

# The Icely Family and Coombing Park, near Carcoar

by Ian Jack

The European creation of a viable route from the Cumberland Plain over the Blue Mountains and down to the potential grazing country beyond in 1813-4 was immediately followed by Governor Macquarie's symbolic journey west in 1815 and his declaration of a future town to be named after Lord Bathurst, the Secretary of State for the British Colonies. The development of Bathurst town and the exploitation of the plains around were quite slow, because of political and practical considerations. The 1820s had seen much debate over the nature of desirable settlement beyond the Mountains, over the size of permissible grants and holdings augmented by purchase, over the need for proximity to a service town such as Bathurst, over British preconceptions about agriculture and Australian preoccupations with pastoralism, over the need for capital and the need for labour, free or unfree, and over the tensions between the interests of the colonial government and the demands of the increasing number of free settlers. The 1830s saw the resolution of these various political dilemmas, with a rapid expansion of settlement after the droughts of the later 1820s gave way to more encouraging weather conditions in the west.<sup>1</sup>

Among the newcomers to New South Wales, with comfortable capital assets, was Thomas Icely. Born in Devon in 1797, Icely came to the colony in 1820 as a trader and returned to settle in 1822. His first land grant was in the Bathurst area, 800 hectares (2000 acres) at Saltram in 1823, and he added to this by grant and purchase over the next four years, while continuing in

business in Sydney until 1827.<sup>2</sup> Although Icely stocked Saltram with 1500 merinos and 420 cattle and imported 144 merinos and some cattle from Britain in 1825,<sup>3</sup> the critical stage in Icely's creation of a significant grazing estate as his full-time interest came with the acquisition of land near the Belubula River in 1829 and subsequent years. Icely entered on the land later known as Coombing in October 1831, building up his acreage by purchase and further grant.

As a result, Thomas Icely became a formidably influential landowner in the area where the government town of Carcoar was surveyed at his request in 1839 and developed in 1840-1.<sup>4</sup> Already by 1836 Icely's total landholdings, purchased, granted or in process of being granted around Coombing, exceeded 10,000 hectares (26,527 acres), of which nearly 100 hectares (240 acres) were under cultivation by 'plough or hoe'. He lived at Coombing and took a personal role in guiding the day-to-day development of the property, with the aid of an overseer, who was not a convict. By 1836 there were thirty convicts assigned to Icely's property and in September of that year he asked the authorities for three more. Within a year he had 62 convicts at work at Coombing, assisting in the cultivation of 120 hectares (290 acres) and running sheep and cattle under two free overseers and was seeking five more convicts, but in 1839 the number had declined to fourteen in post, with a request for nine new assignees. The reason for these fluctuations is not clear and figures are not available for other years, but it is noticeable that in 1837 there



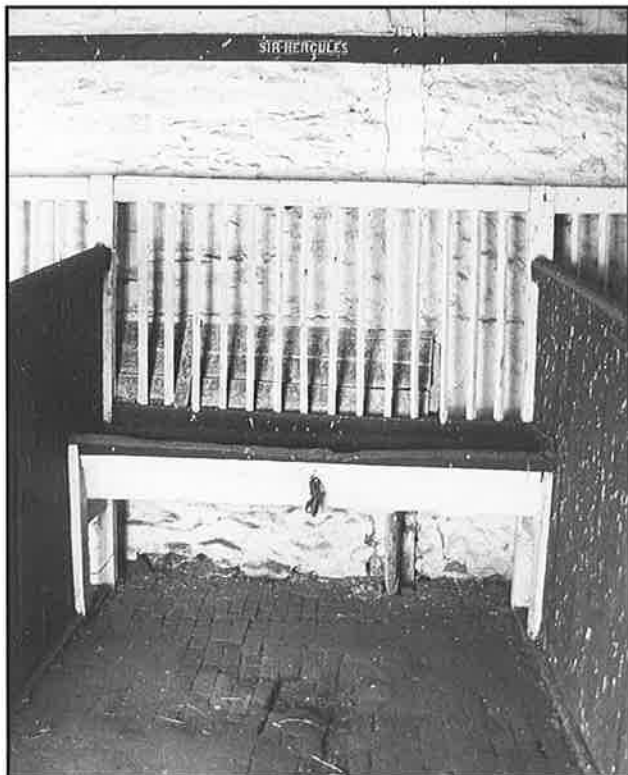
The Icely woolshed today

Photograph by Ian Jack.

