



A lone grave is a sad yet wonderful relic of days gone by. Early settlers often buried family members who died on isolated farms. Often these graves were marked by wooden markers which have long since disappeared and the land has reverted to farmland so the burial is lost forever.

However, a family farming at Blackmount, Western Southland, have been intrigued for many years by a lone grave on their farm, which was marked by a headstone. The inscription on the headstone showed it was the last resting place of Caroline Aylmer, but little more was known except that the family came from Akaroa.

Recently descendants of the Aylmers visited and were able to fill out the missing pieces of the story. Caroline (nee Slatter), born in Berkshire, married Justin Aylmer in Akaroa in November 1854 and was mother to his four daughters.

The Aylmers had arrived at Lyttelton in the Lady Nugent, which reached Lyttelton at the end of 1851, so that they came near being the pioneers of the Province. They went immediately to Akaroa, where The Rev. William Joseph Aylmer, was the first incumbent of the Anglican Church in Akaroa, and was also a member of the Canterbury Provincial Council.

In the 1860, brothers Justin John Aylmer and William Aylmer bought the 30,000 acre Wairaki Station in Blackmount for 1000 pounds from one Dr Samuel Hodgkinson, who was relieved to have got rid of it.

On 31 July 1860, William left Riverton for Blackmount with Caroline, her four daughters, the eldest only 5 years of age, two servants and a Mr Woodrife, all travelling on a bullock dray. Caroline's husband Justin was ill and remained in Riverton until he recovered. The journey during winter of 88 km took 33 days where the party endured serious lack of food and freezing conditions and had to call on all their resources of fortitude and William's bravery to survive. This was one of the worst winters experienced with snow and floods and great stock losses. The saga of survival is beyond our comprehension today but is well documented in much detail in 1930s issues of the Southland Times.

After the family had been on the farm for a year, Caroline became ill, and Justin offered a reward of 100 pounds to anyone who would ride to Riverton for medical help. Many tried but unfortunately the rivers were in flood and Caroline died before a doctor arrived. The farm today is still called Aylmer Downs in their honour.

The conditions in which the family lived were primitive full of hardships and privations, and enough troubles to daunt the bravest. Caroline by all accounts was an extremely gracious gentlewoman, daughter of an Anglican clergyman.

The loss of his wife was not the last tragedy to visit Justin Aylmer. A major outbreak of two diseases in his sheep flocks decimated them and Dalgety and Rattray took over the farm. Justin went up to Dunstan in 1864 as assistant Vincent Pyke, and was afterwards in 1865 appointed as Goldfields Warden to the West Coast. Here he married again.

On their journey to the West Coast the Aylmer family unfortunately met with further misfortune for they were shipwrecked, but luckily no lives were lost. The family made their home in Ross until 1873 when Justin was appointed as Resident Magistrate in Akaroa.

Justin died on 12 January 1885 aged 53.

Prepared by the Historic Cemeteries Conservation Trust of New Zealand (www.cemeteries.org.nz) from information supplied by Stewart & Carol Weir who are the custodians of the gravesite. Information from *The Southland Times* 28 June 2011 and their earlier series of articles entitled *The Conquerors, Saga of the Stations 1933*.