

## Cobdens in Japan

Charles Henry Cobden 1849-1891  
Helena Frances Peers Green 1858 -1880



*English Couple* 1860 Woodblock print by Utagawa Yoshitora (1836-1880). Source: Wikimedia Commons

The youngest child of Henry Andrews Cobden<sup>1</sup> (son of **William Cobden** and **Millicent Amber**) and his wife Frances (nee Baddily) was Charles Henry Cobden born on April 30<sup>th</sup> 1849 at Molong in New South Wales. The parents had arrived in Molong from England in early 1840 under controversial circumstances, having left an illegitimate baby with Frances's parents in Manchester, before marrying in London and quickly emigrating. Henry's elder brother, the famous Anti-Corn Law leader Richard Cobden, had been Henry's employer in the Cobden's calico printing business, and was particularly scathing of Henry's behaviour and departure.

In Molong, hardly a town at the time, the Cobdens ran the *Molong Inn*, and had two sons in Australia before Charles: Richard (Dick) in 1844; and Frederick William (Fred) in 1846. Charles was baptised in the Holy Trinity Anglican church in nearby Wellington on October 21<sup>st</sup> 1849. When he was only 7 years-old, their mother died at the *Molong Inn* after a 'long and painful illness'<sup>2</sup>. Only a month or so afterwards, their father decided to

open a new hotel, the *Masonic Arms*, not far from Molong (near Stuart Town) at the Stoney Creek diggings, taking the boys with him. But their new abode only lasted just on a year. Apart from the lack of reliable business, staying at Stoney Creek was probably not in the boys' best interests. There was no proper school there at the time and it was in the midst of gold-digging frenzy, in a very male dominated, rough and risky environment - not a good influence on the motherless boys.



Gold miners near Stuart Town, New South Wales, 1871. Source: NSW Department of Primary Industries

## Orphaned boys

The family returned to the *Molong Inn*, and the boys attended a small local school run by Mr Johnson. But tragedy struck only a year later when their father became seriously ill with jaundice and died on August 17<sup>th</sup> 1858 at the age of only 45 years. How would the boys survive? Dick was 14, Fred 12, and Charles was 9 and their only relatives were in England. Fortunately, because their parents were so well respected in the local community, and maybe also because everyone knew about their famous uncle Richard, local families came to the rescue. Mr and Mrs Cousins and Mrs Brazier looked after the boys immediately following their father's death. But it wasn't long before the Cobdens in England stepped in to help, particularly their uncle Richard who offered some financial support for Dick and offered to supply educational materials to them.

## Molong to Manchester

Dick lived and worked on the Cousins' properties but little is known about Fred, who went off the rails and was involved in horse and cattle stealing. Charles being too young to be employed on farms, was more in need of continued schooling. So, it was decided to bring Charles to England for education and possibly future employment which his uncle Richard had begun to make enquiries about<sup>3</sup>. So, Charles was sent on the long voyage from Molong to Manchester.

The 1861 English census shows 12-year-old Charles living with his aunt Priscilla Sale and her family (including her son and three daughters) at Bury New Rd. Salford, near Manchester. Charles was listed as a scholar. Priscilla was one of his father's older sisters and was married to William Sale, a highly respected commercial lawyer, the leading partner in the firm Sale, Worthington and Shipman. Priscilla and William would have had the means to help provide Charles with a good education and with business connections when he was older.



Chapel Street Salford 1878. Charles stayed with his aunt Priscilla near there in Bury New Road in 1861. Photo: Alfred Brothers. Source: [manchestergalore.tumblr.com](http://manchestergalore.tumblr.com)

## Japan in the Meiji Restoration

Nothing is known about Charles until 1871 when he was working in Japan as the superintendent of the Municipal Council of Kobe, the first executive committee head

of that council. An obituary<sup>4</sup> for him says he began working for a wealthy tea merchant in Yokohama, which may have been the case initially, however I have not been able to verify this. Charles was in Japan during the early days of the period known as the Meiji Restoration, when the Japanese government looked westwards to develop the country's economy and technology by encouraging foreigners to bring their expertise and experience to Japan. Although trade treaties had been in existence between Europe and Japan for many years and consequently there had been a foreign presence in Japan, Kobe, initially a small fishing village, had only just opened its port, Hyogo, to the west in 1868. This was the first year of the Meiji Restoration period.



