

ORIGINS OF THE KITCHEN FAMILY

Dr. Paul Kitchen – 17 Dec 2009

The name Kitchen is English and perhaps arose either because the original bearer of the surname lived close to a kitchen, perhaps in a monastery, or because he was a person who worked in a kitchen, though another source states the name began in Scotland as MacCutcheon and was anglicised in about 1350. The name Kitchen is said to be one of the oldest surnames of clans in the border country between Scotland and England. The ancient family, Kitchen of Lancashire, was seated with manor and estates in Lancashire before the Norman Conquest of 1066. The name was at times also spelt as Ketchen, Kitching, Kitchiner, or Kitchener (almost all of these names still appear in the Melbourne telephone directory). The clan derives from the Boernicians, an ancient founding race, of Scottish Picts, Angles and Vikings dating from ~400AD, living in an area between Edinburgh and Yorkshire. By the 15th Century the Kitchen family had expanded to Sussex and Surrey and earliest records of the name come from the 12th century including Robert de Kechenor and Henry ale Kychene, both from Sussex. Some of the clan moved to Ireland and settled as protestants in Belfast, but many of these became disenchanted with life there and sailed to North America (with several dying on the way due to cholera, typhoid or small pox). John Kitchen settled in Salem in 1630, Nicholas Kitchen in Barbados in 1654, Joseph and John Kitchin in Virginia in 1635, and Mary Kitchener also in Virginia in 1767. Famous members of the clan include Lord Kitchener of Khartoum, and John Kitching, British Biologist. John Kitchener married Elizabeth Hare in 1716 in London.

The earliest record of Melbourne's Kitchen Family Tree is in the mid 1800's. It is a story of clever purposeful achievement. Thomas Kitchen was father of a poor family in a working class culture with widespread illiteracy. He was a master malt maker and seller. Thomas' eldest son John Kitchen was born 30 June 1799 in the little village of Long Crowmarsh on the bank of the Thames in Oxfordshire. He taught himself to read, kept books and abstained from alcohol.¹ He was initially apprenticed to an uncle who made soap and candles. Later he ran a grocer's shop across an old stone bridge in Berkshire at the market town of Wallingford, making and selling candles, but his business fell into ruin in the depression of the 1840's and he was widowed and nearly penniless with four boys (Phillip, Joseph, John Ambrose and Theophilus)². He came to Melbourne in 1855. John's son John Ambrose Kitchen showed determination and had already left a lawyer's office to arrive in Melbourne at age 21 on Christmas Day 1854 with eight sovereigns in his pocket, only 22 days after the Eureka Stockade. He made a bit of money selling second hand books, then, like so many young men in Melbourne, went to the goldfields to try his luck at gold digging where he was not very successful. In 1855, gold was found at Mount Blackwood on 4th January, but John Ambrose was not successful in his digging and when he heard that his father and brothers Philip, Joseph and Theophilus had arrived by boat (after a 4-month journey) he decided to save money and walk the 57 miles in two days to Melbourne to greet them. Together they rented a single storey building at cnr. Moray & Yorks Streets Emerald Hill, South Melbourne (then known as Emerald Hill), and in 1856 moved to tenement houses at Bridport St, Sandridge (now also in South Melbourne) and lived there making candles out of tallow (melted animal fat). To do this they had to collect fat and bones from local butchers in a wheel barrow and then hawk their products to grocers shops! They boiled down the fat in old coppers and while the boys worked late at night, John's wife would sit and read to them by the light of one of their candles.³ Candles were the main form of lighting for homes and were needed on the goldfields as was soap. They employed failed gold-diggers, deserting sailors, and drinkers as workmen - a motley crew. The Kitchens were given a month to vacate their premises in 1857 when the tallow candle



John Kitchen

¹ John was a man of very determined character, with the courage of his convictions. His uncompromising outlook is shown when on one occasion, while riding in a bus on a very hot day, he asked the conductor to open the window, the conductor sullenly refused, whereupon John promptly smashed the window with his walking stick. He was dogmatic and held strong opinions which he did not hesitate to express. Once at a religious meeting where a famous Preacher was speaking, he showed his disagreement by loudly banging his stick on the floor and saying "No! No! No!" in a very audible voice. Riches A. 'History of J. Kitchen & Sons' ~1944. See a detailed account in: <http://member.melbpc.org.au/~tonkit/kitchen/docs/Riches-History.pdf>

