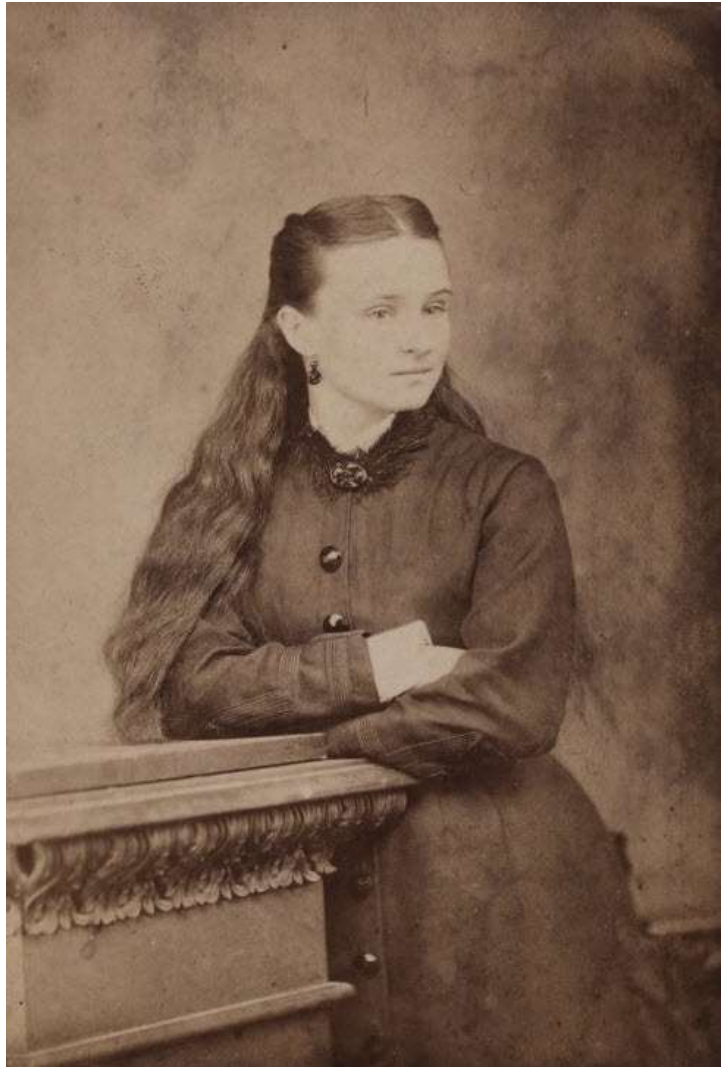


EDITH
DIRCKSEY
COWAN OBE

A compilation of excerpts from informative resources relating to the subject. Please contact the Geraldton Regional Library Heritage Services Team to access complete versions of the featured material.

Compiled by Ben Marsh



Edith Brown later Mrs Edith Cowan, 1876-1877, courtesy State Library of Western Australia.

EARLY LIFE

Born 2 August 1861 at Glengarry on a remote sheep station near Geraldton, Western Australia, Edith Dircksey Cowan (nee Brown), was the second child of Kenneth Brown and his first wife Mary Wittenoom. Edith attended boarding school in Perth, and married James Cowan at the age of 18. When James became a magistrate, Edith gained an insight into the effects of poverty and lack of education on the community.

In the 1890's Edith Cowan became involved in public life, mainly advocating on the behalf of women and children. She promoted compulsory voting as well as better representation and improved education for women. She was influential in the establishment of the King Edward Memorial Hospital for Women in 1916. Cowan campaigned against drunkenness and domestic violence, and encouraged discussion about prostitution, venereal disease, contraception, and sex crimes. In 1920 she was made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire. Cowan's achievements are well documented.

She is best known as the first Australian woman to serve as a member of parliament. The following page looks specifically at Cowan's early years in the Midwest and her family connections to the district. For further reading, please find a selection of references listed at the end of this page.