were more assigned convicts at Coombing than at any of the other major properties in the entire area from Bathurst to Mudgee or Hartley.<sup>5</sup>

All this activity implied a building program, with a homestead for Icely and his young family: when he was in England in 1830, he had married Charlotte Rothery, the daughter of a naval officer become country squire, and the couple had seven children before Charlotte died in 1843. All the children were baptized in Sydney but Charlotte, born in 1838, died in infancy at Coombing in March 1839. This is the first documentary evidence which suggests firmly that a homestead had been erected in the 1830s. Mrs Icely's two brothers, Frederick and William Rothery, also came to New South Wales with capital and in the 1830s established the significant grazing property of Cliefden not far from Coombing.<sup>6</sup>

Farm outbuildings and huts for the convicts and the overseers must have been built at once, probably in a temporary way which was improved and made more permanent as time passed. Although a number of dates have been confidently assigned to surviving buildings, such as the woolshed, coach-house and so-called Icely cottage, there is no good documentary evidence for the sequence of building and rebuilding. There are, however, two very useful written accounts of Coombing in 1846 and 1850. The later of the descriptions is in a letter from Augustus Mann, the new English overseer, writing back in February 1850 to his wife and children in Coventry. Mann's letter, in a small, flowing hand on cross-hatched pages, is not easy to read, but describes his new environment with some precision:



The stall marked with the name of Thomas Icely's stallion, Sir Hercules, in Coombing Park stables today. Photograph by Ian Jack.

Mr Icely's house is about 1/4 mile (400 metres) from our Huts, which are built of Wood with ground for the Floor on an eminence with a beautiful creek of fresh Water running about 100 yards (100 metres) from our doors. The stables, Wool Shed, Store Rooms, Coach House and Office are in a court. The Farm Yard and Farm Buildings are at back of the Huts and set in the Hill side, but Mr Icely is going to fit up two Rooms adjoining the office for my noble self, one for Bed Room, the other for a private Room of Business for Mr I and myself.<sup>7</sup>

Mann's evidence is complemented by the better known description and sketch by Colonel Mundy, who visited Coombing in 1846, four years before Mann arrived as overseer:

... we joyfully hailed the sight of Mr. Icely's fence. There was a clearing of some two or three hundred acres; an approach through flourishing grain-fields; we left on one hand an extensive range of farm buildings and, driving through a modest white gate and a neat English-like garden - the road lined with shouting tenants, servants and shearers (for the sheep-shearing had commenced), we drew up at the portico of a romantic cottage surrounded by a wide verandah whose columns and eaves were completely overshadowed with climbing roses, honeysuckles and other flowering creepers. The front looks over a garden luxuriant with European flowers and standard fruit-trees oppressed with their glowing produce.<sup>8</sup>

From these written accounts, supplemented by Mundy's excellent sketch, transferred to stone for printing in 1852, it is clear that the homestead, demolished in 1900 but photographed in the 1890s, was well established by the mid-1840s and probably built, at least in part, ten years earlier, with a westerly aspect, at right angles to the present Mansfield house on the same site. Some of the existing outbuildings listed by Mann are shown on Mundy's 1846 drawing, so the complex there dates from the earliest years of the property. The huts for the convict workers lay on the rise to the east of the woolshed, between it and Coombing Creek, probably just above the surviving shearers' accommodation closer to the creek.

Higher up to the north of these huts, beyond the main courtyard, were farmyards, with sheds for cattle and produce. It is quite clear that there was no overseer's cottage still in 1850: the overseer lived, not in Stoke Cottage, but in a hut like the convicts and among them, although the promised new bedroom and office for Mann in 1850 perhaps foreshadows the development of the 'Icely cottage' or some other building in the main courtyard.