² Alicia Stone, 'Pioneering Spirits' Unilever Magazine 1993, 88:22-24

³ Riches A. *ibid*



John Ambrose Kitchen

business was declared a 'noxious trade.' John had befriended a councillor and for two years John managed to stave off eviction until in 1859 they spent £400 on the purchase of a new factory in Port Melbourne (at what is now the corner of Crockford and Ingles Streets) and lived next to it, but it caught fire a year later on a hot night (27th Feb 1860) when a farcical quarrel and a riot occurred involving locals as three fire-brigades could not agree who should put out the fire, so the place burned down! They had to rebuild, setting up a legally established partnership in November that year with a signboard 'J. Kitchen & Sons,' each partner earning £2 10s per week. They made candles, soap, glycerine, washing powder and baking powder, and the company was successful. On 23 May 1882, the whole block bounded by Ingles, Boundary and Woodruff Streets was transferred from the Crown to the company. It is opposite the Port Melbourne Cricket Ground. John Kitchen used to ride a little black pony to work every morning.

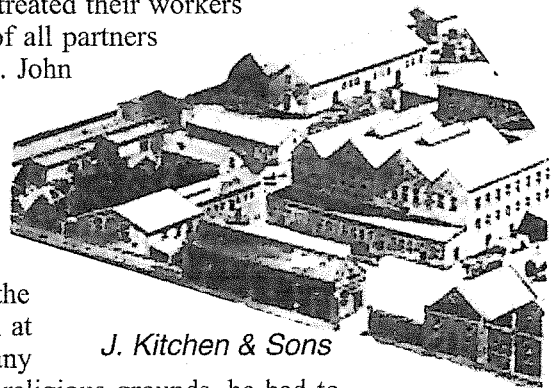
The whole family were initially members of the Plymouth Brethren but John Kitchen in 1873, at age 75, joined the Christadelphians, a sect strong on prophecy and the Second Coming, and he had strong views against 'easy believism.' There

are also records that he was involved in that sect back in Britain. In 1876 he wrote "the doctrine of Immediate Salvation which has been trumpeted forth so much of late... is to be condemned. It flows sweetly from the lips of its mistaken advocates but is not true. It is a broken reed, a snare, a broken cistern, a lie.... Reader – beware of 'believe and you are saved.'" I wonder if his grandson John, my grandfather, would have approved of that theology! Colin Kitchen⁴ states that he placed tracts about his sect at Flinders St station etc, and his sons quickly followed and gathered them all up! His religious views were not good for business! John died at 92 (in 1892) and apparently recanted in his last days, saying 'all the prophecies had run out.' His son John Ambrose marched out of a Brethren Assembly meeting in 1870 with his wife and family and joined the Anglicans. However, he apparently had a reputation for kindness to men and families in trouble. In fact all the brothers were Christians and treated their workers well, not dismissing any employee without unanimous agreement of all partners (quite an innovative symbol of democratic liberalism for that time). John Kitchen had moved to Waterloo St., in St. Kilda in 1865, but by 1873, the three brothers all lived with their wives and families in the exclusive residential suburb of Kew (Kitchens had houses in Pakington St, Wellington St, Normanby Rd, Charles St. and later at Cotham Rd).



