

Threading  
the  
Needle

A Novel

By

JOHN HEPHER

[www.johnhepher.com](http://www.johnhepher.com)

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Needle

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## Author's Note

This is a work of fiction. It is loosely based on the life and times of my Great-Grandfather and namesake, John Hepher. There may be some extended family members who will disagree with my depiction of the characters of John and Edith Hepher. I have interpreted their characters from the descriptions and anecdotes of my late father, John and Edith's grandson, John (Edward) Hepher. Those who disagree may have good grounds for disagreement. I have taken highlights of reality, sourced from the National Library of Australia, and other places, and placed those highlights into this novel. Much of the English part of this story has come from anecdotal notes written by Harry Hepher. I have used some of his words.

This work is not intended to be historically correct, although many of the dates and places are, as are the circumstances and social atmosphere surrounding the early life of John Hepher in Swavesey, Cambridgeshire, and his subsequent journey around England and Scotland and finally to Australia. Here he established himself as a master tailor, businessman, unionist, socialist leader, and revered venerable member of the New South Wales Legislative Council, before, during and after Federation. On his journey through England, John Hepher was accompanied by his older brother Jonas.

I have purposely changed typefaces during this book to indicate the style of those that would have been used in England and Australia during the era.

John Hepher.

Also By  
JOHN HEPHER

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# Introduction

“Oh Edith I’m so tired, please take me home.”

And he was tired, tired from many years of righting wrongs.

The Honorable John Hepher MLC was dying in Sydney Hospital, in Macquarie Street, right next-door to the place in which he had served New South Wales for thirty-three years, three months and twenty four days, the Legislative Council of the Parliament of New South Wales.

Edith did take him home, and a few days later on August 3<sup>rd</sup> 1932, eighty two year old Hon. John Hepher, Father of The Legislative Council, slipped away peacefully at his home in Athol Street, Coogee, a beachside suburb south of Sydney. He had led an incredibly decent life, a life that was diverse in its sacrifices and principles, a life that was fulfilled by humanity rather than profit. But then again, if The Hon. John Hepher MLC had reaped the rewards of financial advantage it is doubtful he would have been the man he had evolved into, now at the end of his “tramp”.

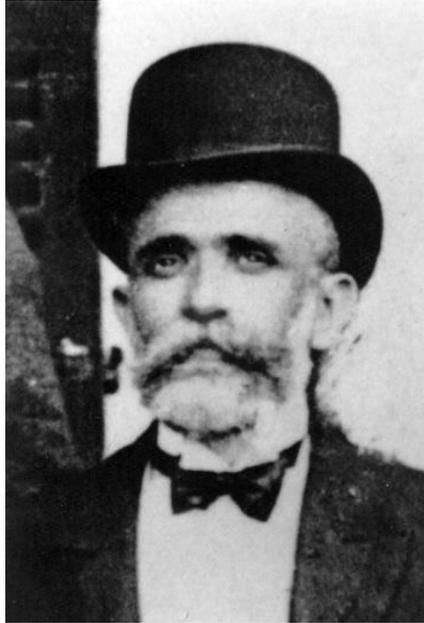
Born in the village of Swavesey, Cambridgeshire England, on the 16<sup>th</sup> day of October 1850, he had now uttered his final words to his beloved wife Edith, whom he had married in 1884

in Sydney, Australia. Edith had given him eight children, six sons and two daughters. They had fourteen grand children.

At 82 years he closed his eyes forever. He was buried, without even a headstone to mark his final resting place in Botany Cemetery in the south-eastern suburbs of Sydney.

His family could not afford the luxury of a headstone, it was the great depression, and although the now late, Hon. John Hopher MLC, had been a senior Labor Member of the New South Wales Legislative Council, such positions were appointed and were voluntary. It was an era when politicians really served their community and reward for that service was not even recognised by the state of New South Wales with a headstone. Let alone the cost of his funeral.

His descendants did in fact belatedly honour him with a family ceremony and headstone to mark his grave, some sixty years later.



I am, The Honorable, (well that's the title they gave me) John Hopher MLC, and I am telling this, my story, to a young reporter from The Sydney Morning Herald, from my bed in Sydney Hospital. The year is 1932, but I shall start my story at the beginning, in 1850.



Part One  
England and Scotland  
1850



# Chapter 1

And it was a bleak, miserably cold day on the Cambridge-shire Fens, a flat expanse of farming country north-east of London and twelve miles from the university city of Cambridge. It was the sixteenth day of October 1850 when I was presented to the world, I was the bouncing new born son of William Hepher, tailor, of Swavesey, and his wife Esther.

Life was hard in our world in the 1850s. The weather was poor and crops were meagre, or failed completely. In fact, it was only due to the generosity of some charitable people who ran a soup kitchen that some families survived. There was what was described as a cold plague in Swavesey, a form of gastric influenza.

