

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2021

2121 Mrs Bebtzen's Walnut Workbox

By Sue Bulbrook

Mrs Bentzen's Walnut Workbox



I suspect my workbox, photographed here, has known its history for almost 150 years. Whilst recently researching my Bentzen family, I unexpectedly discovered an 1873 Illawarra Mercury newspaper articleⁱ describing my very workbox as a “very elegant walnut workbox”ⁱⁱ. This fortuitous find has caused excitement in my family, as the stories of both Mrs Bentzen and her walnut workbox have been unintentionally overlooked. There is beauty in the box itself, particularly the mother-of-pearl decorations. However, it is Mrs Bentzen’s hands and seemingly gentle natureⁱⁱⁱ that have given rise to this story.

In 1873 Mrs Syrena Bentzen accepted a gift, “a slight souvenir of our affection”^{iv} because she and her husband were to leave the Church of England Wollongong School and move to Rylstone, near Bathurst. Mr Bentzen had been the teacher at the school, but he was to become a Curate in the Bathurst Diocese of the Church of England^v. The Wollongong families were saddened to see them leave, particularly as Mrs Bentzen had assisted with sewing instruction in the school. The parents and children gave my walnut box to her, accompanied by beautiful sentiments and speeches. The newspaper article describes a memorable farewell.^{vi}

Leaving Wollongong, Mrs Bentzen filled her workbox with sewing notions and moved to Rylstone. In 1875 Mr Bentzen was ordained as a Priest to serve at the Church of England in Rylstone.^{vii} The Bentzen family moved to Rylstone with no less than seven children^{viii}. The eldest, born in 1859 and named William Rudolph^{ix}, is my great grandfather. It is reasonable to suppose Mrs Bentzen was a busy sewer and you can imagine the weekly mending she had to contend with. Two more children were born at Rylstone^x, where Mrs Bentzen and her workbox were constantly together. In 1879 the Reverend HTA Bentzen was asked to act as “locum tenens” at St John the Baptist Church in Mudgee and became the incumbent minister the same year^{xi}.

And so, Mrs Bentzen, her family, and her walnut workbox moved to Mudgee. She formed wonderful friendships among the families in Mudgee and was considered an active church worker^{xii}. As a teenager, Mrs Bentzen had learned skills as a servant in her English home^{xiii} county of Somerset^{xiv}, however the skills taught and practised during her voyage as an assisted immigrant^{xv} to the colony of New South Wales proved invaluable. The 1857 *Herefordshire's Matron's Work Book*, kept faithfully by Matron Kentish, details the reading, writing and sewing that was deemed imperative by the British Ladies' Female Emigrant Society^{xvi}. I speculate that these learned skills enabled her to work confidently in the Mudgee Parsonage and Parish, as the minister's wife.

Grief struck the Bentzen household when Mrs Syrena Bentzen died in 1892^{xvii}, at not quite sixty years old. She was held in high esteem within the church family and the Women's Guild placed a stained glass memorial window in the Mudgee church in her honour. It still looks beautiful today and complements the stained glass window memorialising her husband, HTA Bentzen.^{xviii}

The Venerable Reverend HTA Bentzen remarried in November 1893 and Miss Emily Jane Rouse became the Reverend's second wife^{xix}—a second Mrs Bentzen to care for my workbox. However, sorrow quickly filled the Mudgee Parsonage again when the Reverend died, just three months later^{xx}. The grieving Mrs Bentzen moved into Mortimer Street, Mudgee,^{xxi} along with some of her stepchildren, namely Thirza and Sigward Bentzen^{xxii}.

Mrs Bentzen's (Emily Jane) death^{xxiii} in 1934 resulted in another move for my walnut workbox. This move was to Sydney and Thirza safeguarded the walnut workbox inside her cedar chest.

When Thirza Bentzen died in 1945^{xxiv}, my mother—who was born a Bentzen and is great granddaughter to Syrena Bentzen—remembers my workbox arriving in her Campsie family home, some time after the Second World War. Mrs Bentzen's walnut workbox was extracted from its cedar custodian^{xxv} and placed into gentle hands. These hands belonged to another Mrs Bentzen, a Dorothy Hester^{xxvi}. I remember seeing this Mrs Bentzen (my grandmother) using the elegant workbox for her particular sewing purposes.

