

OLD COLONIAL DAYS [A NONAGENERIAN LOOKS BACK]

Contributed by Debbie Stirk

From a newspaper cutting date unknown.

In the late nineties, gangs of men were excavating for the foundations of the Tramline in Hay Street Perth. An oldish looking man watched them awhile and then told the foreman that they would not be able to dig much deeper. The foreman grinned, touched his head and winked knowingly at his men; but a few more spades full of earth revealed a line of great tree trunks placed side by side across the street.

They were the foundations of one of Perth's first roads and the oldish man had seen them placed there by convicts 40 years before. He was David Butchart, who, as a 13 year old boy, had gained his first glimpse of the infant colony on August 4th 1852, from the rigging of the 671 ton "William Jardine", 88 days out from Gravesend and chock-a-block with cargo of emigrants, convicts and all their goods and chattels.

The boy had been born on the Rock of Gibraltar, May 31st 1830 in the Barracks of the 79th Regiment of Foot, with which his father had served 27 years. A little later, his father Pte John Butchart obtained an Honourable Discharge.

The family moved to Dundee and early in May 1852, set sail for Western Australia. [ex Pvt Butchart being a Pensioner Guard of one of the early ships, which came between 1850 and 1868 transporting convicts to the Colony.]

As he aged, the boy saw whales caught practically in Gage Roads; knew "Moondyne Joe" the Bushranger of the '60's by sight; played an unwitting part in the escape of the Fenians and incredible as it seems, actually owned a cow bearing the brand of Captain James Stirling, the first Governor of the State.

Now at the age of 94, in full possession of his faculties [and a good many of his teeth], he lives in a lovely spot on the river near Blackwall Reach, his only worry the thought that he may outstrip his father, who died 20 or 21 years ago aged 103. His memory is amazing and his deep brown quizzical eyes shine joyfully with an innerlight when he reaches back 60, 70 or 80 years and grasps some half-forgotten name.

These are the main points of a story which took so long and many hours to tell.

"On the long trip out we had passed only one island and there was terrific excitement on board when we finally cast anchor off what is now the Fremantle Esplanade. Everyone was peering over the side of the ship, but there was not too much to see besides the Old Round House, a few yellow-looking buildings and an inhospitable looking bush. Hundreds of natives were yelling and waving their arms on the beach. We had heard that a British Officer had been killed at Pinjarra in a battle with natives and I was rather frightened.

Then a boat towed out a big double-ended flat raft and we were taken ashore. The beach was bare save for great stacks of bags of sugar and dates. There seemed to be only half-a-dozen houses and a couple of Pubs in High Street and not many people about to patronize them. Other houses were scattered here and there, but there were no footpaths and the streets were like alley ways.

The English church was fair in the top of High Street. Later Keane, the contractor, put the Town Hall up near there, but lost a lot of money on the deal. Peter Hagen owned one of the Pubs; all his beer was English and black as tar.

But to get back to my arrival. We first stayed at the Barracks which held the soldiers, the sappers and the pensioner guards. The pensioner's quarters were separated by a partition, but they could talk over the top. It didn't matter how many were in a family, they were all crowded into one room. The sappers were all tradesmen, blacksmiths, carpenters and whatnot.

They were a lazy lot of beggars and used to shoot parrots all day. The soldiers were just as bad and they loved fighting. Often their faces were as blood red as the jackets they wore. I remember Captain Barrett and Captain Morgan of the 14th Regiment from New Zealand having a great set-to over some fancy woman. They had their seconds too, although they fought with their fists.

"We stayed at the Barracks, which still stand at Fremantle, though nearly swallowed up by other buildings, till the next ship came in and then we had to make way for more pensioners.

We paid 9/- a week for a windowless and floorless sheds at a place called Ticket of Leave Square on the old Manning estate. [Now Bunnings timber yards are there.]

Later, my father was given a grant of land at the pensioner colony at North Fremantle. The old house we lived in still stands on one of the Chinese gardens. They kept some of the convicts in a huge crucifix-shaped depot somewhere near the present North Fremantle school, and the pensioners would have to mount guard there at night. Another of their jobs was to relieve the convicts for 2 hours in the evening on the flat boat, which was the only means of crossing the river.

After 7 years, if they had been of good behaviour, the pensioners were given the deeds of their one-acre grants, and they could then sell them back to the Government for £73, plus an extra pound if there was a building on the block.

Afterwards the land along there became extremely valuable. Men in the know got wind of the building of the North Wharf and brought a lot of land. It cost the Government thousands of pounds to resume it.

One old lady, in England, Miss Cole [I think her name was], owned a big paddock right in the pathway of the first traffic bridge. She made a big lump of money; but my word, the lawyers got a nice penny out of the deal in those days.

There was an old deserted building on her property. When we arrived, it was the only

place on the other side of the river. Everyone called it "The Old House from Home", because everyone could shelter there."

WHALING DAYS –

Whaling was a flourishing industry in those days. John Bateman and Josh Harwood were great rivals and each owned about 6 boats. Bateman had his plant on the south side of the river and Harwood on the north. There were a number of different sorts of whales.

There was the "Right" whale, which gave 14 or 15 tons of oil; the humpback and the sulphur bottom, which each gave about 20 tons. At certain seasons of the year, big schools of whales would be sporting between Rottneest and the shore and lots of youngsters would watch the fuss from Whaler's Hill at Cottesloe.

When they made fast with the harpoons, the whale would go like mad. You wouldn't see the boats for foam: and when the whale came up for blow, 2 great fans of water would shoot out. They would never cut away unless darkness was coming on - they thought too much of the oil. The Yankee whalers were operating at Bunbury and in the North-West. Sometimes 14 boats would come into Bunbury and buy pretty well all the green stuff in the district. Once they chased a big Sperm whale into Fremantle waters and Harwood had a big law suit. He won and the Yankees were ordered off this part of the coast.

Up at the Rosemary Islands the whales were so thick they were a danger to navigation; and although the Americans owned a full-rigged ship and had harpoon guns, they agreed to share whale for whale with Bateman's small fleet.

Port Gregory near Geraldton was another great spot for whales. The fleet was caught by a gale once and several boats floundered and a lot of fellows drowned.

Old Ted Lewington, who died at Rockingham not so long ago, was one of those survivors. He hung onto a bag of bran and was washed ashore. Some of the best known harpooners were Billy and Jim Willis and Sam Law; but

the champion of the lot was a Maori named Butty. He was a fine, big chap and well liked by everyone; his face and *chest* was scarred with tattoo markings. His father was supposed to be a Maori prince and Butty would have come in for a lot of property, but he loved a whaler's life and would not return to his home.

John Bateman buried him on Garden Island well over half a century ago.



Mr. DAVID BUTCHART.