

Migrating from Scotland to Australia

Maisie and Jim Gillespie

Jim and I, with our baby son Gordon, aged 4 months, left Scotland on the 19th October, 1948 for a new life in Australia. We were going to Riverstone, as we had been sponsored by my uncle, Peter Steele, of Richards Avenue.

The ship taking us to this new life was the *S.S. Empire Brent* carrying 900 passengers. During the war this ship had been used as a troop carrier and, although we were well looked after, cabin accommodation was not what we had expected. Gordon and I shared a cabin on the first deck with 15 other females. Jim was under the same conditions, with men, two decks below. Although we were restricted as to what, and the amount of, baggage we could take, mainly clothes, we were very fortunate in being allowed to take Gordon's pram with us. This proved a blessing for us, especially later on.

Two days into our voyage we encountered very rough seas in the Bay of Biscay. Many passengers, including my ex-Royal Navy husband, succumbed to seasickness. Fortunately Gordon and I coped very well. In complete contrast, the Mediterranean Sea was just like a sheet of glass. There were organised activities if you cared to participate, but we were quite happy to spend the time together on deck, watching the world, and the ocean, go by.

Passing the coasts of Algeria, Libya and Egypt, we were headed for the Red Sea via the Suez Canal, and by this time it was getting very hot. Going through the Suez Canal was a thrilling experience. One could almost shake hands with the men on its banks, and pluck the dates from the trees. It was the first time, too, that we had seen camels. They were everywhere. Midway along the canal is a passing place for ships called the Bitter Lakes. The canal is only wide enough for one ship. We spent about two hours anchored here to allow another ship coming the other way to proceed.

In my cabin were a woman and her little girl, the personal hygiene of whom left much to be desired. By this time, coupled with the heat, it became too much for me to bear. I could not stay in the cabin any longer and chose to sleep up on deck, in a deck chair, with Gordon beside me in his pram. We were quite comfortable. I awoke one morning to see a turbaned man standing by my chair. Unknowingly, we had arrived in Port Said and were re-fuelling. He meant no harm. I think he was intrigued with Gordon's pram. Mother Nature blessed us for the woman in question gave birth to her second child just before reaching Fremantle and we never saw her again. The three of them were kept in the hospital till she arrived in Melbourne. Thus I was able to go back to my bunk.



Maisie and Gordon on deck.

After leaving the Red Sea we sailed into the Indian Ocean. For eleven days we never saw another vessel, so this part of the voyage was quite uneventful.

Sailing in to Fremantle we were met by a pipe band playing on the pier. It was very stirring. We were allowed to get off the ship here for a few hours, the first time since we sailed from Scotland. The butchers' shop windows fascinated us, there were cuts of meat we had never seen since before the war. Better still, to Jim's delight, was the display of chocolates. Needless to say, he did indulge! When it was time to sail from Fremantle one very inebriated passenger almost missed the ship. The gangplank had been raised so a rope ladder was lowered down the side of the ship, and anxious crew and onlookers were thinking "Will he?" or "Won't he?", as he missed his footing several times. Eventually he was heaved on board.

By this time we were eagerly awaiting the reunion with our family, whom we had never seen, but knew much of. That long-awaited moment came on 25th November. As long as I live, I shall never forget the stunning beauty of sailing into Sydney Harbour at 6:00am on that glorious morning. After immigration and customs had been cleared we were on our way, by car, to Riverstone. I remember passing Stacey's shop and thinking, "Fancy leaving rotten potatoes in the window", only to find that they were passionfruit. Of course they were new to us.

We soon settled into our new life. We did miss our family, of course, but everyone was kind to us and we were welcomed wherever we went, especially by the congregation of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church. Many of the friendships made then are still enjoyed today. Here I may mention that, a few days after our arrival, Mrs Cecilia Bond called on us in Richards Avenue. She had seen our baggage on Riverstone Station. The Bond family had come to Australia on the *Empire Brent's* previous voyage. Jim worked in the meatworks' tannery at Northmead awaiting the establishment of Villawood Textile Co. We bought a block of land at the top end of Regent Street, and, in April 1950, we moved in to what was to become our home for 45 years. Financial circumstances allowed us to only partly build that home, but it was ours and we were very happy.

Life has had its ups and downs, (whose life hasn't), but I can only sum it up by saying, we have shared life in Riverstone with so many good, kind people that, when we decided to come to Australia, we are glad our destination was Riverstone.



Arrival at Pyrmont in Sydney.

Jim and Maisie Gillespie, Peter Steele, May Steele and Gordon Gillespie (baby).

Photo courtesy of Gordon and Maisie Gillespie.