colonist. He decided to settle on the Canterbury Plains. William got on very well with the Maoris and soon had a knowledge of their language. He made such an impression that they offered him a chieftainship if he would stay with them.



John Deans (pictured) had bought land orders in the Nelson settlement and arrived there in the *Thomas Harrison* on 25 October 1842. He was much dissatisfied with the quality of the land and the arrangements for settler, and readily agreed to join his brother in the new venture.

Settling in Canterbury



The first house on the Canterbury Plains, Riccarton. In 1843 the Deans brothers built this house. [ca. 1890]

William had shown great judgment in selecting the spot where they were to settle. The small bush afforded them shelter and plenty of timber for their needs, and the ground was rich and intersected by deep streams of never-failing pure, cold water. These streams served them to keep the stock in different lots and off their cropping land. They changed the Maori name

Putaringamotu to Riccarton and they called the principal stream the Avon after a stream at their Scottish home. They, of course, had to build the necessary bridges. They made their own bricks, sawed their own timber, and built a long shed, divided into three rooms with curtains of blankets. This was finished by May; within the year they had built two more houses, a stock yard, a milking shed with 10 double stalls, a stable and café house, and two bridges. For the next seven years the Deans lived the simple rewarding life that philosophers have dreamed of, seeing their flocks and herds flourish and multiply, often for

months not seeing another white man. They shipped their fat bullocks to Wellington and their butter and cheese to Wellington Sydney – their cheese earned the highest commendation. In 1844, 20 cows were being milked.



Homebush

After some trouble the brothers were able to exchange their previous land orders for 400 acres freehold at Riccarton. Their run of 33,000 acres was known as Homebush.

Tragically William was lost at sea in 1851. The following year, John returned to Scotland to marry Jane McIlraith bringing her to New Zealand in 1853 where their son John was born later that year. Their original home, Deans Cottage, is preserved today as the oldest building on the Canterbury Plains. Sadly John had caught a chill on his way to Scotland and later developed tuberculosis. He died at Riccarton on 23 June 1854. On his deathbed he asked Jane to make sure that Riccarton Bush remained forever.

Jane decided to remain in New Zealand and look after the estate for her son until he was old enough to take it over. Jane had little knowledge of farming but became a good judge of stock, especially horses and cattle. She was active in the life of the growing community, and was a strong supporter of the Presbyterian Church in Christchurch. Jane Deans died on 19 January 1911 at Riccarton. Riccarton Bush was presented to the people of Canterbury by the Deans family in 1914.

Sources

- An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand, Vol. 1, A.H. McLintock (edit), 1966
- [Dictionary of New Zealand biography](#), Vol. 1, 1769-1869. Wellington, 1990
www.dnzb.govt.nz

2010 Earthquake

One of the casualties of the 7.1 force earthquake which hit Canterbury on 4 September 2010 was the historic Deans family homestead, Homebush at Hororata just 6 km from the epicenter in Darfield. Severe damage was sustained to the upper storeys and roof with bricks strewn around the property. This photo was taken on the morning after the earthquake.