EARLY LIFE AT GLENGARRY STATION

Paraphrased from *A Unique Position: a biography of Edith Dircksey Cowan 1861 – 1932* by Peter Cowan

Ascending the Victoria Range I discovered patches of better soil, and in passing over a gap of it about 2 miles to the north of Wizard Peak...We then descended lower and lower, following the course of the bed of a mountain stream which led us to Glengarry...The house stands on a table land of 9 or 10 acres at the edge of the bank of the low broad bed of the Greenough at a bend, from whence two small narrow pools are seen, one above and one below the house...The surrounding view is extensive and romantic. (Cowan, p. 23)

In the late 1880's, with federation looming, a large segment of the Western Australian community was opposed to changing the status quo remaining steadfast in its colonial allegiance to Britain. It was in this milieu that Edith Cowan commenced her adult life. In a simple but attractive house, the children of Kenneth and Mary Brown were born, (Blanche Mary Elizabeth on 24 June 1860, and Edith Dircksey on 2 August 1861). On 12 December 1862, their first son Forrest Kenneth was born, followed by Clarence Dirk on 2 September 1864 and Ernest Burdett, who, sadly, died in infancy in 1866.

Meanwhile, Geraldton was beginning to grow, although its location among the sand hills, combined with strong winds made it a somewhat unappealing locale, as described by W. Knight in 1870.

“The town of Geraldton, in Champion Bay, is fast becoming a place of great importance. As a place of residence, it has not much to recommend it, as, in addition to its uninviting aspect, the town is continually subject to the encroachment of loose shifting sand dunes, and the clouds of sand and dust constantly blowing about, are extremely disagreeable, while the intense glare, caused by the bare white ground, is very unpleasant.”

The Browns were neighbours with the Burgeses, the Hamersleys and the Drummonds, and it was them that they were familiar with rather than those in Geraldton. Theirs was a close-knit family community which was beginning to contribute greatly to the colony's wealth and productivity. Although Glengarry was considered one of the colony's best sheep runs, the Brown brothers aspired to expand their land holdings and increase production. (Cowan, p. 33)

Mary Eliza Dircksey Brown was in a good position to teach her children as she had some training and experience as a teacher but would have looked to send them to Perth for later education. Although it is commonly claimed that boys received better education at this time, in reality boys often left school early to commence working. It is true though, that boys were generally taught a wider range of subjects, and girls were traditionally taught to be, and expected to be, teachers. Edith Cowan's complaint of the education in her time was that men had access to further education, whereas women, although not denied further education rarely received it. Her sole comment on her own early education was such. (Cowan, p. 40)

“When I was a child, we were not taught all those wonderful things children are now taught in schools. We had to listen to what we were told and digest it. Readings from the Bible and from the early Greek writers, our elders expounding while we mended our stockings, or sewed our seams, and then questioning us on the subject. We learned Latin with our brothers and did sums on a slate which I oft washed with tears. I would not have it otherwise. (Cowan, p. 41-42)

In September 1868 Mary Brown died giving birth to her sixth child, who also perished, both being buried in the family cemetery at Glengarry. Today, there exists no trace of the graves or the small plot itself. (Cowan, p 42).

A MURDER IN TOWN

Paraphrased from *A Unique Position: a biography of Edith Dircksey Cowan 1861 – 1932* by Peter Cowan, p. 44-46

Edith went to boarding school in Perth the year her mother died, and for her and her sister this was like losing both parents. Kenneth Brown continued working at Glengarry after his wife's death, taking part in the public life of the district. He would speak at public meetings to promote the move towards responsible government. Brown moved to Melbourne in 1872 and married Mary Ann Tindall. They relocated to New Zealand for a short time, returning to Champion Bay in 1875. After a time, people noticed a marked change in Kenneth's behaviour including increasing display of violence towards his wife. It is now suspected that heavy drinking was only part of the cause for his changed persona. It is believed that many of the men involved in the early exploratory expeditions may have suffered various problems due to the extreme heat and lack of water, as well as drinking dirty water and eating rotting food infested with parasites. The results are thought to be kidney damage and brain damage. Some men recovered fully after returning to normal life, however, others were never the same.

Whatever Kenneth's physical and mental state was it led to tragic circumstances. In 1876, after a day of drinking and arguing with his wife, Brown shot her in a fit of rage. All he would say on the matter was that he was ashamed of the disgrace he had brought on his family, and that he would make no excuses for his actions, for him, he

said, “the joy of life had gone long since”. That Edith’s father’s conviction for murder did not deter her from a public life was quite remarkable given the attitudes and conventions of the time.

KENNETH BROWN ESQUIRE

Excerpt from *Messing About in the Mid-West* by Anthony R. Horn, p 74.

The photo below is assumed to be of Kenneth Brown. It was provided by Aidan Kelly of Fremantle who has prepared detailed research notes on the life and times of Kenneth Brown. Mr Kelly sourced the photo from the Royal WA Historical Society photographic Collection. There it is recorded as an unidentified male with the photo coming from the collection of JS Davis of Tibbradden. The photo was taken by Hewitt of Swanston St Melbourne around 1874-75 and was located in the Tibbradden collection amongst other photographs that relate to Kenneth Brown.

