

# SERGEANT ROBERT RAMSAY

A recent article in EPG Gazette outlined some information about the opium wars in China during the 1840s and 1850s. There is a link to Western Australia's pensioner guards in this matter.

Sergeant Ramsay, ex Royal Artillery, was a veteran of war service in many parts of the world before coming to Fremantle as a pensioner guard in 1851. He arrived on the Minden with his family. Initially an overseer of convict activities in and around Fremantle he later was in charge of the new asylum building with his wife Mary, the matron. Both retired in 1872. Their youngest child, Lucy married James Bell Junior the son of James Bell, a farmer at East Rockingham.

The elder Bell had arrived in 1845 on board HMS Driver, the first steamship to arrive in WA. Tired of the hard life on Driver, Bell deserted. Thus he became the first migrant in our state to arrive by steamship. The ship had been based at Hong Kong, the China Station for the British Eastern fleet, as part of the Opium Wars squadron. Driver had been ordered to New Zealand for the Maori Wars. Curious colonists both at Fremantle

and Sydney flocked to see Driver when she arrived.

From the 1770s the East India Company claimed a monopoly over opium products in Bengal. They sold them throughout Asia and Europe as a medicine and recreational drug. Its use was illegal in China but company servants smuggled it to agents in exchange for silver that was used to buy tea for the British market. The opium trade paid for all of Britain's tea purchases meaning they did not have to export bullion for it. European ships smuggled the opium in chests each weighing about 60 kilograms giving a gross profit of 1000 silver dollars per chest. The Chinese government insisted on payment in silver for their tea which otherwise would have been a drain on the British Treasury.

The Chinese forcibly resisted the opium trade which led to gunboat diplomacy. The first opium war began in 1840 when Britain sent a fleet of ships to force China to buy opium and open her ports to British shipping. In January 1841 East India Company ships and British gunboats destroyed a fleet of Chinese

war junks in Anson Bay. The value of the paddle warships, like Driver, was that steam power gave manoeuvrability and allowed them to operate in shallow waters and up rivers. Small boat raiding parties could be landed more easily. The first opium war lasted until September 1842. China was forced to settle and agreed to pay Britain an indemnity and to cede the barren island of Hong Kong. The latter was then turned into a fleet base that quickly grew as a major Asian trading centre.

The Ramsays' link was further extended when another of their daughters, Mary Jane married Richard Vincent, son of the Rottnef Island prison Superintendent, Henry Vincent. The Vincents had various roles in convict supervision particularly with road works development. Another daughter, Phoebe married Captain Thomas Shaw to raise a large family at Fremantle. Many of the daughters' descendants today live state wide. However, sons of Robert Ramsay and his wife travelled to the Eastern states where they settled and raised large families. This meant that the Ramsay surname from this line died out in WA. Ramsay and Vincent graves are located at Karrakatta Cemetery and Bells at East Rockingham Cemetery. The Eastern Ramsays are well aware of their lineage, however, and have already held some reunions, in recent years. The Bell descendants through Robert Ramsay also have had gatherings in recent years. Some western relatives from Robert and Mary Ramsay's daughters have been in contact with their t'othersider cousins but more notable is the fact that a number of Australian Ramsays from Robert's lineage are still in contact with Ramsay descendants in both Scotland and Ireland. A book about the Ramsay history was written two years ago.

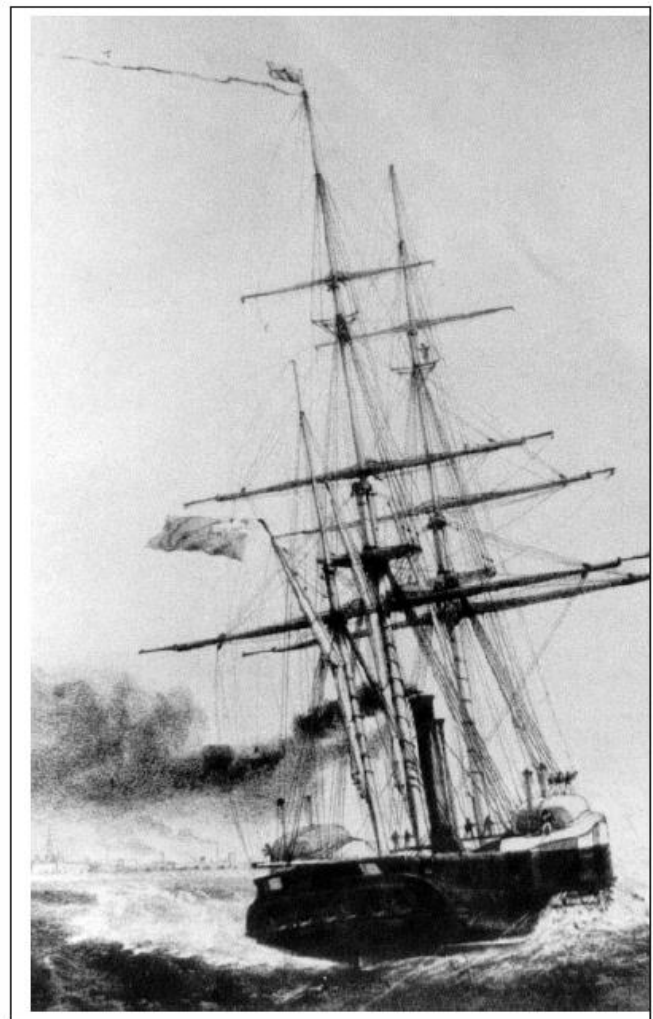
The Ramsays originally lived near Edinburgh and Robert's father William had gone to Ireland with troops to help put down the 1798 rebellion. Typically the British Government of the times did not want to pay their soldiers so gave them land grants in lieu of wages. The land granted to the Ramsays near Athlone is still occupied by the family. It was here that William Ramsay settled to raise a family but son Robert joined the army in

1825 to eventually come to Fremantle as a pensioner guard after he retired from the Royal Artillery in 1847.

Further information about the Ramsays can be found in Mr D. Barker's book about pensioner guards in Western Australia.

***Mervyn Bell Regehr.***

*[Thank you Mervyn for this article which is a sequel from Ron Sutton's article on the Opium War in the July issue]*



HMS Driver