Japan's first rail service, from Tokyo's Shinbashi to Yokohama, 1872. Utagawa Hiroshige III, 1872. Print. Source: nippon.com (Courtesy of the Minato City Local History Museum)

## Foreigners' settlement

In the recent past, at Yokohama, there had been problems when foreigners and Japanese mixed - on the whole due to cultural misunderstandings. Keen to avoid this problem at Hyogo (also spelled Hiogo) a settlement was established where foreigners (British, American, Chinese, French, German, Dutch and others<sup>5</sup>) could live under their own municipal law separate from Japanese law. This gated community (foreigners needed a passport to leave the settlement and Japanese were not permitted to live there) was a way for the Japanese government to keep the foreigners and Japanese culturally and socially apart yet allow business to continue. A municipal council, including elected representatives as well as foreign consulate representatives, was created to govern the settlement, and Charles was its first superintendent.



American, French, Chinese 1860  
Woodblock print by Utagawa  
Hiroshige II. Source: nippon.com  
(Hagi Uragami Museum)



Houses at the Bund (embankment) Kobe (Hyogo) 1880s. Source: oldphotosjapan.com

The settlement was not always a harmonious community within itself. There were many disputes and divisions between the various nationalities, particularly between the British and the Americans, as well as racism towards the Chinese. There were also cultural differences between the traders on the one hand, with their independent and mercenary instincts, and on the other hand, consular staff, usually of upper middle-class or aristocratic backgrounds. I'm not sure where Charles fitted in with his dual identities - his Cobden credentials (his uncle Richard having achieved international fame and high status before his recent death in 1865), but also his colonial frontier upbringing in the Australian bush. The combative male dominated environment of the foreign settlement would not have been totally alien to him. A resident from 1872 recalled: 'Most of the foreigners were young men; there were few ladies; and the community as a whole led a free and easy life. Alcoholic liquors, paying only a five percent duty on cost, were cheap and were consumed in considerable quantities.'<sup>6</sup> A recipe for trouble!

A way for individuals to gain status and belonging in this competitive society was facilitated by the establishment of social and sporting clubs in the settlement. Many were created along national preferences (eg cricket for the English, baseball for the Americans) and naturally being English/Australian, Charles had a preference for cricket - in 1876 he was the secretary of the Yokohama Cricket Club<sup>7</sup>. In the various clubs, business networks were formed and deals were done.

### **Racist attack**

At about the age of 21 Charles' job as the superintendent included overseeing the various public works and services needed to run the settlement as well as expanding the wharves and collecting taxes. Quite a lot of responsibility for a young man. Perhaps it all went to his head and the combination of youth, arrogance, and booze led him into a situation he should otherwise have avoided: In July 1872, three Europeans broke into a Chinese 'godown' (warehouse) under the pretence of believing there was gambling going on (illegal in Japan, but unclear as to its legality in the settlement). 'After assaulting the three Chinese men with clubs and an attack dog, one man was thrown down a flight of stairs and another lost his queue, the long ponytail haircut, as it was ripped from his head'<sup>8</sup>. They were dragged to the Japanese police outside the settlement. The assailants were three men who were

regarded as community leaders and no doubt believed they had a right to exert (or abuse) their authority: a company representative 26-year-old Briton, Arthur H Groom; an American Edward Fischer, a company owner and high-ranking Freemason; and 'an accomplice' the municipal superintendent Charles Cobden!<sup>9</sup>

Was Charles under the influence of the other men, trying to prove himself, and succumbed to pack mentality? Or maybe this was acceptable behaviour - Europeans asserting their 'superiority' over the 'coolies'. It was well known that the Europeans resented the Chinese, who were there in larger numbers, had been there longer, and often had to be relied upon as mediators between the traders and the Japanese authorities. We can only guess at Charles's real motivations. He became an employee in Edward Fischer's merchant and insurance company at Kobe from then until 1875.

