



Thomas Brebner

In the Port Chalmers Old Cemetery, under the pine trees, stands the memorial to one of the district's most versatile early settlers.

Thomas Brebner was born in Aberdeen circa 1817, and his wife Mary Hambleton was born circa 1826 in Drysdale, Manchester. Together with their two sons, Adam and Robert, they sailed from Manchester aboard the *John Wickliffe* and arrived at Port Chalmers on 23 March 1848. Reverend Thomas Burns' Visitation Lists show that by 1849 two daughters, Mary and Alice, had been born, and by 1851 another son, John Alexander. The total number of children was to be nine: five sons and four daughters.

Thomas set himself up as a waterman (one who ferried cargo and passengers to and from ships anchored in the harbour) and, as a sideline, on 25 May 1850, Brebner was empowered to receive subscriptions for The Otago News.

In 1852 he went to Australia from Wellington aboard the *Louisa*. The purpose of the trip was, it is believed, to work in the Victorian goldfields. There are conflicting reports of his success or lack of it, but by 1855 he was back in Port Chalmers and had resumed his work as a waterman.

During the 1850s he managed a farm owned by Arthur Burns (son of Rev. Thomas Burns) at Grant's Braes. In the 1857 Jurors' List he is shown as "limeburner".

Limeburner's Beach at Portobello had an abundant supply of shells suitable for limeburning to make lime for whitewash which was used for painting buildings. In the Otago Witness in April 1857 there appeared an advertisement for his lime. His son Adam assisted with lime burning from a very young age, but the business declined in the 1860s when natural lime deposits were discovered locally.

In 1861 he went to the Otago goldfields, and on his return, after having presumably made another "pot of money" settled at Portobello where he developed a farm before moving back to Port Chalmers.

When the Port Chalmers wharf was built the trade of waterman became obsolete – ships were loaded straight off the wharf – so he became a lighterman, serving on *Pioneer*. She was a seven ton carvel rigged as a ketch, built in London of mahogany and oak and brought to Otago aboard *John Wickliffe*. Later he was joined by his sons Adam and Robert, and may have become the owner. Lightermen had 'lighter' ships and were able to offload cargo and passengers and transport them longer distances.

When the Mechanics' Institute library opened in 1864 Brebner was appointed as the first librarian, a position which he was to hold for the next twenty years. The Mechanics' Institute was not just the local library, it was also a place for meetings, debates, lectures, games of chess, or for the local orchestra to hold its rehearsals.

In 1868 he joined the Port Chalmers Navals as a gunner.

As Inspector of Nuisances he wrote to the Port Chalmers Borough Council in 1876 asking for an increase of ten pounds on his annual salary – which was granted. Thomas and his wife Mary spent their declining years living in Magnetic Street and owning and managing a general store in Mount Street below Gooseberry Hill. Thomas died at the age of 64 on 24 April 1883 of “inflammation of the bowels”. At the time of his death his Port Chalmers properties were valued at fifteen hundred pounds, one at West Harbour twenty pounds and another at Tapanui at fifteen pounds.