I already had seven siblings, four brothers and three sisters. I wasn't the last though, there were six more to come. Esther, my mother, indeed attracted the fertility fairy. Fourteen children were born to her and my father between 1840 and 1861. My father was a master tailor, the trade that would inevitably be passed on to me and my elder brother by six years, Jonas. As children, Jonas and I became inseparable with Jonas the quintessential big brother, and me looking up to him, as younger brothers do, like an expectant puppy. Jonas was a kind brother who seemed to not care about the vast age difference at the

time. Six years is a huge gap when you are young, but I always felt protected by my brother. Protected and nurtured. It was to be this way for the rest of our lives.

Swavesey, our village, was rural in character. It was a market village, and our home, Church End Farm, was nestled amongst a row of cottages facing the street with The Swan Pond almost at our front door. Life in our family was full of understated love, we all somehow knew that we all loved and respected each-other, but it was always love at arm's length. There was typically no demonstration of affection in any physical way. Typically I say, because we were dour Church of England.

Swavesey had its church, St Andrews, and it is in its yard is where my Grandparents, James and Ann are buried, and will no doubt become the final resting place of my parents, and many more Hephers yet to come. I would have liked to have been entombed there but circumstances yet to present themselves got in the way of that. I daresay Jonas would have also liked to have rested there as well. Years later, he mentioned returning home one day. St Andrews church was a source of frightening fire and brimstone, and bigotry, emanating from its raised oaken pulpit and reverberating around its gothic colonnades and high oak rafters. The church was renovated when I was seventeen, but I never did get to see it in its new form.

As was the practice in the mid nineteenth century, I left school at the age of eleven after what was considered a good education. Discipline was strict and my father had to pay a small amount of money each week, a penny or two, to pay for the

school amenities. Everything was learnt by rote. And at the end of my six years at Swavesey School, I could (very basically) read, write, add, subtract, divide and multiply and that was regarded as sufficient to make my way in the world. I was the son of a tailor and as was expected, followed my father and brother Jonas into the trade. Not that I had a choice mind you, but I did actually grow to enjoy our tailor's workroom, an outbuilding in the back garden.

Our father kept his workroom pristine with its racks of bolts of fabric, rows of dozens of reels of variously coloured threads, boxes of buttons, rows of many little coloured pillows into which needles and pins were stabbed according to their sizes and styles. My father had built a small Inglenook fireplace into the end of the workroom for warmth and the various other uses a stove had. Pressing irons had to be heated.

That was part of my early apprenticeship. I was responsible, as were all boys of the era that entered such employment, for keeping the floors clean, the irons hot, the reels wound with thread, the pins and needles in the correct order, and off the floor, and threading the dozens of needles. I was the workroom dogs-body for my first two years, and during this time I learnt the basics of tailoring while sitting cross legged on the floor in the 'tailors squat' practicing the many stitches and learning their purposes. For me, the buttonhole stitch was the hardest. I learnt to balance an ironing board on my knees in this position. Fourteen hours a day. Six days a week. Fifty two weeks of the year. My father was a brutal taskmaster when I was twelve years old, but brutal only in his own work ethic and expectant of the same

attitude from his apprentice sons. Yes, his work ethic was brutal but at the same time, he was a stoically loving father who would not criticise or beat his sons, like some fathers did, but would simply point out a fault and mentor us towards perfection. I gradually became proficient enough at the basics of my trade to be entrusted with working on the cheaper garments like mole-skin waistcoats. Father was fair in his payment of wages. He paid by the hour, not piecework as was the common practice. He said, “if a man does a fair day’s work, he is due a fair day’s pay”.

You see, he had worked out that some people work fast and some work slow, those who worked fast were not as accurate in their stitching and those who worked slower were generally more careful and could be trusted with the finer work on more expensive garments. It was simply a matter of identifying how different people worked and giving them the tasks that suited them. Their productivity was reflected in this, and in his eyes, they were all as valuable as each other.

He was also very mindful of safety in the workroom, a quality that I would come to appreciate much more as time went by. You see, it was my father’s influence that shaped my social and political mind. But that was to evolve later. I’m telling you this because it is important for me to emphasise this point, in the light of what I was to discover about life in the revolution that was taking place in England.

I tell you, mid nineteenth century England was a place of upheaval. It was a time when technology, as it was then known, was moving ahead exponentially. Steam power was the key and

each new invention begot the next new invention. Huge factories were mushrooming up all across England, from Leeds and Manchester, to Sheffield and Newcastle. Canals and railways were being built across the land to connect the industrial centres and provide transport links by ship or rail to send the manufactured goods from the midlands and the north to the major shipping ports on the coast. Narrow canal boats in their hundreds plied the canals of the industrialised midlands and further to the north. Originally powered by horses drawing them from pathways alongside the canals, the narrow boats, mostly with a beam of about eight feet and a waterline length of sixty feet, were now being fitted with rudimentary steam engines to make them more economical, powerful, and certainly faster than being pulled along the canals by heavy horses. Early versions of steam powered narrow boats were propelled by paddle wheels, until the invention and development of the screw propeller in the mid eighteenth century. Steam locomotives on rails were just starting to prove themselves.