### Mary Green hotelier

As well as the clubs, a large part of social and business life was conducted in the several western style hotels. One such hotel was the *Hiogo Hotel*, run by Mrs Mary Green<sup>10</sup> who was to become Charles's mother-in-law. She had owned and run some of the first western style hotels in Nagasaki, Yokohama and Kobe since the 1860s, including the *Yokohama Hotel* in Yokohama and the *Commercial Hotel* in Nagasaki. In 1871 she and her two daughters moved to Kobe to open the *Hiogo Hotel* in the settlement, situated at No.38 Carroll's Block where the Municipal Council was to build its office. Perhaps this was how Charles met his first wife Helena, Mary Green's younger daughter.

MRS. GREEN,  
(OF NAGASAKI)  
Begs to announce that she has taken from  
MESSRS. GEORGE DOMONEY & Co.,  
THE POPULAR AND WELL KNOWN  
**YOKOHAMA HOTEL,**  
Containing a Billiard Room unsurpassed by any in the East, the Dining Room and its accompaniments are under the direction of a thoroughly qualified Steward, and the table is liberally supplied with all the delicacies of the season, the Bed-rooms are pleasant and commodious and fitted up with a regard to comfort only to be met with in first class Hotels; Mrs. GREEN assisted by her sister Mrs. ANDERSON, will superintend personally every department, and will guarantee to all who favor her with a call, that every attention conducive to their comfort and convenience shall be her especial care.  
Visitors to Yokohama either for a short or long period will here find in every sense of the word a Home.  
Breakfast, Tiffin and Dinner can be ordered at any time but the hours for the TABLE d'hote are

Breakfast .....	a.m.
Tiffin .....	12.30 p.m.
Dinner .....	6.30 p.m.

Yokohama, 17th November, 1869.

Advertisement for Mary Green's hotel in Yokohama 1869. Source: *Meiji Portraits* website.

### Move to Yokohama

By 1875 Charles had left Edward Fischer and was employed as a clerk with Jardine, Matheson and Co., now operating as insurance and trade agents for several steamship companies and some banks of Yokohama<sup>11</sup>. Charles may have begun working in their Kobe office, but he is found in the Yokohama Directory in 1876. This new job would have been a step up in his career as Jardine, Matheson and Co. were one of the largest and oldest foreign companies operating in Asia. Yokohama was also very close to Edo (Tokyo) one of the largest cities in the world, therefore well positioned for business.



Japan in 1871, showing Hyogo, Yokohama and Nagasaki. Edo is Tokyo. Source: timemaps.com



Bentenbashi Station, Yokohama 1873. Source: oldphotosjapan.com

## Marriage in Kobe

But Charles did not lose contact with Hyogo. On April 16<sup>th</sup> 1877 at the Union Protestant Church of Kobe, Charles married 19-year old Frances Helena Peers Green. The wedding was preceded by a ceremony at the British Consulate in Hyogo. On the marriage certificate<sup>12</sup> Charles is described as a 'commercial clerk', aged 27 living in Hyogo (temporarily it seems). His father is described as a 'farmer', and Helena's father as a 'gentleman'. Helena had an older sister, Mary Ellen, who worked with their mother in the *Hiogo Hotel* and had married the previous year at the

same Church. One thing Charles and Helena would have had in common was growing up around hotels!