At the time of the photograph Kenneth Brown was known to be residing in Melbourne. Based on this and other information, Mr Kelly believes the photo was commissioned to commemorate a wedding, probably that of Kenneth Brown and his second wife Mary Ann Tindall.



Kenneth Brown, courtesy Royal Western Australian Historical Society.

A CRIME SCENE

Excerpt from *Messing About in the Mid-West* by Anthony R. Horn, p. 75-79.

These days we can only marvel at modern technology which allows us to rediscover forgotten historical facts. The 1876 case of Kenneth Brown's (Edith Cowan's father) hearing for murdering his second wife is a good example. By simply inserting a few keywords on the internet we can retrieve digitised newspaper articles with a word for word description of the court case.

Consider the following extractions from the West Australian on the 11th of April 1876.

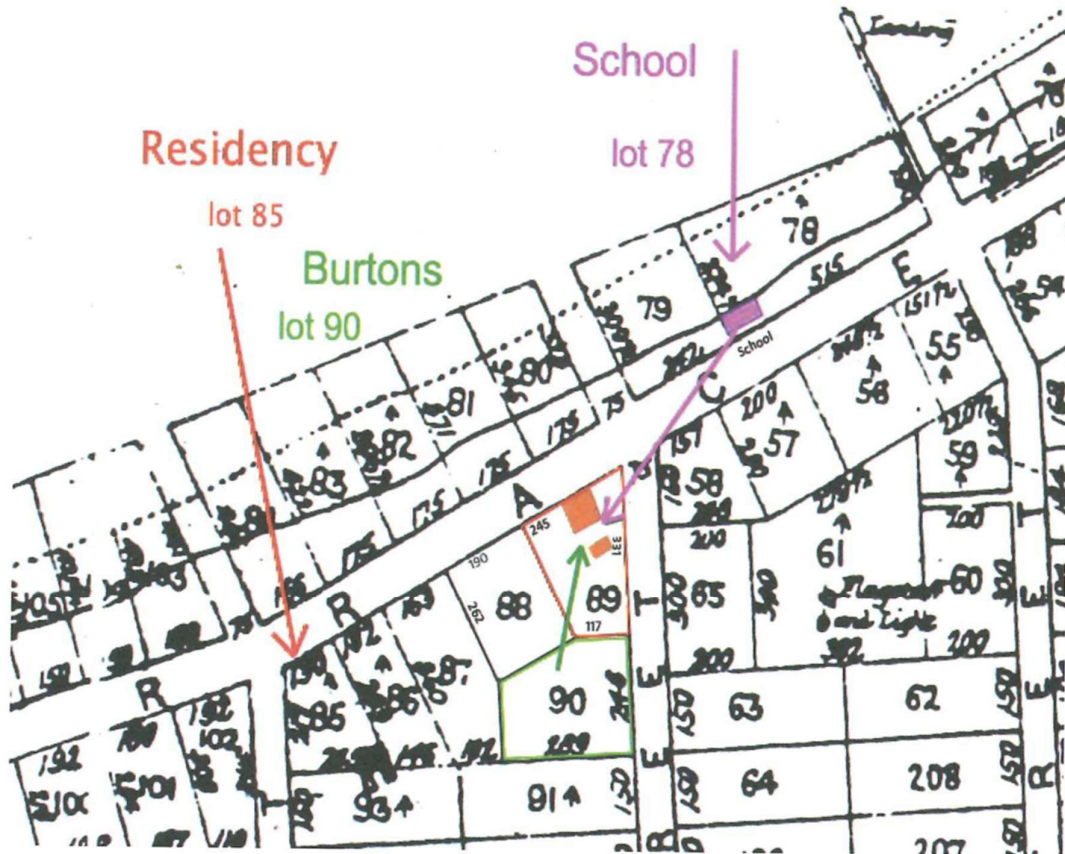
Sic: Marta Burton, sworn, deposed: I live at Geraldton near the house occupied by the prisoner. I could see the back door of prisoner's house from my place. I recollect 3rd January last, about 4 o'clock. I heard a report of a gun. On hearing the report, I ran out to a spot from where I could see the back door of the house. I was about 25 yards away. I saw the prisoner outside the back door in the yard. It is about 14 or 15 yards from the back door to the kitchen. He had the gun raised to his shoulder. He was taking aim. The gun went off.

