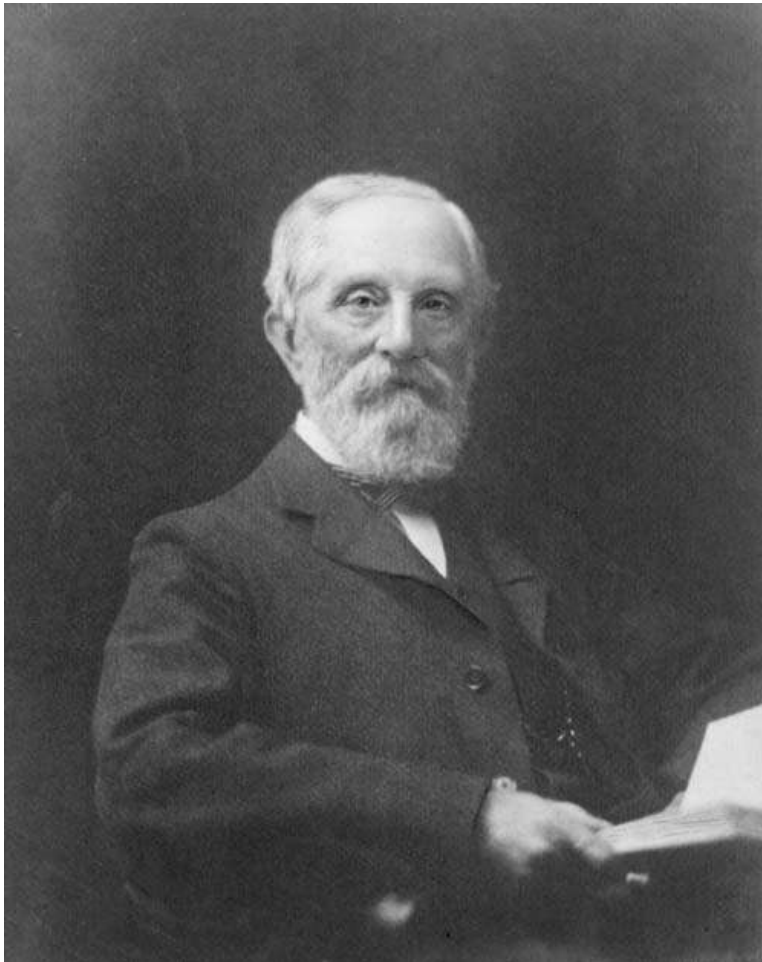


THEY MADE THEIR MARK**SIR JOHN HALL FARMER, STATESMAN AND EMANCIPATOR**

*Photo : Dictionary of New Zealand
Biography*

Think of those great pioneers of the campaign to win women the vote, and the chances are that you think of the suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst who founded the Women's Social and Political Union - dedicated to 'deeds not words' - in 1903, or her daughter, the increasingly militant Christabel. Or perhaps you think of Emily Davidson, who died when she stepped in front of the King's horse at the 1913 Epsom Derby. Chances are

that you won't think of a bewhiskered, austere looking Victorian gentleman who was born in Hull shortly before the Christmas of 1824. But perhaps you should.

John Hall was fourth of the five children of George – a naval captain - and Grace Hall. By the time John was born his father was a well to do shipowner and had become one of the Master Brethren of Hull Trinity House and its Warden in 1841. At the age of six John was sent to a small local school, and then to a boys' boarding school at North Ferriby run by Dissenters – mostly moderate Puritans or Presbyterians who refused to conform to the Church of England. George arranged for all three of his sons to be partly educated abroad, and after North Ferriby John continued his education in Switzerland, Paris and Hamburg. Unlike his two older brothers he did not follow his father into a seafaring career, working instead in the London office of a German merchant before joining the General Post Office in 1845, working his way up to be private secretary to the permanent head of the organisation.