Charles and Helena set up home in Yokohama and their address in 1877 was no. 33 the Bluff. This was quite a prestigious address, the Bluff (or Yamate) was a residential and consular district built upon elevated ground above the foreign settlement of Yokohama. By 1878 they had moved to no. 242 the Bluff and in 1879 no. 59 Yokohama.<sup>13</sup>

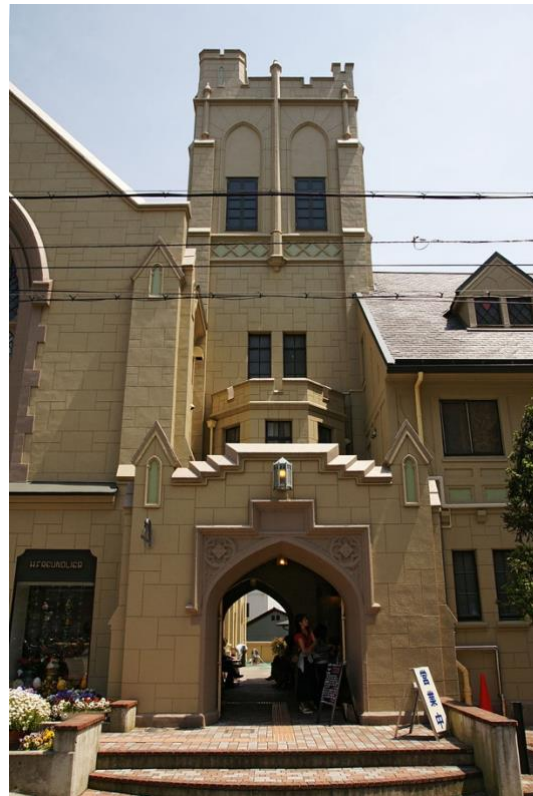
### Births and deaths

On February 16<sup>th</sup> 1880, Helena gave birth to their daughter Helena Mary Carroll, born in Yokohama. The name Carroll is derived from the baby's godfather James Dennis Carroll, an Irish American ex-ship captain who had been a close friend of Helena and her mother Mary, and had been living in Japan since the 1860s. His company Carroll & Co. Ship Chandlers and General Commission Agents was first established in Yokohama and in 1877 at Kobe. He was the original owner of 'Carroll's Block' where the *Hiogo Hotel* was situated.

But tragedy struck when Helena died one month after giving birth. This terrible event was followed the next year by the unexpected death of her mother Mary at only 43 years of age. Mary had been caring for the baby after her daughter died, but who was to look after the baby Helena now? Charles probably was able to find local nursemaids at first but it was clear that Charles would not be able to balance his working life with his parental responsibilities - no such thing as a stay-at-home dad then, plus, he had to make a living.

### The godfather

When Charles decided to go to Australia (the reason is unknown) the care of the young Helena was left to her godfather James Carroll, also living in Yokohama at the time. How did this arrangement come about? Was it by mutual agreement between Charles and James, or was James pressed into offering support because he was the godfather? James may have been honouring a promise made to his lost friends Mary and her daughter, and indeed it is shown that he must have felt a great responsibility and affection towards the baby Helena because, fortunately for her, she became his main heir in 1891. In 1886, at the age of 6, she was sent to live with her relations in England, echoes of her father being sent to England 27 years earlier.



Former Union Protestant Church, where Charles and Frances married in 1877, Kobe Japan. Source: Wikiwand

Whatever the circumstances, Charles returned to Australia sometime between 1881 and 1885 and settled not far from the district of his childhood. Bringing his little daughter with him may not have been possible. His own parents were dead, his only relatives in Australia were his two brothers, one was unmarried and leading a precarious life in the bush, the other was raising 11 of his own children at the time. And apart from that, Charles had left Australia when still a boy and had no friends or connections to help him bring up a child.

### **The Great Western Milling Company**

In New South Wales in 1882 the Great Western Milling Company was formed at Spring Grove, situated between Bathurst and Orange. By 1884 the company had laid the foundation stone for a large mill to be erected next to the railway line to Sydney, servicing the wheat farmers of the district. Around that time Charles became a clerk at the mill and by 1889 rose to the office of Secretary. Spring Grove changed its name to Millthorpe reflecting the importance of this industry to the town (and to differentiate itself from the several other 'Spring' names in the area).