The first Kitchen 'factory'

Of the four brothers John Ambrose was the driving force behind the progress of the partnership but John Kitchen his father was known at the 'Candle King.' He became the managing director of the company after his father retired in 1870, and although reluctant to do so on religious grounds, he had to persuade his brothers to accept a loan. Then the business grew. In 1880 the first telephone directory was issued in Melbourne called the Melbourne Telephone Exchange Company, at 'The Exchange' 60 Little Collins Street East and John Kitchen and Sons were the 16th name on that list. In that year the company put on a very successful exhibition in Melbourne with candles of various designs, and then took all the employees in hired taxis to a sit-down picnic meal with sporting events, at Doncaster Hall in the outer suburb of Doncaster.⁵ They manufactured glycerine, washing blue, soda crystals and baking powder and took over companies in Bendigo, Wangaratta and Echuca as well as forming a link with the Apollo factory in Brisbane and the Sydney Soap Company. They had expanded to Adelaide and Western Australia by 1902. In 1907, the firm began an



J. Kitchen & Sons

⁴ Colin Kitchen 'John Kitchen, Chemical Industry Pioneer, A Soap Story' Vic. Historical Journal (1993) 64: 46-59

⁵ Riches ibid p55

ultimately unsuccessful plantation producing copra oil at Milne Bay, Papua. John Ambrose' eldest son, John Hambleton Kitchen managed the New Zealand branch which was established in 1876 at Hamilton, and the company also had business interests in the United States. 'Kitchen and Sons' later became famous for producing Velvet soap and Solvol, and in 1901, John Ambrose led the family to a link with Lever Bros, in Sydney, now known as Unilever. In 30 years from 1870 to 1900 the Kitchens spread their activities north to Townsville and Fremantle. Theo and John Ambrose bought properties in Toomuc Valley, Pakenham in the 1870's with dairy and orchard developments. Theo built the wooden church there. The annual tea meeting was a gala night with the two Kitchen families present and John Ambrose' large family of girls always present doing their part in the serving. Two sons of John Ambrose, Ernest and Frederick managed the properties which extended to 300 acres and had 600 cows and the first cool stores in Victoria. It was the largest orchard property in the southern hemisphere.

There was a market boom and then a bank crash in 1893 when the brothers lost nearly all their money and finally the properties were sold. John Ambrose had to sell his beautiful home in Wellington St Kew; they mortgaged other properties and the New Zealand branch was sold in 1894. Free trade meant tariff reduction on imports which also damaged the firm, so reorganisation was needed and margarine was added to the range of products. After an earlier name modification, the company regained its old title of J. Kitchen and Sons Ltd in 1901 and became the largest soap and candle manufacturer in the country. The first Federal Parliament opened that year in Melbourne at Exhibition Buildings, and J. Kitchen and Sons made thousands of 'fairy lights' of small candles and holders, but just before the event it was announced that the public illumination would for the first time be electrical! However, they still had plenty of customers for their candles. Velvet soap was a most



successful product first marketed in 1900. Sales grew enormously after John Ambrose dictated a spelling error inadvertently in a poster (always a good way to get noticed!). Newspaper advertising was used successfully, and in the 1932 they introduced Persil with travelling squads of female washing demonstrators who were sent house to house with the powder! Solvol, introduced in 1915, was another useful hand-cleaner still on sale today. In 1914, a merger with Lever group introduced better margarine processing but the First World War made things difficult with forced price fixing. Frederick Kitchen, youngest son of John Ambrose (born 1879) was a different man. From 1914, he guided the company successfully into the modern period, but he also raced horses (this was banned by grandfather John, though apparently older brother John Hambleton liked a

flutter occasionally!) and he died in 1940. Unilever Ltd took control in 1946, with the firm re-named Lever and Kitchen Pty Ltd in 1962, but the Kitchen name was later lost in 1993 when the business was re-christened Lever:Rexona.