As the current carer of Mrs Bentzen's workbox, I am obliged to treasure its beauty but, more importantly, to capture its story, the story of Mrs Bentzen and her walnut workbox.

ⁱ <https://trove.nla.gov.au/search/category/newspapers?keyword=bentzen&l-state=New%20South%20Wales&l-decade=187&l-title=669> Illawarra Mercury, 4 Nov 1873

ⁱⁱ <https://trove.nla.gov.au/search/category/newspapers?keyword=bentzen&l-state=New%20South%20Wales&l-decade=187&l-title=669> Illawarra Mercury, 4 Nov 1873

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/62726847?searchTerm=bentzen>

^{iv} <https://trove.nla.gov.au/search/category/newspapers?keyword=bentzen&l-state=New%20South%20Wales&l-decade=187&l-title=669> Illawarra Mercury, 4 Nov 1873

^v <https://trove.nla.gov.au/search/category/newspapers?keyword=bentzen&l-state=New%20South%20Wales&l-decade=187&l-title=669> Illawarra Mercury, 4 Nov 1873

^{vi} [https://trove.nla.gov.au, Evening News \(Sydney, NSW: 1864-1931\)/ Wed 24 Jan 1894/ page.4](https://trove.nla.gov.au, Evening News (Sydney, NSW: 1864-1931)/ Wed 24 Jan 1894/ page.4)

^{vii} [https://trove.nla.gov.au, Evening News \(Sydney, NSW: 1864-1931\)/ Wed 24 Jan 1894/ page.4](https://trove.nla.gov.au, Evening News (Sydney, NSW: 1864-1931)/ Wed 24 Jan 1894/ page.4)

^{viii} William Rudolph, Thirza Eliza, Thorvald Sigward, Eva Dagmar, Albert A, Victor Valdemur, Adolph Sigward (original birth certificates held in family)

^{ix} NSW BDM #2542/1859 Balmain, William Rudolph Bentzen

^x Violet Victoria NSW BDM #19262/1875; Claude HJ NSW BDM #20235/1877

^{xi} 125 Years of Parish Life, St John the Baptist Church, Mudgee, published by church 1966

^{xii} <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/162179631?searchTerm=bentzen> Sat 4 Jun 1892, The Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser

^{xiii} https://www.ancestrylibrary.com.au/search/categories/34/?name=cyrena_harris&birth=1832 Syrena Bentzen, nee Harris, born 30 Dec 1832, South Petherton, Somerset, England

^{xiv} <https://www.ancestry.com.au> 1851 English Census, Syrena (misspelt "Lyrena") is listed as a servant in the Hurd household, Seavington St Mary, Somerset

^{xv} http://indexes.records.nsw.gov.au/ebook/list.aspx?series=NRS5316&item=4_4793&ship=Herefordshire NSW State Archives, Index to Assisted Immigrants Arriving Sydney and Newcastle, 1844-59

^{xvi} Matron's Work Book, sighted by author at NSW State Archives Kingswood, NRS-5239-3-[9/6213], 1857 papers

^{xvii} NSW BDM, #8622/1892 Mudgee, Syrena Bentzen death 26th May, 1892, Mudgee

^{xviii} From St John the Baptist Church, Mudgee, Window booklet held by author. Mrs Syrena Bentzen is window #6, Archdeacon HTA Bentzen is window #8.

^{xix} NSW BDM 4994/1893 Bentzen marriage to Rouse (original held by family)

^{xx} NSW BDM 8733/1894, HTA Bentzen death 23rd January, 1894, Mudgee

^{xxi} <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com.au> Electoral Rolls, 1903-1980

^{xxii} <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com.au> Electoral Rolls, 1903-1980

xxiii NSWBDM #11059/1934 Emily Jane Bentzen death 5th May 1934 Mudgee

xxiv NSWBDM #14362/1945 Thirza Eliza Bentzen death 12th July 1945 Lewisham

xxv Oral history, Mrs Maureen Dagmar Upfold (nee Bentzen), January 2021 at Pennant Hills, NSW

xxvi NSWBDM #17010/1929, Hurstville Dorothy Hester Smith married Thorvald Alexander Bentzen (original held in family)