Naturally conservative, John was opposed to the Chartist mass demonstration at Kennington in South London in 1848. Chartism was a working class movement which demanded various democratic reforms such as universal manhood suffrage and voting by secret ballot. The idea was that a huge crowd would march from Kennington to Westminster there to deliver an enormous petition to government. The authorities, who clearly regarded this demonstration as seriously subversive, organised a massive response headed by the ageing Duke of Wellington, involving cannon stationed close to Buckingham Palace, thousands of cavalry and infantry, and steamboats on the Thames to move troops quickly to trouble spots. Some 170,000 citizens were sworn in as special Constables to assist the police, including John Hall. He was in good company. Other Specials included William Gladstone, Sir Robert Peel and even Prince Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, the future Napoleon III. The demonstration, incidentally, turned out to be a total failure. Far fewer Chartists than expected turned up and the police simply refused to allow those that did to cross the River Thames. Finally the Chartist leader and the petition were sent to Westminster in three hansom cabs while the rest of the demonstrators drifted away in pouring rain. The experience, though, was perhaps to be relevant much later in Hall's career.

After he was passed over for the appointment of Chief Postmaster in Brighton, John decided on a very different career. He was fascinated by a book he'd read on sheep farming and was attracted by the opportunities offered by the Canterbury Association which supported the development of the Canterbury region of New Zealand by encouraging immigration from Great Britain and Ireland. John managed to persuade his two brothers to join him in a new venture, and voyaged to New Zealand in 1852, the two brothers – Thomas and George - following him later that year. Thomas had a particularly eventful voyage – his ship caught fire when in Australian waters and he was commended for his bravery in volunteering to move the contents of the powder magazine to safety. John acquired the Rakaia Terrace Station where the brothers successfully ran sheep, soon proving themselves astute businessmen in the buying and selling of property as well. In 1891 the property was valued at over £94,000, around £10,000,000 in today's money.

A devout Anglican, John was attracted by the religious ideals of the settlement at Canterbury, but also became interested in local politics. He was elected to the Canterbury Provincial Council in 1853, later becoming its first Council Chairman before being elected to the Second New Zealand Parliament in 1856. He returned home for a couple of years in 1860 though, during which time he married his brother George's sister in law - Mary Dryden - at Holy Trinity Church in Hull. Her father was an attorney who was at one time the partner of the lawyer John Rollitt but at one stage also owned the Duke of Cumberland public house in Cottingham.

Back in New Zealand – this time with Mary at his side – John renewed his political career, becoming Mayor of Christchurch in 1863 and soon re-entering Parliament. Despite indifferent health he must have been an effective politician because he rose quickly in government becoming Prime Minister in 1879, holding the post for about three years. He was then knighted and retired from politics, taking an extended tour of England and Europe before returning to New Zealand by way of Canada and America. Even now though he couldn't let politics go and once again stood successfully for Parliament in 1887.

Sir John's record as a farmer, businessman and politician is impressive enough, but he would not enjoy the renown he does had he not taken up the cause of women's suffrage. Throughout much of the nineteenth century women did not have the vote anywhere in the world, but there was a growing movement in favour of their enfranchisement. Sir John's support was partly for pragmatic reasons – he had opposed the Chartist movement and their radical demands such as extending the right to vote to more men, and thought that granting the vote to women would soften the radical nature of New Zealand politics. But he had also come to realise that female suffrage was right in principle and spoke forcefully for its adoption as early as 1878. In the late 1880s, during his final spell in Parliament, he was approached by Kate Sheppard, who led New Zealand's female suffrage movement, to become their champion in Parliament, a role he gladly accepted. He convinced the movement's leaders to start a petition amongst New Zealand women demanding the vote, and personally presented it to Parliament in 1893. He made a great spectacle of it. *New Zealand History* tells us that the petition was glued together to form a continuous sheet, rolled around a broomstick and brought into the House in a wheelbarrow. Hall unrolled it down the aisle of the chamber until it thumped against the far wall. The theatricality paid off and Hall was able to steer his bill through Parliament, proudly making New Zealand the first country in the world to give women the vote.

It was his last great political act. He retired from Parliament and devoted much of the rest of his life to the Anglican church, although he did become Honorary Mayor of Christchurch for the International Exhibition of 1906-7. He died shortly afterwards at home in Christchurch at the age of 82 and is now widely remembered as the conservative opponent of Chartism who went on to spearhead the introduction of votes for women.

Don Knibb 31 August 2024