

Gladys with Rodney, Grandma Mary Aston holding David (about 1924) at their Waikaretu home



Shearing time: Clyde (centre) with two of his boys playing on the fence



WRAF Lt Gladys Tighe

## 1920 From Finishing School To Waikaretu

### Gladys Aston – pioneer too busy to stand for parliament

Waikaretu in 1920 was the back of beyond – an isolated place with a single, often impassable, unmetalled road to connect it with the outside world, no power, no telephone and no school. It was a long way from the high society of Sydney, the Paris fashion houses and a finishing school in Belgium. But this was where Clyde Aston brought his new bride Gladys – to a tiny cottage that had been the Mission House. Gladys and Clyde would raise six sons there and as the small settlement grew, Gladys' privileged upbringing was to prove no obstacle for this remarkable pioneering woman.

Gladys was born the eldest daughter of Arthur and Rosa Tighe on 16 Feb 1889 in Waratah, New South Wales. She had one sister, Norah, who was also born in Waratah.

Gladys and Norah's grandfather, Atkinson A. P. Tighe was a very well-to-do and prominent person in Newcastle, NSW, the first mayor of Newcastle and the local magistrate. Tighe's Hill, a suburb in Newcastle, was named after him and he owned several properties around Tighe's Hill.

It is not clear what Gladys' father, Arthur, actually did, but whenever he had money they lived very well, with a large home,

servants, cooks, gardeners and horses and carriages for them all. But when there wasn't any money, they all went to live with Atkinson.

Arthur, Rosa and their girls travelled extensively around Europe and UK, returning to Australia whenever funds got low. They also took the two girls on trips abroad, with their two unmarried aunts often taking them to Paris to buy their clothes.

Early in the 1900s Gladys and Norah were taken to England by their parents and placed in boarding schools while their parents travelled. Reflecting her social standing and custom of the time, Gladys attended a finishing school in Belgium. She later attended German language lessons at the Heidelberg University in Germany. Gladys became very fluent in French and had a reasonable 'handle' on the German language, but said that she "found German much more difficult than French".

Between Aug 1918 and July 1919 Gladys was in the WRAF (Women's Royal Air Force) in England, rising to the rank of Lieutenant and appointed as a Deputy Administrator. Her role included working as an interpreter and a driver. Rosemary Aston, Gladys grand daughter recalls: "I can remember her telling me that when she first went into the Air Force they didn't have women's uniforms and they had to wear Army uniforms until they were given their proper uniforms. One of her jobs was to attend court on Monday mornings to get all the girls out of the lockup after their 'boozy' weekends as they were needed back at the ammunition factories for the war effort. Gladys had an uncle, Henry 'Harry' Tighe, who was a very well-known writer/director who lived in London, so she did have family she could go to while she was there."

Each time a wedding was planned a telegram was rushed off to Gladys to come back to New Zealand. She attended her mother's second marriage to Dr James Purdy in Wellington, a connection that would eventually lead to her own marriage. Gladys was always keen on cars and drove Dr Purdy on his medical rounds, as he