

MARMADUKE DIXON – 1828-1895

Marmaduke Dixon was born in 1828 in Caistor, Lincolnshire. Holton Park, the family seat for four hundred years, was situated in the fen country. Marmaduke was delicate as a boy and as the fens were considered unhealthy for him, he was apprenticed to a shipping firm. His life at sea during the 1840s was full of adventure. Dixon made several voyages to Australia, and on one of these, about 1845, he paid his first visit to New Zealand. Dixon later met an Australian squatter John Murphy, who had taken up a run on the Cust. Murphy described the plains to him and so sharpened his interest in New Zealand. In 1852 he settled on the leasehold run between the Waimakariri and Eyre Rivers. There was still plenty of open pasture left in Canterbury at that time so the only reason for Dixon's choice on the Eyre may have been the influence of Murphy, whose run lay on the opposite bank.

Dixon's first home, a small whare which he built in the manuka near the Waimakariri, was called 'The Hermitage,' the name by which his station was first known. He stocked his two blocks with three thousand sheep, but was immediately faced with the problem of watering them. As surface water and springs were non-existent, he dug a well nearly eighty feet down into the shingle. However, after all his work he found that he had missed the waterbeds. He reluctantly abandoned the well and continued to sledge his water three miles from the Waimakariri.

Dixon made a trip to England in 1859, to marry Eliza Wood and when they returned he took up residence in a new homestead that he built nearer the Eyre. Here he tapped a reliable water-bearing stratum. Eliza named the new homestead 'Eyrewell.'

Over the next thirty-five years, up until his death in 1895, Dixon devoted his energy and ability to the development of both Eyrewell and the Eyre County. Dixon entered politics through the Rangiora and Mandeville Road Board, being among the first members of that body elected in 1864. He later served on the Eyre district boards and was elected a representative of the Provincial Council for Mandeville in 1865, serving on that body until the abolition of Provincial Government in 1876. Although a successful squatter, in local and provincial politics he fought tirelessly for the rights of the small farmer and for the North Canterbury community.

Eliza and Marmaduke Dixon had six children. Two sons died young, while Marmaduke John (Duke), Richard, Rosa and Catherine lived to inherit the Eyrewell Estate. By 1892, Dixon was in an unusual and enviable position among Canterbury run holders in freeholding a station now totalling almost 40,000 acres, and when he died in 1895, it was divided between his children. Duke took over the Eyrewell block, Richard, a block of heavier land called Holton, Rosa, a block of light land known as Claxby, and Catherine inherited a westerly block, which was eventually sold to Duke when she and her husband Percy Johnson moved to Mount Torlesse Station.

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