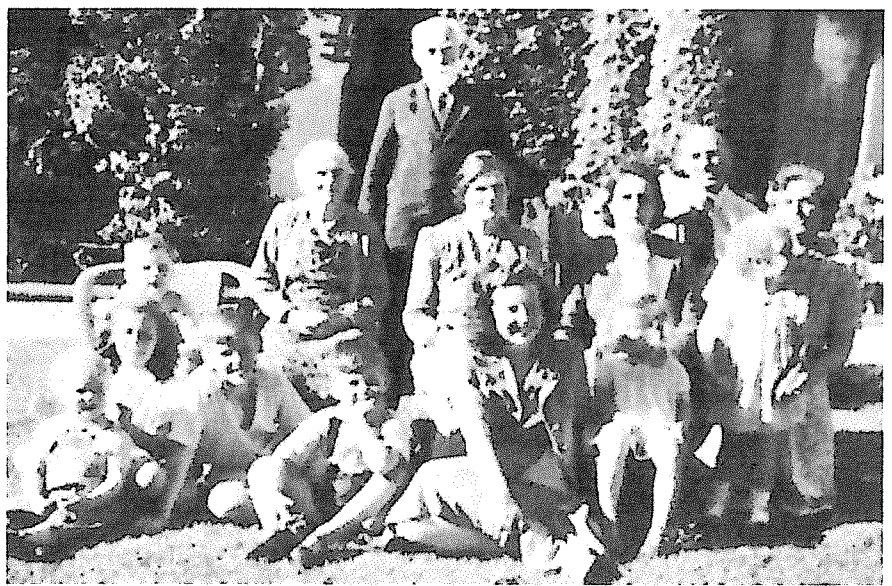
There are seven generations of Kitchens who have lived in Australia and a new one is emerging. Our roots are through John's son Philip, who lived in Power St Hawthorn and was a member of the Open Brethren. He died in 1898. One of Phillip's sons died of typhoid fever aged 12, but John James Kitchen (known as JJK) was born in Hawthorn in 1866 and educated at Hawthorn Grammar and Caulfield Grammar. He was a quiet man but won prizes at school where he played cricket and chess and got top marks in his matriculation year. He trained in medicine and started a medical practice in South Melbourne in 1893, also giving anaesthetics for a surgeon and weekly at the Royal Melbourne Hospital. JJK found that all quite stressful, riding his bicycle to see patients at night in an industrial suburb (though using horse and buggy during the day), so he retired from practice after 18 years in 1910 (at age 54). He married in 1897 and in 1910 took his wife Clare on a 14-day trip from China on the Trans-Siberian railway, being in London for the coronation of King George V. He bought the sturdy Cotham Road house in 1913, and named it 'Kuling', after the holiday resort for CIM missionaries that he had visited in China. His father Philip was the first treasurer of the China Inland Mission (CIM), founded by Dr. Hudson Taylor in 1890. JJK took over as treasurer of CIM and later co-founded the Melbourne Bible Institute. At about the turn of the century, JJK organised a meeting at Melbourne Town Hall to oppose the 'New Theology' and the hall was full. He says in his memoirs, 'hundreds were)turned away,'and that 'several leading evangelicals took part.' He led several prayer meetings in Melbourne Town Hall when the 1st World War was going badly in 1917. In 1920, he became chairman of Geelong Holiness Convention and then Upwey Convention (now at Belgrave Heights).

He attended the Open Brethren but sent his children to Kew Baptist which was more suitable for them, so the Kitchens became Baptists! Although JJK describes himself as in his early life having 'a nervous temperament of timidity and shyness combined with a nervous temperament,' nevertheless 'entrusted with special opportunities for public service and positions of honour and responsibility' he did not seek. JJK was regarded as 'a dignified revered Christian gentleman' and an excellent Convention chairman with an emphasis on punctuality and brevity of words. He died aged 86 in June 1952. JJK's son Howard became a missionary with the CIM, now called OMF, and his son Ridley followed his father as chairman of the Belgrave Heights Convention. The rest of the story is well known to us with the life of my father Ridley, the move of our family to "Cherry Tree Farm" in Mitcham in 1956, the death of our mother Betty in 1970 and his marriage to Marjorie in 1976. In 1977 Ridley was able to visit cousin Lloyd and Mima in Auckland and Paul and Merrill have been visited by David Kitchen, son of Lloyd, an obstetrician in New Zealand who has helped us with that side of the family.

We should be proud of our Kitchen heritage, despite the odd name. Kitchens had a rich and ancient British heritage, and were a founding family of the city of Melbourne, being involved in the success of its business development, and were foundational in a number of important inter-church evangelical organisations. It seems that Kitchens lived to a good ripe old age and had many children. May the coming generation maintain that good reputation!



John & Clara Kitchen



Extended family at Kuling