The daily routine is vividly captured in Mann's letter:

We have a large Bell ... fixed in a large Gum ... opposite the office ... I ring it sunrise, at this time about 5 o'clock, then again at 8 o'clock for the Men to

go to Breakfast and again at 9 a.m. to work again, at 1 p.m. for dinner and at 2 to continue to work. The men leave off at dusk.<sup>9</sup>

The mixed nature of Icely's farming is very evident, since there was a large element of self-subsistence on all these remote properties: neither the service towns of Bathurst (from 1833), Carcoar (from 1840) or Blayney (from 1843) provided a substitute for home-grown grain, vegetables and meat. In the 1830s the area under cultivation at Coombing reached 110 hectares (290 acres) and Mundy's drawing of 1846 shows neat grain-fields on the ridge immediately south of the homestead. In 1825 Icely had brought out from England a threshing machine and a horse-powered flour-mill.<sup>10</sup> These were probably transferred to Coombing in the 1830s and the wooden gears surviving in Coombing coach-house may belong to the 1825 mill: certainly they are evidence of continuing subsistence agriculture in the Icely period, alongside grazing. By 1846, according to Mundy, there were 25,000 sheep, 3000 cattle and 300 horses on the property.<sup>11</sup> These descriptions, moreover, come from the period of deep rural depression in the 1840s: as Dr Cable observes, Icely was 'a landowner with a belief in orderly and scientific development [who] did not suffer from the depression of the early 1840s as much as many of his fellows'.<sup>12</sup>

Like the Whitneys who succeeded the Icely family at Coombing, Thomas Icely was keenly interested in breeding fine cattle. Mundy praises Icely's 'Durham bulls, for which the owner had paid large sums - 100l. and 200l. in England' and 'he made type history in Australia in his selection of Shorthorn cattle'.<sup>13</sup>

Icely was also a prominent breeder of thoroughbred horses, both for the domestic racing market and for the Indian army, where 'Walers' were at various periods of the nineteenth century a major import from Australia. His outstanding stock at his earlier Blacktown property of Bungarabee was transferred to Coombing in the 1830s: already by 1839 he was selling in Bathurst 83 two-year-olds and fillies which he had bred at Coombing and Mundy commented on the exceptional quality of Icely's Arab stallion in 1846. In 1844 Icely had been one of the elite group of breeders who dispatched a cargo of 73 horses to Calcutta, where they sold for an average of £80 each.<sup>14</sup>

The stables at Coombing today reflect the fame of some of the stallions of Thomas Icely's time. One stall has the names of Comus I, the Arab stallion praised by Mundy, foaled in 1840 which died in 1856, and its offspring Comus II, which lived from 1853 until 1878, surviving theft in 1863 by two of the Ben Hall group of bushrangers, one of them, Mickey Burke, a former employee on Coombing.<sup>15</sup> Another stall bears the name of Sir Hercules, perhaps the best-known Australian stallion of the mid-nineteenth century.

By the time that Comus II was stolen in 1863, Thomas Icely had ceased to live in the country. He had remarried

in 1856 and had two more children, Louisa, born at Coombing in 1858, and Samuel, born in 1862 at Parramatta, the year in which Thomas and his second wife, Louisa Bartlett, had moved from the country to Parramatta, resident first at Greystanes and then, from 1869 until his death in 1874, as lessee at the Macarthurs' Elizabeth Farm in Parramatta.<sup>16</sup> He left the eldest of his three surviving sons, Thomas Rothery Icely, born in 1832, in charge at Coombing.

Thomas Icely was a hard act to follow. Widely considered 'as the best gentleman of the old settlers - *facile princeps*',<sup>17</sup> the elder Icely had weathered the colony's worst financial difficulties and had been an extremely successful grazier and man of business. Thomas Rothery Icely was not entirely incompetent: Sir Joseph Long Innes described him to Sir Henry Parkes as 'a very capable man,... a shrewd energetic fellow', but, as Long Innes also recognized, 'he has made a sad hash of his own pecuniary affairs' and in 1887 was 'financially quite on his beam ends'.<sup>18</sup> He was never, however, declared bankrupt, which deprives modern researchers from access to the details of his financial shortcomings.

