

# *SAOA Historical Series No 64*

## *John White Mellor (1868-1931)*

### *Part 1, by Penny Paton*

#### **Introduction**

Remembered with every reference to the Little Raven *Corvus mellori*, described in 1912 by Gregory Mathews, John White Mellor was a stalwart of South Australian ornithology in the later years of the nineteenth century and early years of the twentieth. He was a product of two early and distinguished colonial families, the Mellors and the Whites, as his mother was Eliza White (the sister of Samuel White, father of Captain S.A. White) and his father was John Fox Mellor, making J.W. Mellor and S.A. White first cousins. The two families lived in the same vicinity, namely the Reedbeds, the Whites at 'Wetunga' and the Mellors at 'Holmfirth'.

#### **J W Mellor's Ancestors**

To investigate Mellor's ancestors is to understand his private means and some of his passions. His grandfather **Joseph Mellor (1808-1880)** came to South Australia in 1840 from Holmfirth in West Yorkshire with his wife **Mary (née Fox, ca 1808-1873)** and other relatives on the *Fairlie*, and settled initially at Semaphore. Joseph established an agricultural implements works and two of his sons carried on the business as Mellor Brothers, which expanded into other cities and states, but had a chequered history, being finally liquidated in the recession of the mid-1890s. The fourth son, J.W. Mellor's father **John Fox Mellor (1845-1913)**, was briefly involved in the business but turned to farming, buying land at the Reedbeds in the 1870s, and building a

substantial home at Fulham, 'Holmfirth', on the northern side of Henley Beach Road. John Fox Mellor married **Eliza White (1847-1919)** in 1868 at Fulham and they had four sons and two daughters (Photo 1), John White being the eldest. One of their daughters, Barbara, married into another ornithological family when she wed Dr E. B. Nicholls of Melbourne, while the youngest child, Winifred, was reputed to be a competent ornithologist herself. Winifred died suddenly in 1916, at the young age of 31 years.

John Fox Mellor was a man of many interests, including natural history, charitable concerns, music, philanthropy, athletics and religion, and he was a member of the Royal Agricultural and Horticultural Society, the YMCA and the Independent Order of Oddfellows. He was also a member of the Field Naturalists Section (FNS) of the Royal Society of South Australia and kept extensive aviaries at 'Holmfirth'. There were nearly 200 species of birds in the aviaries in 1899 (Blaylock 2000). John Fox Mellor and Mrs



Photo 1 — The Mellor family on the 'Holmfirth' steps ca 1900; L-R, (standing): Barbara, John White; (seated): Winifred, Stanley, Percy, John Fox, Eliza, Charles; the sharp-eyed will see a parrot on Eliza's lap! (From the collection of the State Library of South Australia, PRG 335/109/40)

Mellor hosted the FNS at 'Holmfirth' in March 1899, where they showed off their poultry, parrots, pigeons and pheasants, but there was not time to look at the extensive oological collection of their son, John White Mellor. This was not an isolated occasion, evidenced by a photo showing a FNS outing setting out from 'Holmfirth' in 1909 (Photo 2).



Photo 2 – The Field Naturalists leaving 'Holmfirth' 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1909 in two horse-drawn wagons, Henley Beach Road, Fulham. (From the collection of the State Library of South Australia, PRG 335/109/5)

John White Mellor was influenced in his natural history and conservation pursuits as much by his mother as by his father. S.A. White (1914) tells how his grandfather John White did everything in his power to stifle the love of nature in his children, going to the lengths of destroying William and Samuel's fledgling bird collection when he discovered its hiding place in a hollow tree. He failed, as "nature will out." His only daughter, Eliza, likewise had an abiding and passionate love of nature, no doubt influenced by her two older brothers' interest and knowledge. She was born on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1847 at the Reedbeds and was married at the age of 21 to John Fox Mellor at the Wesleyan Chapel at Fulham built by her father John. She, like her husband, was an active member of the FNS for about 35 years, a foundation member of the Australasian Ornithologists' Union (later the Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union) and attended annual congresses in her home state as well as interstate. The Mellor family property, 'Holmfirth', with its extensive gardens and farmland, was run as a bird sanctuary, an action carried on by their son, John White Mellor, at his various properties.

Eliza's obituary in the *Advertiser* noted that she was an accomplished artist and worked diligently for many charities, including the Jude Benevolent Search Party, in which she raised money and made clothing for the poor. Eliza was also active in the establishment of the local branch of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. When she died in 1919 she was living still at 'Holmfirth', while her son John was in Lockleys ('Mellor Park'), Percy and Stanley were living at Fulham, Charles was resident in Wellington, New Zealand, and Barbara in Melbourne.