The industrialists and merchants, shipping and export companies, and bankers, were booming. The workers, in their thousands though, were suffering the injustices and dangers of the Industrial Revolution. Dangers from working up to sixteen hours a day from when they were eight years old, in sweatshops, looms, and polluted factories and iron foundries, or deep in the bowels of the tin, iron, and coal mines in shafts only two feet high in places. Industrial England was built on the backs of countless exploited children and their poor fathers and even poorer mothers. Life expectancy of workers was not high on the

agenda of the industrialists. A worker could be killed or maimed but there were always more workers than jobs. Wholesale exploitation and abuse of workers was rife. Mothers and young girls from the age of eight were employed in the mills of Manchester in atrocious conditions. And the industrialists and merchants and bankers reaped the rewards of millions of pounds, and built huge Manor Houses on country estates. They were the newly rich upper middle class of nineteenth century England.

Their excesses were also paid for by the exploitation of a tenant farm workforce. I was made aware of these circumstances when Jonas and I left Swavesey and my father's workshop when times became hard, and my father, as hard as he tried, could no longer afford to employ his now trade qualified sons. There were younger sons to train in the tailor's craft, and a couple of daughters to enlist helping with pressing and other work in the family business. From my apprenticeship I graduated to the rank of journeyman tailor after I had begun to master the art of the cutting of the cloth, the real mark of a tailor. I had learnt all the stitches, buttonholes, styles, linings, and the many fabrics used in the many styles of a tailored suit, overcoat, waistcoat, cape or trousers. In the tailoring trade, tradesmen mostly specialised in one garment, the cape, the coat, the trousers, or the waistcoat. Jonas and me? Well we were jacks-of-all-garments. We may not have yet developed the finer details of each garment, but we could both make a durable, if not basic item, of all of them. And after-all, we were not Saville Row, but Cambridge Fens tailors more attuned to creating working-class and rural garments. The finery and fashion could come later.

Jonas of course had six years experience ahead of me so when it came time for us to find our own way in the world there was no other thought than we would do it together. Journeymen tailors we were, and journeymen we were to become. We went 'on the tramp', the term used at the time for tradesmen on their itinerant wanderings in search of work. Jonas and I reluctantly left the comfort of our home, workroom, and family, to make our own way the only way we could afford. We walked.

We knocked on doors and asked for food and shelter in return for odd jobs done, or buttons sewn on, or waistcoats mended, or even at rare times, a new suit made to measure. We carried small leather packs on our backs, laden with our tools of trade, and we pushed our meagre few bolts of fabric in a wheelbarrow. Our father had given us the basics of tools and materials needed to eke out a living for a short while. The rest was up to us, and Jonas and I took turns at pushing the barrow which was equipped with a canvas tarpaulin that we had made to cover our precious cloth. The tarpaulin was well oversized but this was done on purpose as it doubled as a small tent for the many times we didn't find accommodation in the miserable rain of the midlands and the north.

Our wheelbarrow was acquired from an uncle's farm and it was in a bad way when we carried it home to effect repairs. Jonas and I found some new timber for shafts, and made a wheel from the good end of a broken fabric reel. The reel-end wheel was lubricated with lard pinched from my mother's kitchen. Jonas and I calculated the amount of canvas we would need to cover the wheelbarrow and to fold out to the side to provide our shelter.

We treated the canvas with alum and oil to waterproof it. The cover was just large enough to accommodate a fourteen year old and his twenty year old brother.

We thought of making a bag that could be stuffed with leaves or hay picked up from the fields as we travelled, to act as a mattress, but decided it would add too much weight to the already burgeoning wheelbarrow. As it was, it was lucky we dumped that idea because when it rained, and that was frequently, the mattress would have been soaked providing a perfect environment for mould and respiratory problems. We slept on whatever was available and used another piece of canvas as a waterproof ground sheet.

Our heaviest items were the bolts of cloth and these had to be protected from the elements as well. Mouldy cloth is not a good way to present one's craftsmanship. We made canvas tubes from off-cuts from the tarpaulin tent to protect our most valuable stock of heavyweight woolen fabrics more designed for the farmer's, or factory worker's work-wear than the fashionable gentleman's frock coat. We also had a small amount of cotton and linen that could be made into shirts, or ladies blouses, or aprons. The woolen cloth could also double for heavy duty skirts for women factory workers and their daughters. We thought, given the current state of the economy, our work would be aimed at the plain and necessary garment rather than a frivolous and fashionable one. If we needed to make a new frock coat for a squire, we could buy the fabric as needed. As we went along, we modified the wheelbarrow with small drawers to hold buttons, needles, pins and tailors chalk.