In 1880 Thomas Rothery Icely had been still resident at Coombing, now known as Coombing Park on his embossed notepaper, and he invited Sir Henry Parkes to stay overnight after a banquet in Blayney in May 1880.<sup>19</sup> But in the mid 1870s Icely had been borrowing money from London financiers on a fairly heroic scale and, although he managed to repay a loan of £25,000 in July 1880, he simultaneously entered into another loan from different London aristocratic speculators amounting to £16,000 and within six months, in January 1881, he was obliged to sell Coombing, with the encumbrance of the debt, to Cobb and Co.<sup>20</sup>

He seems to have gone to Sydney to live modestly. The King family still remembers that Sir Kelso King,



Part of the stock-pile of castings of the half-refined copper regulus still beside the smelter site at Coombing Park. Photograph by Ian Jack.

the prominent Sydney businessman, who had been welcomed to Coombing Park by Thomas Rothery Icely when King was a young bank employee in Carcoar in 1873, in turn invited Icely for regular weekend lunches at his Sydney home in the 1880s.<sup>21</sup> Thomas Rothery Icely then rather disappeared from public view, except for a quite useful spell as Visiting Magistrate at Lord Howe Island in 1891.<sup>22</sup> He never married and even his date of death remains elusive. One aspect of his time at Coombing, however, has left extremely important archaeological remains, the copper mines and smelter.

The physical remains of the Geraldine copper mine and the separate site of the copper smelter, with its remarkable stockpile of ingots, are an important feature of Coombing Park in the twenty-first century. Both of these memorials to the copper industry relate to the mid-1870s, in the time of Thomas Rothery Icely. There was, however, a precursor to this phase under Thomas Icely himself, who took a keen interest in the mineral wealth of Coombing during the 1840s and the subsequent gold rush.

In June 1848 the London Assay Office sent a report on copper samples from Coombing collected by Thomas Icely in 1847 or earlier. Icely himself was actively engaged with Sydney business and professional men, including Sir John Darvall and Sir Stuart Donaldson (later the first premier of New South Wales), in starting a company to exploit the deposits of copper.<sup>23</sup> The company did not immediately eventuate, but Icely persevered to some extent. When Augustus Mann came to be overseer in 1850, he described how

We have a Mine on the Estate where Mr Icely has found Gold and very soon he intends working it so that there is no knowing what may ultimately occur.<sup>24</sup>

When the newly appointed government geologist, Samuel Stutchbury, inspected Coombing early in 1851, he described how Icely had sunk a shaft vertically for 20 metres (10 fathoms) and then on an incline for a further 20 metres, with horizontal tunnels at the lowest level. A further vertical shaft from that level going down to 60 metres filled with water, which could be controlled by buckets. Soon after Stutchbury's visit in 1851 Icely sank a separate ventilation shaft to the east of the main shaft. There were three lodes visible to Stutchbury, extending onto crown land, just as the 1848 correspondence had noted, and Stutchbury noted that 'these valuable discoveries have excited a good deal of interest in the neighbourhood'.<sup>25</sup>

The Coombing copper venture of 1848-51 was significantly early. The first two copper mines in New South Wales had opened only in 1844-5. Icely would have been well informed about the potential, for one of these foundation mines was on the Lipscombe Pools property of his brother-in-law and near neighbour, William Rothery of Cliefden.<sup>26</sup> There is no evidence, however, that either Icely or the proposed company continued to develop the Coombing copper deposits in the 1850s or 1860s.

An entirely new phase opened in 1875, when Lewis Lloyd, the future copper magnate of Burruga mining and Lithgow smelting, and Sir Saul Samuel, State Treasurer under Robertson and Postmaster General under Parkes, a major figure in many mining ventures, together reopened the copper mines at Coombing, renting two areas of land from Thomas Rothery Icely for £50 a year and paying him royalties on ore raised and sold. Lloyd and Samuel engaged a Cornish captain, C. Strathen, who began work with four miners and his young son in August 1875. Before the end of the year two new shafts were being sunk, one known as Lloyd's and the other as Samuel's. The initial shafts, some 80 metres apart and connected by a drive, were near the homestead, where Thomas Icely had mined from 1848 until 1851, but by February 1876 a survey was being made of the separate leasehold where the Geraldine mine was developed. The tempo increased, with up to ten miners and four labourers at work in 1876. To judge by purchases, access to the shafts and drives was by ladder, while ore was brought up by whip, until a whim was erected in 1877.<sup>27</sup>