The Mill (at Millthorpe) was built in 1884 for the processing of flour and operated until 1962. The Great Western Milling Company was formed by local shareholders and became one of the biggest millers in the state employing many local people. This impressive mill building was demolished in 1974. Source: Millthorpe Walk brochure

### **Ancient Druids**

The first piece of evidence I have of Charles back in Australia is a news report in Sydney's *Evening News* of December 10<sup>th</sup> 1885 describing the opening of a new branch of the United Ancient Order of Druids at Millthorpe in *Montgomery's Hotel*. Charles was elected its first secretary. Just as had been done in Japan, to find your 'equals' in a new country, you joined a club of likeminded citizens. This advertisement in the *Evening News* of December 16<sup>th</sup> 1885 shows the influence on local affairs such an organisation hoped to have:

**Wanted.**

**W A N T E D.**

A Duly-qualified **MEDICAL PRACTITIONER** to **TENDER** for Medical Attendance and Medicines for members of a Druids Lodge newly formed at Millthorpe, and now numbering 50 members, with every prospect of increasing largely.

Millthorpe is a rising township on the Western Line, embracing a very large district, and no medical man within seven miles.

For further particulars apply, at once, to  
**C. H. COBDEN, Secretary Druids Lodge, Millthorpe.**

### **Crime at *Montgomery's Hotel***

Charles' name was mentioned in a news report about a court case involving a theft at *Montgomery's Hotel* at Millthorpe on a Saturday night in June 1886. Charles was at the hotel when George Welch allegedly stole money from Alfred Gainsford when Gainsford, drunk, fell trying to get on his horse. The alleged thief Welch, then came back into the hotel kitchen where there were four people (including Charles) and shouted 'drinks all round!' The hotel's groom, William Adamson, mentioned 'he (Adamson) made a communication with Cobden'<sup>14</sup>, presumably about his suspicions, but this didn't stop any of them from availing themselves of Welch's 'shout'. Welch was later found guilty of the theft.

### **A second marriage and baby**

In 1890 Charles married Jane Oborn, the daughter of Millthorpe farmers Benjamin Oborn and Jane Thorncroft. The marriage was registered at Orange. The following year they had a son they named Henry Andrews Cobden (after Charles' father). The census for 1891 gives their address as Crowson Street, Millthorpe.

### **Heart disease**

But baby Henry did not ever know his father. Charles died that year on May 26<sup>th</sup> whilst at the mill. Here is the rather dramatic report from Sydney's *Evening News* on May 29<sup>th</sup> 1891:

**Dropped Dead.**

**MILLTHORPE, Friday.**—Mr. Charles Cobden, a clerk in the employ of the Great Western Milling Co., while engaged at his work at the mill, suddenly said to his companion; "Catch me; I'm going to have a fit," and fell down dead without a struggle. His death is attributed to heart disease.

His obituary in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of May 30<sup>th</sup> 1891 reads:

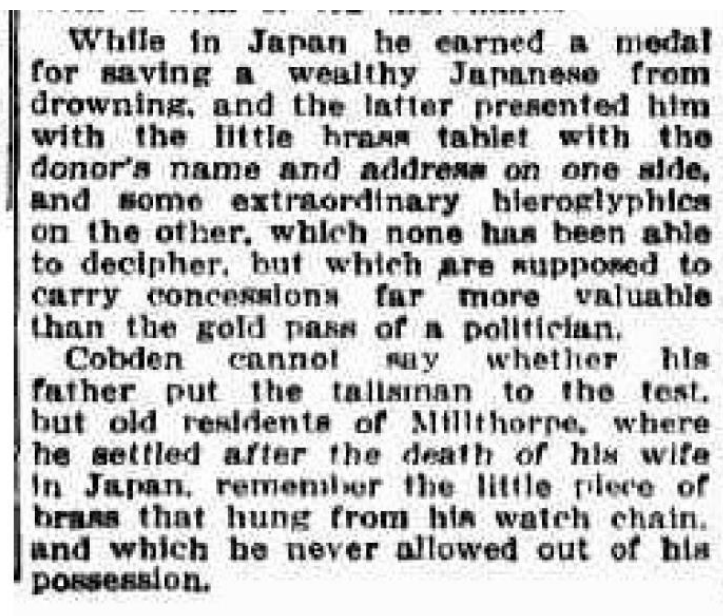
#### 'DEATH OF A NEPHEW OF RICHARD COBDEN -

Mr Cobden died on Tuesday, suddenly at Millthorpe, the cause of death being apoplexy. The deceased was 41 years of age, and was born at Molong. Mr Cobden was a nephew of Richard Cobden, the great English reformer, whose name is so closely identified with the repeal of the Corn Laws; but unlike his uncle, was a staunch believer in protection. Richard Cobden, being anxious that his nephew should receive a good education, requested the boy's parents<sup>15</sup> to send him to England. They did so, and after completing his education in England, young Cobden was engaged in clerical work by a rich firm of tea merchants in Yokohama, Japan<sup>16</sup>. While there he signalled himself on several occasions by saving life from drowning, and for his bravery was awarded a Japanese medal or tablet. During the last three years he acted as secretary to the Great Western Milling Company, Millthorpe. The deceased was an intimate friend of the late Jno. Bright, and kept up a regular correspondence with him until just before the great tribune's death<sup>17</sup>. The deceased married about two years ago Miss Oban, of Millthorpe. Prior to that he was a widower, and by his first wife leaves a daughter about 9 years of age, living at Bombay, heiress to a large fortune.'

The obituary does not mention his son Henry.

#### **Life-saver**

In 1930 an interesting article appeared in *Smith's Weekly*, a Sydney newspaper, that confirms part of the obituary. It describes how Charles' son Henry had in his possession a talisman that had been presented to his father in Japan for saving a local Japanese man from drowning:



While in Japan he earned a medal for saving a wealthy Japanese from drowning, and the latter presented him with the little brass tablet with the donor's name and address on one side, and some extraordinary hieroglyphics on the other, which none has been able to decipher, but which are supposed to carry concessions far more valuable than the gold pass of a politician.

Cobden cannot say whether his father put the talisman to the test, but old residents of Millthorpe, where he settled after the death of his wife in Japan, remember the little piece of brass that hung from his watch chain, and which he never allowed out of his possession.

Where is this medallion today?

## Son Henry seeking relatives

In 1912 a Missing Friends report in the *Perth Sunday Times* of June 30<sup>th</sup> states: 'COBDEN - (Henry Andrew), son of the late Charles Henry Cobden, of Millthorpe, formerly, of London and Japan, seeks news of his sister or other relatives.'

The newspaper states that the names in their Missing Friends column are 'compiled from the latest English, Irish and Scottish journals.' It also states information concerning any of the people listed will be 'forwarded to the paper in which the inquiry first appeared.' So, Henry had placed an advertisement in a British paper, hoping to connect with Helena or their relatives in England.

I wonder if Henry ever had contact with his half-sister Helena, or the other relatives.

Ann Hurley

2020

See my story **The Last of the Cobdenites** for more about Helena Mary Carroll Cobden.

[hurleyskidmorehistory.com](http://hurleyskidmorehistory.com)

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### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> In reading references written around the early 1900s, it appears that Henry Andrews Cobden's name has often been given as that of his youngest son Charles Henry Cobden. Perhaps the confusion arises as they both had a brother named Richard, who was sometimes referred to in the articles.

