

Longbeach Estate

General Background

The first John Grigg was born at Bodbrane Farm in Liskeard, Cornwall in 1828, the son of a yeoman farmer. His mother died when he was young, leaving him to be brought up by his grandmother who was keen for him to enter the clergy. However he wanted to farm. His father died when John was in his early 20s, leaving him with responsibility for his stepmother as well as his siblings and step-siblings. He inherited from his father a freehold farm, which he sold in 1853, and then sailed for Australia (with his siblings) in the ship "Blackwall," reaching Melbourne early in 1854. Mr. Grigg remained only about six months in Australia, and then moved to New Zealand.

He began farming at Otahuhu, near Auckland but by his mid-30s he became tired of the climate and concerned about the frictions between the Maori tribes. So he moved south with his wife Martha, their children (of which there were eventually 6) and his siblings. In 1863 he purchased 2,135 acres south of Ashburton, in partnership with his brother-in-law Thomas Russell. The land he bought was described as Valueless Bog on the Lands Office Map in 1864. This was to become Longbeach and total 32,000 acres stretching from the Ashburton River in the North to the Hinds River in the South, and from the Pacific Ocean on the East to the present North/South Railway in the West. The land was selling at £2 an acre freehold. There were no roads in the area, no house on the land and there were apparently only six people living in the Ashburton (Hakatere) area with less than 30 in the entire mid-Canterbury hinterland, and they were mostly drovers.

The Grigg family, including John's sisters, step-sisters and brother, lived in Christchurch for several years while work began on draining the swamp and establishing dwellings. Grigg purchased the Chertsey Accommodation House and transported it by bullock wagon through the Ashburton River to the farm. The family then arrived in a convoy of horses and wagons across the swamp in 1872.

John's first drainage programme opened the Hinds River. This was followed by the establishment of 11 large open drains running east to the sea and then the laying of kilometers of clay-tile pipes. In 1886 he brought a brick-maker onto the property and established a kiln where these tiles were fired and then laid at the rate of almost 50 km a year.

John's biographer PG Stevens describes these as days of activity on Longbeach. "There were gangs of men in the swamp digging their way through peat and clay to free the squelching soil from water; men burning and clearing the rough growth from the drying land; men moving forward in line abreast with seed bags slung over their shoulders, rhythmically sowing seed as they advanced over the burned swamp, carefully avoiding the bog-holes which would suck a man waist deep; fencers dividing and subdividing areas into paddocks; road-builders; teamsters in their camps scattered over the station, ploughing, cultivating, sowing and reaping; shepherds and herdsmen with their alert, keen-eyed dogs; dairymen milking cows and making butter and cheese; pigmen attending bacon curers; tradesmen building sheds and homes; saddlers, horse-breakers, gardeners, butchers, cooks and men here, there and everywhere. And leading them all, with the exhortation 'come on' not 'go on', is the bushy-bearded Grigg himself." [John Grigg of Longbeach by PG Stevens, Whitcombe & Tombs, Christchurch, 1952.]

Extensive crops were rapidly established on the newly drained land. By 1879 there were 1200 hectares in wheat, oats and barley, 120 hectares in peas, five hectares in roots and forage crops plus 200 hectares for hay. Stock numbers rose in response; before long the merino flock numbered 10,000.

The ever-innovative John had heard about a successful experimental shipment of refrigerated sheep meat from Buenos Aires to Marseilles in 1877 and had begun breeding specialised Shropshires with carcasses suitable for the English market. When the first shipment of frozen meat left New Zealand on the 'Dunedin' in 1882, Longbeach mutton was on board and John remained a major architect of New Zealand's frozen-meat export trade thereafter.

Longbeach Station became a self-supporting Community with its own Post Office, School, General Store, Flourmill, Brickworks, Church, Smithy, Bakery, Cookhouse as well as Stables, Cowsheds, Pig Sties and Woolshed. The Church, which is situated in the homestead Gardens, was bought for £30 in 1873 from Prebbleton and moved on skids by oxen. It was dedicated by the Primate of New Zealand Bishop H.J. Harper and the burial ground near the Church was consecrated, where today a number of the members of the Grigg family are laid to rest. The Bishop also baptized two children on that day 25th May 1873, the first two baptisms to be recorded in the Ashburton register. A Memorial in the Chapel records the names of the men from Longbeach who gave their lives in WW1, there is also a memorial to John Grigg which quotes the words "who laboured for the common good; Large was his bounty; His soul sincere."

The Longbeach garden was first established in 1864 with trees planted as shelterbelts against the North West winds. The garden has prospered over the years as each generation of the Grigg family has continued with plantings and maintenance. Today there is around 16 acres of sweeping lawns and garden.

John Grigg's brother-in-law and sleeping partner saw no future prospects in farming so in 1882 the heavily mortgaged Longbeach was put up for sale, due to the amicable end of the agreement between Thomas and John. Everything had to be sold, including all of the Longbeach stock. The printed, hard-bound catalogue held 225 pages and the auction lasted for five days. The sale netted £35,000. John purchased back 16,000 hectares lying between Boundary Road and the Hinds River along with 13,000 sheep. With the frozen export trade firmly in his sights, he grew that number to 37,000 in 12 years. Lamb fattening became a huge enterprise. In 1893, 50,000 lambs arrived at Longbeach for finishing off. In another season he purchased 80,000 sheep and lambs for fattening and shipment to London. And in one record day 4400 Longbeach lambs were drafted for the freezing works with an average carcass weight of more than 19.5 kilograms.

John was also interested in dairying and his son JCN Grigg, was sent to source the best dairy cattle he could find. He settled on Dutch Friesian cattle, descendants of which are still important in local dairy herds today.

The present Homestead is the third on approximately the same site. It was constructed in 1938 after the second was burnt down in 1937. It is constructed from bricks originally made on the property and salvaged from the fire that destroyed the second Homestead. The architect was Heathcote Helmore and the property is a double brick construction with a shingled roof of Canadian cedar.

Besides devoting great enterprise, intelligence, and energy to the development of "Longbeach," Mr. Grigg actively assisted in the establishment of the Belfast Freezing Works, in the management of the Canterbury Agricultural and Pastoral Association, and in the work of the Ashburton County Council, the Longbeach Road Board and School committee. He was also for some time a member of the House of Representatives. Mr. Grigg died at Longbeach on the 7th of November, 1901, at 74 years old, and was buried in the Longbeach churchyard beside his wife who had predeceased him by about sixteen years.

Longbeach Estate has remained in the same family, passing from John Grigg, to J.C.N. Grigg, to his son J. H. Grigg, who in turn passed it on to his daughter and son in law Virginia and David Thomas, and today it is farmed by their son Bill Thomas, his wife Penny and their four children. Bill was just 23 when he took over running Longbeach from his mother Virginia and her husband David Thomas in 1985.

Today the Estate comprises of a successful farm plus the Chapel and Cookshop which are hired out for weddings and functions. Groups can access the Gardens of National Significance by arrangement during the summer months.