The Mining Registrar for Carcoar division reported at the end of 1875 that already about 100 tonnes 'of excellent ore (some of which has assayed over 40 per cent [just as Thomas Icely's ore had assayed in London in 1848]) is now at grass'. The reopening of the copper mine coincided with a gold rush to Mandurama and Thomas Rothery Icely threw his estate open to gold miners in January 1876: thousands came but only fifty remained by the end of February. Nonetheless the scent of gold fever encouraged the search for copper and in particular seems to have encouraged Icely to speculative follies in the copper fields of Cobar in the late 1870s.<sup>28</sup>

Lloyd and Samuel continued to invest at Coombing. They were both aware of the potential advantages of partly smelting the copper to regulus at the mine, to diminish the costs of carriage to refining smelters in Lithgow or on the coast. They were aware that the company mining copper at Milburn Creek in the same Carcoar district had recently erected three smelters, so in August 1876 Thomas Evans was engaged as head smelterman at Coombing, £65 were spent on building a furnace and £60 more on bricks, almost certainly for the chimney. This was close to the principal mine and two kilometres from the Geraldine. Buildings erected on the site in 1876-7 included: a charcoal kiln; a shed; a substantial dwelling house, which cost £50; an office; and a powder magazine. Blacksmithing work was done, for a price, by Icely's own blacksmith.

The smelter was staffed by two Welshmen, as might be anticipated: the Cornish specialized in hard-rock mining, the Welsh in smelting throughout South Australia and New South Wales. The two firemen at the smelter were also Welsh, Thomas John and Sam Williams. According to the Mining Registrar, a second smelting furnace was in course of erection in 1876, but there is no indication of this in the company ledger, which is uncommonly comprehensive.<sup>29</sup>

At the Geraldine, which lies two kilometres to the south, close to Fell Timber Road, a very visible mining area today, a shaft was eventually sunk in 1876-7, but open drives and cross-cuts were actively excavated on both the mining areas. Work continued with up to sixteen miners in 1877, although Captain Strathen left in March and was replaced by Captain Penhall, another Cornishman. The Geraldine produced a steady supply of ore, carting up to 20 tonnes a month to the smelter. But Samuel withdrew from the partnership with Lloyd in March 1877, and increasingly the mining was done, not by the captain's men but by tributers, 'miners working on their own account' giving 'the mine owner a proportion of all metal they mined'. As Mike Pearson has commented, this is 'often found in mines where the owner had ceased viable company operations, but where mineral can still be won'.<sup>30</sup> So the sixteen miners of March 1877 shrank to six in April and in May only Captain Penhall remained, with seven named groups of tributers, whose ore was smelted still by Thomas and Henry Evans. Four miners returned to the Lloyd company in June, but two went away in July and none remained in August. Essentially only the smelter remained as a company activity in the latter part of 1877 and in February 1878 the smelterman and the two firemen worked for five days each and then went away, while Thomas Evans stayed on an extra two days to close down the operations. Thereafter the smelter was closed, though a large stock-pile of ingots of copper regulus remained on the site and remains there to this day.<sup>31</sup>

The cost of the enterprise to Samuel and Lloyd was in excess of £5000 in 1876, when the smelter was built. The return to Thomas Rothery Icely was not dramatic: he received £150 for rent of the main mine with the smelter and the Geraldine site and his total royalties over the two years and six months were only £33.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the lack of success of the Coombing copper venture, Thomas Rothery Icely is said to have had a gambler's enthusiasm for mining ventures and to have squandered the family fortune on investment in copper enterprises at Cobar. There were numerous companies at Cobar in the later 1870s, not all successful, and it is possible, even likely, that Icely invested unwisely. It has not proved possible to document his investments, but it is likely that his failure to retain his substantial patrimony was due to wider financial ineptitude than simple investment in Cobar mines, for he failed to live within his means even after he had realized the unencumbered value of Coombing estate by selling to Cobb and Co in 1881.

