

Tarnagulla in April 2018

During our trip to Australia we were taken to Tarnagulla and this unique little place was where I found my spiritual home! Quite unexpectedly. Quite without ceremony. Quite astonishingly. This place spoke to me like no other! It has taken me seventy years to find it – so perfect, so poignant, so very much (unbeknown to me) embedded in my very being. I wasn't the same person by the end of that amazing visit. It was a personal revelation which I still feel now I have returned home to the other side of the world.

I had always been drawn to Sampson Ball – the humble Cornish blacksmith – who had the guts to emigrate well into his middle years – to this place of golden gums, golden earth, golden hopes and dreams and golden treasure in the ground. Tarnagulla was the golden goal for working Cornishmen such as Sampson, who was a blacksmith by trade, and who were prepared to take on the dangerous sea journey all the way to Australia. They left their wives and many children behind, calling for them once they had established themselves 'down under'. Jane Ball (nee Bennett) who was middle-aged by this time, followed with her remaining children. The couple had sadly left behind a seven year old daughter who had been killed in a horse cart accident a few years earlier and a toddler had been burnt to death after her clothes caught fire in the family hearth – these were tough people with tough lives but with huge ambition.

On arrival at Tarnagulla, we were met by the Postmaster and cousins Joan and Margaret (another cousin who lived there was Jean who was away at the time). Joan and Margaret were delightful ladies – Joan is a retired teacher who has, in the true spirit of family enterprise, just taken up learning to play the violin. I knew these were my people.

Paul the Postmaster took us all on a walking tour of the whole town – the older cousins being remarkably spritely in mind, body and spirit. It was quite extraordinary to meet members of my family after all these years on the other side of the world with whom I had an instant affinity – I couldn't help wondering what it would have been like to grow up at Tarnagulla with the extended family – there are so few of us here in Britain.

The Post Office is in the centre of Commercial Road and is exactly how it would have been since it was built with its original counters – so good to find it unchanged. To add to the atmosphere, there was a power cut on the day we visited and I wouldn't have turned a hair if someone had lit a gas lamp which would have been so appropriate. Paul and his wife are obviously very happy, providing a service to the community that would be acutely missed if this Office was to close, as so many have done in Britain. Consequently, too, they knew everyone in the whole area which is now a semi ghost town of around 133 people at the last census in 2016.

Commercial Road is the main street with very little passing traffic and no footfall. It is dusty and wide with traditional single storey houses bordering onto canopied sidewalks. There are shops and stores closed and unchanged since the day when the dying town couldn't sustain them any more. You had the feeling that if a door was suddenly to open, the tradesman would be standing there smiling to welcome you and a step over the threshold would be a step back in time. I loved this connection with the past. In a town where a huge gold nugget

weighing 26.6 kilograms was found in 1906, you would expect all the infrastructure - stores, hotels, churches, halls, mills and a station to be present. They are all still there if you know where to look. If ever there was a town to be affected by the cruel volatility of a gold rush, this was it. The nugget, incidentally was named "Poseidon" after the winning horse of the Melbourne Cup of that year.

We visited the old Bank House built in 1859 – a grand house still maintaining its many period features including an imposing chimney built to smelt gold. In these rooms – both the bank area and the living quarters behind - it was so easy to turn around and not be at all surprised to catch a glimpse of the original owners. I had to be alone for a few moments, soaking in this tangible link with the past. We were lucky enough to meet the current owner living there happily with the ghosts and a passion for the history of the place. By some strange coincidence he is also tied up with a project alongside the Australian War Memorial in Canberra using the latest technology in mapping the last movements of the Victoria Cross recipients in each campaign by using a 3D printer, thus demonstrating graphically the sort of terrain and attendant dangers that had to be surmounted before any VC action could take place. We had so much to talk about, I thought we would see nothing else of the town before nightfall! This gentleman also collected French Horns!

Walking leisurely along Commercial Road and chatting away – so quiet that one could almost walk in the middle of the road with disregard to any traffic – we were shown some of the old trading and service buildings still standing and preserved in every way. The old Victoria Hotel and Theatre was unlocked for us and we retreated from the bright sunshine into a large village hall where the residents must have met, drank and danced over many years. Joan remembered dancing here. The walls were hung with ancient photographs of dignitaries, businesses, horses and carts and picture models of gold nuggets. We then turned into the Soldiers Memorial Park and looked at the war memorial where cousin Jean had left a floral tribute in her absence. We walked around the area, avoiding the copious amounts of kangaroo droppings, and took in the atmosphere of the place – so quiet – no-one else around, warm and sultry with crunchy gum leaves underfoot. There had been no rain for months. The spirits were there snatching a peek at us from behind a tree trunk or quietly laughing as we took turns to sit in the extraordinary kangaroo chair.

We continued onwards over a bridge, struck by the peace and quietness of the place – almost daring not to speak ourselves – and were astonished to find another road (Gladstone Street) running parallel with Commercial Road, along which were many different and varying old houses – best loved homes and others in a state of dilapidation. I enjoyed this impromptu "homecoming". My ancestors, the Symons and the Balls lived next door to each other in Wood Street – just a poignant, ethereal space left by two wooden miners' cottages long gone.

We meandered up to the disused Uniting Church past the school which – although still functioning – added to the generally deserted atmosphere as all the children were out on a field trip. After noticing the deadly privy in the churchyard which, in my imagination must have contained every Redback in Australia under the toilet seat, we went into the church to find an exhibition of lovely paintings done by an Austrian artist who lived across the road. I

wanted to buy a beautifully evocative scene of the ghost gums surrounding Tarnagulla with the morning sun slanting across them as my need to take something home from this lovely place was very strong. We bought the painting and we are so pleased we did – the shipping was a doddle as Postmaster Paul was at hand!

We then sauntered back to the Post Office along a street with the bush on one side and an incongruous railway carriage on the other which served as someone's home.

On the way, we were invited into Joan's home where she had lived for many years. It hadn't changed in all that time and her windows overlooked the sidewalk shaded by the verandah that protected pedestrians from the strong Australian sun. In the middle of the room was a music stand and a violin - her new interest taking centre stage in her life. She and Margaret then proceeded to show us very old family photographs – stacks of them – one in particular blowing me away – that of my grandfather aged about ten with two of his brothers! None of us had ever seen him as a boy – the only photos we have are as a soldier in his AIF uniform. It was simply amazing to me that such a treasure of a photograph could surface, quite out of the blue, in this little forgotten town in Victoria, Australia. Forget national archives – here it was in the possession of this lovely lady who was my unknown cousin! This was one of the highlights of my whole trip and I regretted the fact that I could only spend a limited time looking at these photos – I am sure there are a lot more secrets to yield care of cousin Joan.

After this, we needed some sustenance and we were delighted to be invited back to the Post Office for a large teatime spread of cake, scones and jam and samozas! Again, the unexpected – what is a samoza doing in Tarnagulla? Just lovely.

On the way home, we headed for the cemetery at Tarnagulla which is outside the town literally in the bush. It is an enchanted, haunted place surrounded by ghost gums with the road on one side and a country railway line on the other. We spent an hour looking for Sampson and Jane Ball as I know that they are buried there with other members of the family, but to no avail. There are no "Ball" headstones but I felt that Sampson had shown me enough for one day. We placed some roses on an unmarked grave and said a prayer and left quietly, leaving my ancestors to rest in peace.

© Sarah Kellam – granddaughter to William John Symons VC

THE PAINTING – "Magic Moment" by Joe Jakitsch

