

## The Tragic death of John and Sarah Blanch

Sarah Blanch was a younger sister of Mary Martin (Witt), and was married to John Blanch. Sarah and John accompanied William to Tasmania in 1836 and were later joined there by Mary and her husband James Martin and their four children.

"John & Sarah (WITT) BLANCH emigrated to Van Dieman's Land (Tasmania) in 1836, accompanied by their son John. Another son, William Harnet BLANCH, was born during the long sea voyage. All survived the journey. They were also accompanied by Sarah's brother William WITT, with his wife Harriet and daughter Alice."

Sarah died in an awful explosion in Melbourne, Dec 1839. There are a number of accounts of the tragedy.

This one was published in a newsletter of the Port Phillip Pioneers' Group.

The tragic death of John & Sarah Blanch, 1839

<http://home.vicnet.net.au/~pioneers/pppg5r.htm>

An article from the Newsletter of the [Port Phillip Pioneers' Group Inc](#), Melbourne, Australia. It is reproduced in it's entirety here...

This is a report from a primary source, written at the time.

### **SHE ARRIVED WITH A BANG**

On December 16th, 1839, Jane Mortimer, aged 8, arrived at Port Phillip from Hobart Town with her family. The occasion was marked by a terrible explosion.

*We had cousins living in Market Street, Melbourne, Mr. and Mrs. John Blanch and their three children John, William and Ann Eleanor. He was a gunmaker. Mother and we girls were to stay with them until our house was finished.*

*But the very day we were leaving the vessel their house was blown up and quite destroyed, the roof being thrown into the street. Mrs. Blanch was in the sitting room sewing when one wall fell on her, killing her instantly. Mr. Blanch lingered until one o'clock in the morning. Father being in town was able to be with him and sent a message by boat to us in the bay telling us not to come up.*

*Fortunately, their children were out with the nurse. The two assistants were injured, one very severely - it was many months before he was well, but the man who did the mischief was not hurt.*

*He was getting some caps to fit his gun, and fired it off in the shop, thinking it was not loaded. It went into a barrel of gunpowder, hence the explosion. So we remained on board as long as possible.*

*We came up in boats, I do not remember what time we left the vessel, but it was twilight when we reached the landing place. It was such a pretty river, the water clear and clean with ti-tree to the water's edge on the south side and on the north lovely little wattle trees and bushes, but the mosquitoes were something to remember.*

Sarah's brother William was not present, but he remembers this in his memoirs:

*Decr 27th. This day has been one of great trouble and affliction, in hearing of the awful death of our dear Sister Sarah, and of her husband, John Blanch, (Melbourne, P.Philip) their house being blown up by Gunpowder, which accident happened, on the 17th of this month, the three dear children were out at the time, with the nurse.*

*Severe and sudden as this stroke is, the Lord has wonderfully supported me under it; I now feel and prove, that religion, is not a cunningly devised fable; but, that it is my only refuge and consolation, strength and grace, is given me in rich abundance, so that I shall not sink under the accumulated weight of sorrow. O God my heavenly Father, may this awful visitation of thy Providence, be sanctified to every member of our families, especially to the unconverted; so that we may make sure work for Eternity, through our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Another First person account is from an observer named David Wilson Virtue, in an account of "My Life", In this extract, he writes:

*Shortly after this, another event of a very painful character occurred. The shop of a Mr Blanch, a dealer in fire arms and ammunition, situated in the Market Square, blew up. The report was awful, and the sky was darkened with dust, and presently, guns, pistols, pieces of brick and wood began to fall in Collins Street opposite our door. After recovering from the shock I ran with others to the scene of the explosion, and found the building completely demolished, and level with the ground. Rev. Mr Blanch, with his wife and nurse girl were underneath, as also two men, new arrivals. One of these had caused the accident by snapping his towling piece, which he thought was empty when it was loaded. The contents struck a stack of tins of gunpowder. Mrs Blanch and the nurse girl were dead when extricated. Her husband and the two other men died the following day. I followed the funeral of the fire to the grave. The service was conducted by the Rev Mr Davis, Church of England, in a very solemn impressive manner, the tears running down the cheeks of the good man, while he spoke.*

This is an extract from the website of (Marist) Brother Tony Butler:

*They [Alexander Bishop Butler, his wife Charlotte Selina (Mortimer), and 6 children] arrived in Port Phillip, Monday 16 December, and no sooner had they arrived than tragedy struck. John Blanch, son of Henry William and Charlotte Selina's sister Ann Eleanor, aged 26, (John had been a signatory of the 7 October 1839 letter of welcome to Governor LaTrobe in The Port Phillip Patriot,) and his wife Sarah, aged 22, were blown up in an explosion in his gunsmith's shop in Market Street, Tuesday 17 December. About four in the afternoon of Tuesday the shop and warehouse of Mr. Blanch, the gunmaker, blew up from the ignition of a large quantity of powder, causing the total destruction of the building itself and involving, in one horrible scene of death and anguish, the unfortunate inmates of the house. Two passengers, lately arrived by the Westminster, in passing Mr. Blanch's "Emporium", dropped in with the usual design of customers, one holding a gun in his hand imprudently fired off a cap; the gun was loaded and discharged itself into a quantity of powder lying loose in the shop; above was a large square box filled with the same destructive material. ... Hundreds of persons immediately rushed to the scene while a few dragged from amidst the charred and smoking ruins the body of a female; her whole form, scorched and withered, was denuded of every particle of clothing except the fragment of a shoe that remained on the right foot. The parties were bearing the mangled figure over to the house of Dr. Cussens, but seeing life became extinct after a slight convulsion of the limbs, it was carried to Mr. Lilly's rooms. Mr. Blanch himself was taken to Mr. Cotter's surgery, where after lingering in great torture, but sensible to the last, he died at 10 this morning. Of the surviving two, neither it is expected will survive the injuries received; their names are Henry Griffin and Charles Deering. ...*

*The funeral of Mr. and Mrs. Blanch will take place this afternoon at four o'clock when all persons are invited to attend the remains to their last melancholy home. Their three children, John, William Harnett and Ann Eleanor, were out walking with their maid when the accident occurred. There is no mention of them - or of their recently arrived relatives - in the newspaper account. Henry William Mortimer had intended that his wife and younger children should stay with the already established Blanch family, but their deaths put paid to that idea. Instead, Mortimer moved into Flinders Lane and reared the three Blanch children with his own.*

Additional Information on John Blanch's family:

<http://www.jblanchdatabase.co.uk/history.htm>

A Brief History of J Blanch & Son, part of a site dedicated to [John Blanch & Son, Gunmakers](#) by Toby Barclay. The John Blanch who married Sarah Witt was the son of the first John Blanch. The history is illustrated with some interesting photos of trade labels, etc. Photos of the actual guns can be found elsewhere at the site.