Another witness, George Cornish stated:

I am a teacher in the Government Boys School. I recollect the afternoon of the 3rd of January I heard a gun go off about 4 o'clock in the afternoon. I looked out of the window from which I could see Brown's yard. The prisoner stood in the middle of the yard. He had a gun levelled to his shoulder. He fired it off. It was about a minute between the two shots. I jumped out of the window and ran over.

From these two witness statements plus an early map and an old photograph, we can readily determine where the action was.

The Burtons were known to have lived at 90 Francis Street and we know where the old boy's school was. The school is the old building now known as the Mission to Seafarers in Marine Terrace. The map shown provides a layout.



Map showing murder scene in orange, lot 89.

The buildings on the corner of lot 58 and clearly visible in the 1913 photos were known to have been there when the incident occurred. They appear on another 1874 map, not shown. These buildings restricted Cornish's view of the Burton's lot 90 from the school. The only back yard visible to both witnesses is that of lot 89. George Cornish clearly states where the shooting occurred in his evidence. Martha Burton's lot 90 was wide enough to see the area between the kitchen and house.

And finally, the 1913 photo taken from the top of an OTC radio mast in Francis Street shows that lot 89 had two buildings (1. And 2.) in the middle of the lot, exactly as described by Martha Burton. The house in the original 1913 photo has a lean-to rear section, not part of the original house. This was a common modification on old houses in later years. It had previously been a fire hazard to have an under-main-roof kitchen with a wood stove and often, shingle roofs. It was also cooler. (Another

example of separate kitchens is visible across the road on the bottom right of the photo. A small building with a large chimney can be seen in the back yard.)

A modified photo shows the house without the added lean-to rear section making the picture appear as it once was adding credence to Marta's statement about the space between house and kitchen.

The house where the crime occurred was eventually demolished to make way for the electrical workshop at 209 Marine Terrace. The shooting occurred on a lot facing Marine Terrace and not Francis Street as previously thought.

Each of the original lots 89 and 90 are now sub-divided into smaller lots with new street numbers. I recently heard that when the original house was demolished, a well was found under the kitchen floor, much to everyone's surprise. This confirms our knowledge that the lean-to kitchen was a later addition and covered the outside well.

The distance from the Geraldton Hotel recorded at the trial also matches the distance to the old lot 89 on the corner of Francis Street.

Oddly enough, one rarely sees street names and certainly no house numbers listed in old newspaper reports. In court cases, witnesses merely state that they saw at someone's house or at a particular business. I suppose the town was so small everyone knew where Tetlow's Pound was or Hosken's Hotel. Street numbers may not have been necessary. It would appear there was no postie or junk mailer buzzing about from gate to gate.

An excerpt from *Edith Cowan – Inspiration for Women Independent MPs* by Adrian Farrell.

The subsequent criminal court cases made news around Australia. Here was a man of considerable means from a respected family with many connections in high places now on a murder charge.

It was difficult to find suitable jurors for the trial, one of the first in the colony as a 'trial by jury' in the Supreme Court. The population of Perth was only around 5,000 at the time, with roughly two-thirds being male.

The Age newspaper in Melbourne gave a long-winded, detailed report and commentary on the evidence presented at the trial:

“[W]hen he [Brown] at length rouses himself to do the fearful deed, he deliberately fires at his victim as she flies shrieking from his presence, and when he perceives the shot is not fatal follows her to her place of retreat, and as she comes out from it and crouches before him in terror points the second barrel of his gun at her head and blows out her brains. All this occurs in open day, in the middle of a town, without any attempt to escape observation, and is proved beyond dispute.” – “The Kenneth Brown Murder in Western Australia,” *The Age*, 26 Jun 1876.

The news report goes on to debate whether a conviction of murder would still be the result even with the overwhelming evidence presented:

Defence, therefore, there was absolutely none, while there was an abundance of aggravating circumstances, one of them being the fact that the poor woman was near her confinement. But the reluctance of the colonists to convict a brother settler and bring disgrace on his connections was known to be so great that an attempt was made to offer such a show of evidence as might give an excuse to a friendly jury for bringing in a verdict of insanity.

The first trial before Chief Justice Burt was aborted after the jury could not reach a verdict. The same thing happened in the second trial. It was only after jurors in the third trial unanimously rejected the defence proposition that Brown was insane that a guilty verdict was reached on 25 May 1876. Brown was sentenced to death and was hanged two weeks later.

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