<sup>2</sup> *Bathurst Free Press & Mining Journal* June 7 1856

<sup>3</sup> Morgan, Simon and Cobden, Richard - *The Letters of Richard Cobden* Vol 3 1854-1859 (2012). Letter dated November 18th 1858 from Richard Cobden to John Bright

<sup>4</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald* May 30 1891

<sup>5</sup> 'An early census taken in 1871 shows there were 116 British, 36 Germans, 19 French, and 240 Chinese, plus others, including Americans, whose numbers are not recorded.' Johnson, Eric *Taking a look back at Kobe's opening to the West nearly 150 years ago* (*The Japan Times* Jun 25, 2017)

<sup>6</sup> Ferdinand Plate, who arrived in Kobe in 1872 and was living there in 1918, described the makeup of the early settlement. Johnson, Eric *Taking a look back at Kobe's opening to the West nearly 150 years ago* (*The Japan Times* Jun 25, 2017)

<sup>7</sup> *The Directory & Chronicle for China, Japan, Corea, Indo-China etc* 1876

<sup>8</sup> Swanson, Darren - *Treaty Port Society and the Club in Meiji Japan: Clubbism, Athleticism and the Public Sphere* (Thesis University of Sydney) p 210

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<sup>9</sup> Swanson, Darren - *Treaty Port Society and the Club in Meiji Japan: Clubbism, Athleticism and the Public Sphere* (Thesis University of Sydney) p 210

<sup>10</sup> Charles' mother-in-law Mary Green's husband Matthew Green worked as a constable for the British Consulate but left Japan in 1866. Mary stayed on in Japan with her two daughters Mary and Frances.

<sup>11</sup> Jardine, Matheson & Company, was the largest foreign concern in China, with headquarters in Hong Kong and Shanghai, and branch offices throughout China and in Yokohama, Japan. Continuing its longstanding trade in smuggled opium, tea, and cotton, the firm diversified into other areas including insurance, shipping, and railways. By the mid-19th century, the company had become the largest of the *hongs* or foreign trading conglomerates with offices in all the important Chinese cities as well as Yokohama, Japan. One of its branch agencies, Glover and Co., established in Nagasaki, was known in Japan as an arms dealer who contracted with then-rebel forces from Chōshū Domain who led the Meiji Restoration in 1868. (Wikiwand)  
In the 1870s, when the Suez Canal, steamship lines, and telegraph connections sped communications between China and Europe, the China trade became increasingly competitive, and Jardine Matheson diversified its import-export business into shipping, insurance, and banking and withdrew from the opium trade in 1872. (<http://what-when-how.com/western-colonialism>)

<sup>12</sup> UK, Foreign and Overseas Registers of British Subjects, 1628-1969 (Ancestry.com)

<sup>13</sup> Lepach, B. - *Meiji-Portraits* <http://www.meiji-portraits.de/> (2016)

<sup>14</sup> *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal* July 24th 1886

<sup>15</sup> Charles' parents were dead - it was his uncle Richard who wanted him to come to England when orphaned.

<sup>16</sup> Probably referring to his work with Jardine & Matheson.

<sup>17</sup> I have found no evidence of this and wonder whether the author could have been confusing this Charles with Richard Cobden's brother Charles.

Other resources:

*Australian Births and Baptisms 1792-1981* (Ancestry.com)

*Australian Death Index 1787-1985* (Ancestry.com)

*Australian Marriage Index 1788-1950* (Ancestry.com)

*British Newspaper Archive* (British Library)

Directories and Chronicles for China, Japan, and the Philippines 1860s and 1870s

Duits, K. - *Old Photos of Japan* <https://www.oldphotosjapan.com/> (2008)

*England and Wales Census Records* (Ancestry.com)

Grady, Eileen Doyle (descendant of J D Carroll)

Johnson, Eric *Taking a look back at Kobe's opening to the West nearly 150 years ago* (*The Japan Times* Jun 25, 2017)

*Kobe Foreign Settlement* (Wikiwand)

Orange Family History Group

Trove (National Library of Australia)

*UK Foreign and Overseas Registers of British Subjects 1628-1969* (Ancestry.com)