

PURCHAS Mary Anne, Arthur Guyon (jnr), and Agnes Olivia

the information in this biography is primarily taken from John Steele's book
'No Ordinary Man; the extraordinary life and times of Dr Arthur Purchas'
(David Ling Publishing Ltd. 2019)

Rev Arthur Guyon Purchas was the first Vicar of Saint Peter's Parish, Onehunga (1847-1875).

Arthur Guyon (b. 27 September 1821) and his wife **Mary Olivia Challinor** (b. 7 December 1824) married in Liverpool, England, on 27 December 1845.



Olivia and Arthur Purchas

Arthur Guyon (jnr), Agnes Olivia, and Mary Anne were their first three children, and all three tragically died at a young age, and are buried in Saint Peter's Cemetery, Onehunga.

Their brief biographies follow, in the order of their death, rather than the order of their birth.

Mary Anne Purchas,

Arthur and Olivia's third child was born 4 May 1850.

Steele, page 69: *'... at first all was well ... she was baptised in the same month at Saint Andrew's Church, Epsom, as Purchas and his helpers put the final touches on the family's new single-storey house (the vicarage) in Onehunga, in preparation for their move ... it must have been an enormous relief when they finally moved in about June 1850.*

Unfortunately, that mix of relief and happiness was short-lived. Within weeks the baby became ill with a fever and a rash. To his horror, Purchas soon realised it was diphtheria ... There had been another outbreak of some size around Onehunga and in Auckland itself soon after the baby was born – and in those days there was no real cure ... Mary died with a badly ulcerated throat in the new Onehunga house

in September (18th) and at only five months old, was buried in the small cemetery next to St Peters. It was the first family tragedy faced by Arthur and Olivia, but it would not be the last.'

Arthur Guyon Purchas (jnr),

Arthur and Olivia's first child, was born 11 January 1847,
and baptised at Saint Thomas' Church, 31 January.

Steele pages 94-95: *'Perhaps it was Olivia who encouraged her husband to have a break ... in mid-April 1855, with their five small children. Purchas agreed, suggesting the family have a couple of days at a small bay he had in mind, near Nihotupu on the Manukau Harbour ... the plan was for himself and his son Arthur (whose family name was 'Agape' – Greek for 'love') to go up there first and check the exact spot out before returning a few days later with the rest of the family ... a friend, Henry Smythies, agreed to take them there in his sailboat ... they sailed from Onehunga up the northern coast towards Nihotupu towing a small flat-bottomed dinghy ... before finally heading into Big Muddy Creek. This was an inlet beside land very familiar to Purchas from his regular visits there to settlers and Māori families during the past seven years.*

Purchas later described what happened next: 'When we reached the creek ... the tide was too low to admit the boat reaching the landing place. We therefore anchored her outside and went ashore in the dinghy. We there lighted a fire and cooked our dinner and by the time we had finished our meal the sun was going down.'

The two men then organised their sleeping place, laying down some fern before setting off back to the boat to get their bedding. 'I asked Agape if he was afraid to be left alone while we went for the boat' said Purchas, 'and to this he said 'no'. I preferred leaving him on shore for fear of any accident which I thought might have happened if I had taken him in the dinghy with us, as it was dark.'

Purchas and Smythies then headed back out into the channel, rowing hard against the incoming tide. But for Agape, a small eight-year-old boy, probably unused to the strange noises of large crabs scuttling in the mud around his feet – and birds and creatures settling for the night in nearby bush – it must have been a somewhat unnerving experience.

He ventured a short distance from the safe spot where his father told him to wait. Purchas was almost halfway back to the boat when he heard his son call out. At first, he couldn't make out what he was saying. He shouted back in the dark to tell him to wait quietly and that he would be back in a few minutes. But then Agape called back distinctly; 'Papa, I want you to take my boots.'

By this time, Purchas and Smythies had reached the bigger boat. 'When I heard these words, the terrible sense of impending danger came over me,' said Purchas. 'I did not lose a moment but pulled back as fast as I could, calling to tell him I was coming and also to reassure him.'

But Agape had already stepped down through the mud to the water's edge. Purchas was within about 40 metres of him by now and, as he got closer, he called out again in the dark: 'My dear boy, whatever made you come down to the water?' Agape answered in a voice of terror: 'Papa, I was frightened!'

Before he could reply, Purchas heard the dreadful sound of the boy's splashes as he began wading towards the dinghy. The horrified father swung his dinghy around in the direction of the noise, but by the time he got back somewhere near the spot, calling out all the way, there was nothing but an eerie stillness. The boy had had inadvertently, stepped off a steep edge into deep, fast flowing water, disappearing beneath the surface without a word.

Frantically Purchas called out to Smythies that his boy had drowned. But Smythies could do nothing other than shout out to some woodcutters camping nearby in the bush. One of them rushed down to help. After hours of furious searching, Purchas realised it was in vain. He trudged back to the dinghy in the pitch black. In his utter despair, he described how he climbed back in and knelt down inside it, alone in the dark, to 'commend my son to God and to pray for strength.'

They found Agape's body the next morning 'in such a peaceful attitude that it quite struck those who saw him,' Purchas said later. It is difficult to imagine the distress endured by Arthur and Olivia when he finally returned home to Onehunga the next day with the body. The funeral followed quickly as friends rallied around. The boy was buried in the cemetery next to St Peter's, beside his sister Mary.'

Agnes Olivia Purchas,

Arthur and Olivia's second child, was born 21 January 1849 at St John's College, and baptised at the College chapel, on 2 February 1849.

Steele (page 229) alludes to Agnes '*not enjoying the best of health*' at the age of 21; and (page 251) '*still unfortunately very ill*' in March 1875.

Steele, page 261-262: describes how one of Arthur and Olivia's daughters, **Edith**, was preparing to marry lawyer Frederic William Brookfield; the marriage took place in February 1878 ...

'Just four weeks later, Arthur and Olivia's eldest daughter, Agnes, finally passed away at their home in Karangahape Road, (1 April 1878) aged just 29, after a long illness (Footnote: The actual cause is unknown but is likely to have been consumption/tuberculosis, pleurisy, scrofula or other similar pulmonary or respiratory diseases.) The two families (Purchas and Brookfield) once again came together for another funeral service at St Peter's in Onehunga, where Agnes was laid to rest alongside her two siblings, Arthur (jnr) and Mary.'