### 'Holmfirth'

I have spent many hours researching the exact location and extent of 'Holmfirth', the Mellor property in the Reedbeds, and have been helped greatly by Philippa Horton and others. That such a significant home and grounds could be so little

known less than eighty years after its demolition is confounding, especially as there are many photos in the State Library of South Australia collection. 'Holmfirth' was a substantial two-storey home, with large gardens, a conservatory and extensive aviaries (Photo 3). A hand-drawn map probably from the early 1900s kindly provided by the Henley and



Photo 3 – Eastern view of 'Holmfirth' looking west towards the sea, date uncertain, but Henley Beach Road can just be seen to the left of the house (From the collection of the State Library of South Australia, PRG 335/109/91)

Grange Historical Society shows 'Holmfirth' as the first house west of the Tapleys Hill and Henley Beach Roads intersection on the northern side. The house to its west belonged to Stanley and we know that by 1919 he was living in a separate house to his mother and listed as a gardener in the Sands and McDougall Directory. He continued to be listed at this house until 1933, although his profession was changed to grazier in about 1931. We are unsure who lived in 'Holmfirth' after Eliza's death in 1919; Percival Willingale (Percy) Mellor was the only child still in South Australia apart from Stanley and John (who of course by this time was at 'Mellor Park' up the road in Lockleys). However Percy had set up a property, Willingale Station, named after his maternal grandmother's maiden name, on the east side of Lake Albert, at least by 1913 when his father died (P. Horton pers. comm.). Perhaps 'Holmfirth' was unoccupied unless Percy was visiting from Willingale.



Photo 4 – the four Mellor boys at Fulham, one with a rifle over his shoulder, presumably John, the eldest. (From the collection of the State Library of South Australia, PRG 335/109/12)

There were no more Mellors listed on Henley Beach Road after 1934. Information from John Samuel White via Philippa Horton indicates that 'Holmfirth' may have been sold after Stanley moved (presumably about 1934) but was still standing in 1949. The house must have been demolished about this time as, after the Second World War and the construction of Breakout Creek to minimise the flood risk, much of the Reedbeds' market gardens were subdivided for housing. Stanley died in 1947 and Percy in 1943, when his address was given as the Reedbeds but we do not know exactly where he was living at this time.

There were other relatives' houses nearby too. Captain S.A. White's home and estate 'Wetunga' was just across Tapleys Hill Road to the east, and the two-storey home still exists. At some stage (and possibly in the 1930s with the construction of Breakout Creek) the course of the River Torrens changed – it once crossed Tapleys Hill Road north of Henley Beach Road (now the site of a small creek or drain) and now it crosses it to the south. S.A. White's two uncles, William and Charles, had homes in the

vicinity, Charles on the south-west corner of the Henley Beach and Tapleys Hill Roads intersection and William on the north-west corner, although strangely William's home (now demolished) does not appear on the hand-drawn map. Charles' two-storey home is still standing and used now as part of a retirement village.

### J W Mellor's Family Life

**John White Mellor (1868-1931)** apparently lived at 'Holmfirth' until his marriage in 1913 and as a young boy made extensive ornithological, oological and entomological collections (White 1932). His collections were impressive and shown to Lord and Lady Tennyson during a vice-regal visit to the model colonial farm and property in 1902 (Horton, Black and Blaylock in press). The extensive grounds and family farm would have been a paradise for a youth interested in nature (Photo 4). John Mellor was a member of the Reedbeds Rifle Club, as were his three brothers, attested by a photo of the four boys in uniform and carrying rifles (Photo 5, next page). John was a crack shot and won a South Australian Rifle Challenge Cup in 1920 (Horton, Black and Blaylock in press). Rifle Clubs were common around Australia from the 1860s, when they were mainly the preserve of the well-to-do and varied enormously in strength and military efficiency (Kilsby 2014). In South Australia the Rifle Volunteer Force was rebadged in 1886 as the Volunteer Militia Reserve Force, with the rifle clubs being renamed the Defence Rifle Clubs.





Photo 5 – the four Mellor sons, possibly in the livery of the Reedbeds Rifle Club, ca early 1900s, John (front), Charles (right), Percy (back), Stanley (left). (From the collection of the State Library of South Australia, PRG 335/109/48)

John married **(Elizabeth) Maud Elliott (1886-1951)** in 1913, the year that John Fox Mellor died. Four sons (one dying in infancy) and one daughter were born between 1915 and 1925 (Photo 6). It seems that John and Maud Mellor moved into their new home, 'Mellor Park' in Lockleys in late 1915 as he reports a new house being built in October 1915 (White 1915a). This smaller home, currently the Serene Aged Care Facility, is now in Myzantha Street Lockleys and near Mellor Park, a reserve on Henley Beach Road. In 1915 the house and garden were surrounded by farmland and the estate extended to the River Torrens. In the bird notes of the *South Australian Ornithologist* in the 1920s Mellor mentions birds in captivity at the new house at Lockleys, including Sulphur-crested and Pink Cockatoos. Mellor (Ornithological Notes 1923) stated that, although only a mile separated his former residence from the new house in Lockleys, there were differences in the bird fauna, for example the Tree Martin was common at Fulham but rarer at Lockleys.

*(References will be included in part 2)*



Photo 6 – John White Mellor with his two eldest sons, Reginald (L) and John (R) ca 1923. (From the collection of the State Library of South Australia, PRG 335/109/16)