With the dissolution of the Cobb and Co. partnership in the 1890s, Coombing Park passed to the widow of one of three last partners, Bella Whitney, and under her formidable authority the great pastoral property recovered its eminence and also gained fame as the supplier of iron ore to the Lithgow Blast Furnace under Sandford and Hoskins. Since the Whitneys took over Coombing with all its contents and equipment from the Icelys, the moveable heritage of the estate today is of extraordinary importance and evidential value for the

entire 170 years of development under only two families.

- <sup>1</sup> D.N. Jeans, *An Historical Geography of New South Wales*, Artarmon, 1972. pp. 105-127
- <sup>2</sup> K.J. Cable, 'Icely, Thomas (1797-1874)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 2, Carlton, 1967. p.1
- <sup>3</sup> W.A. Steel, 'History of Carcoar', *Journal of Royal Australian Historical Society*, 17, 1932. p.250
- <sup>4</sup> Steel, 'History of Carcoar', pp. 250-259; Carcoar and District Historical Society, *Carcoar: a History of Carcoar and District*, Carcoar, 1971. p.1
- <sup>5</sup> State Records NSW, Bathurst Magistrates Convict Returns, 1836-1839, 4/7554. pp.21-22, 37-38, 53-54
- <sup>6</sup> Cable, 'Icely, Thomas', p.2; Steel, 'History of Carcoar', pp.274-275
- <sup>7</sup> Letters of Augustus Mann, ML, A 3030. p.32
- <sup>8</sup> G.C. Mundy, *Our Antipodes: or, Residence and Rambles in the Australasian Colonies with a Glimpse of the Gold Fields*, 2nd ed., London, 1852. Vol. I p.273
- <sup>9</sup> Mitchell Library, A 3030, p.32
- <sup>10</sup> Steel, 'History of Carcoar', p.250
- <sup>11</sup> Mundy, *Our Antipodes*, Vol.I p.293
- <sup>12</sup> Cable, 'Icely, Thomas', p.1
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*; Mundy, *Our Antipodes*, Vol.1 p.294
- <sup>14</sup> Steel, 'History of Carcoar', p.271; Mundy, *Our Antipodes*, Vol.I p.294; A.T. Yarwood, *Walers: Australian Horses Abroad*, Carlton, 1989. p.56
- <sup>15</sup> B.Ledger and K.Guerin, *Bushranging around Carcoar*, Orange, 1972. pp.8-10
- <sup>16</sup> Cable, 'Icely, Thomas', p.2; Registers of Births, Deaths and Marriages
- <sup>17</sup> Hamilton to Deas Thomson, quoted in Cable, 'Icely, Thomas', p.1
- <sup>18</sup> Sir Henry Parkes Correspondence, ML, A 923. pp. 747-748
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, A 889. pp.373, 374
- <sup>20</sup> Coombing Park Archives, 'Abstract of Title ...to the Township of Mandurama', 1889
- <sup>21</sup> Information from Berkeley King of Coombing Park
- <sup>22</sup> Parkes Correspondence, ML, A 889. pp. 365-371, 375
- <sup>23</sup> Norton Smith Deposit, Darvall Papers, ML, A 5436, folder marked 'Ulongola Mine'
- <sup>24</sup> Mann letters, Mitchell Library, A 3030, p.32
- <sup>25</sup> S. Stutchbury, 'Papers relative to Geological Survey', *Votes and Proceedings, Legislative Council of New South Wales*, 1851, 2nd session, Vol.II, pp.259-26
- <sup>26</sup> J.E. Carne, *The Copper-Mining Industry and the Distribution of Copper Ores in New South Wales*, Department of Mines, Geological Survey, Mineral Resources 6, Sydney, 2nd ed. 1908. p.6
- <sup>27</sup> Coombing Copper Mine Ledger, Whitney Pastoral Co. Papers, ML, A 5298; *Carcoar Chronicle*, 1 July 1876, reprinted in a later issue of the newspaper surviving only in a cutting in Carcoar Museum, courtesy of Carl Purcell.
- <sup>28</sup> Department of Mines, *Annual Report*. 1876. pp. 37-38, 76
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p.77; Coombing Copper Mine Ledger, ML, A 5298
- <sup>30</sup> M. Pearson and B. McGowan, *Mining Heritage Places Assessment Manual*, Canberra, 2000. p.113
- <sup>31</sup> Coombing Copper Mine Ledger, ML, A 5298
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*