

WILLIAMS Thomas and BACKHURST Mercy

Contributed by Theresa Murphy tmurphynz@xtra.co.nz
based on information from her Backhurst cousin Carol Oakes (nee Williams),
g-granddaughter of Thomas and Mercy;
plus various historical records.



Mercy Williams (nee Backhurst) c.1900

Mercy Backhurst was born in 1835 in the small village of Boughton-Monchelsea in Kent. She was one of the twelve children of **William Backhurst** and **Eliza Wilkins**. William was an 'agricultural labourer', as probably his ancestors had been for centuries. By the 1851 census **Mercy (Backhurst)** had left home and was working as a 'General Servant' in the home of a butcher in Maidstone. In all likelihood, she would have left school at the age of 12 or 13 as was typical for the time. At some stage she trained as a mid-wife and the family story is that her path crossed with Florence Nightingale but that is not proven.

She went to Cape Town in South Africa about 1860. No passenger record has yet been found. She went to join her sister **Ellen** who had arrived about a year before with her husband **Richard Gardiner Jeffery**. In addition, their older brother, **Henry Backhurst**, was also there, having immigrated in 1858 with his wife, **Sarah**. 30-year-old **Thomas Williams** arrived in Cape Town in 1861 on the ship 'Sedgmoor'. He was noted as a labourer, though he

trained at some time as a carpenter. He was born in Worcestershire.

Tom and **Mercy's** relationship blossomed quickly, and they married in St Georges Cathedral, The Cape. **Ellen** and **Richard** were witnesses. Two children were born to them in South Africa – **Mary** (1862) and **George Edward** (1864).

The families settled in a small hamlet, then called Papendorp (later Woodstock). Family lore says that **Thomas** was employed as a carpenter on the first railway station in South Africa. However, the economy around Cape Town was going into a depression and many people thought of moving elsewhere. New Zealand offered a carrot to emigrate.

On 8 November 1864 the **Williams** and **Jeffery** families came to New Zealand on the ship 'Maori' under the *Waikato Immigration Scheme* of the Auckland Provincial Council. **Tom** and **Mercy** initially took up land in Pukekohe, but soon settled in Onehunga near the Jefferys. More children followed – **Thomas Henry** (1866), **James** (1868), **Eliza** (1870), **Henry Gardner** (1871) and **Hilda May** (1879). Young **George Edward** died in 1869 and baby **Hilda** died at the age of 7 months and is buried in St Peter's Church Cemetery.

During this period the sisters welcomed their brother, **George Backhurst** and his family who sailed from England on the 'Celestial Queen' to arrive in Auckland, 30 July 1872.

Thomas worked as a builder/carpenter and **Mercy** was a mid-wife for many years. The family say she used to travel far and wide by horse and cart and acted as a nurse for Doctor William Scott, in Queen Street, Onehunga.

Thomas died on the 8 August 1887 after an illness and was buried in plot 415 in the same grave as his infant daughter, **Hilda May**.

Mercy continued to live in Onehunga. Her property on Arthur Street is now part of the Onehunga School. She would have enjoyed the company of her sister, **Ellen**, who had also been widowed earlier, along with her children, grand-children and other extended family. She died on 17 January 1922 (the last of the siblings) and is buried in Plot 415 in St Peter's Churchyard with **Thomas**, and next to her brother, **George Backhurst**. No headstone was erected for either. **Ellen** is buried close by.

Three of Thomas and Mercy's children lie in the *Waikaraka Cemetery*:

Mary Denize and her husband John, and children Arthur Oliver and Elsie Hazel,

Thomas Henry Williams and his wife Margaret Catherine, and children Charles James, Thomas Henry, Vincent Edwin and Cyril John.

Eliza Mincher and her husband Albert, and their daughter Olive.

Two others are elsewhere:

James Williams and his wife Christina are in the *Howick Public Cemetery*.

Henry Gardner Williams is in the *Purewa Cemetery*. His wife Harriet Emily is in the *Waikumete Wall Niche*.