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LIEUTENANT JOHN OXLEY R.N. 1783 - 1828

John Joseph William Molesworth Oxley was born at Kirkham Abbey, near Westow, Yorkshire in 1783. There is an element of doubt about the year of his birth as some authorities give circa 1785. He was the eldest of a family of six sons and one daughter.

Throughout his life he used only the first of his four given names.

His father's family were of landed stock having moved to Yorkshire from Oxley Manor, in Westmoreland. His mother, Isabella, was the daughter of the fourth Viscount Molesworth.

The second son, Richard, joined the Navy, became a Lieutenant and was lost at sea in 1818. The third son, Henry, was educated at Canterbury, afterwards went to Saint Omers and was ordained a priest of the Roman Catholic Church. He later returned to the Church of England and died unmarried. The fourth son, Thomas, joined the Navy and, like his elder brother Richard, was lost at sea in 1819.

The two other sons died very young and the daughter, Isabella Margaret, married Captain Dixon, came to Australia and died in Sydney in 1839.

John, as a lad of sixteen years, joined the Royal Navy and became a midshipman on the "Venerable" under Captain Sir William Fairfax and later, in 1801, served in the same ship in the West Indies.

Later in the same year, he transferred to the "Buffalo" where he served in the East Indies under Captain Kent.

In 1802 he sailed for New South Wales in the "Buffalo" as Master's Mate.

Chester Smith states in an article published in the New South Wales Freemason, May 1st, 1953 that "it is on record that Oxley was entrusted with letters in Latin, French and English, from the Royal Navy and Army, for delivery to Freemasons then in the Colony". These were probably Master Mason's Certificates.

John Oxley's first introduction to survey and exploration work came in 1804 when he assisted in a survey of Westernport which had been discovered by

George Bass in 1798. He was also involved in a number of other hydrographic surveys of South-Eastern Australia and Van Dieman's Land.

Although, due to his service at sea, he had not passed the promotion examinations, Oxley was made an Acting-Lieutenant in 1805.

In 1806 he was given command of the "Estramina" and, in the following year, he returned to England in the "Buffalo" to receive, in 1808, his commission as First Lieutenant. He transferred to the convict transport "Speke" and returned to New South Wales.

In an earlier letter to his superiors, Governor King described him as a "very active, sober and attentive young man" - and reports such as this, no doubt, led to his promotion.

Oxley received a land grant of 405 hectares situated between Cobbity and Narellan as a result of his involvement with the "exclusive party", one of whose leaders was John Macarthur who held an adjoining property at Camden and who was involved with the so called "Rum Rebellion" which resulted in Governor Bligh being deposed in 1808.

In 1810, Oxley returned to England in the "Porpoise" and, during the following year, he resigned from the Navy and, on the recommendation of Matthew Flinders, he was appointed Surveyor-General of New South Wales at a salary of 273 pounds fifteen shillings a year. He arrived in Sydney on 1st January, 1812 to take up his appointment.

He erected a house, stables and a mill on his property which he named "Kirkham" after his birthplace in England. Kirkham Lane today leads from the Hume Highway to the original property.

In 1813, Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth succeeded in crossing the Blue Mountains, a hitherto impenetrable barrier, some 60 kilometers west of Sydney.

They were followed by George Evans, Deputy Surveyor-General, who discovered the Macquarie River in 1813. Bathurst, the first inland town in Australia, was established there in 1815. ^{Later} In 1815, Evans proceeded south west from Bathurst and discovered the Lachlan river and established a depot where the town of Cowra is situated.

These discoveries generated considerable interest and John Oxley, who had done very little and shown no interest in exploration during the five years since his appointment as Surveyor-General, volunteered to explore the inland.

Governor Macquarie instructed him to lead an expedition westward to find out the course of the Lachlan River.

With George Evans as Second in Command and Alan Cunningham the botanist, the expedition left Sydney for Bathurst on 3rd April, 1817. The party of twelve men left Bathurst on 20th April and two boats, built in Bathurst, were carried overland to Evans' depot on the Lachlan River which was reached on 28th April.

The expedition continued downstream, past the site of the present town of Forbes to a point somewhere near the present Condobolin. The river was then in flood and impassable swamps and marshes prevented further progress.

On May 18th, Oxley left the Lachlan and struck south-west. Dense scrub and shortage of water forced him to turn north-west to regain the Lachlan when he was within two days journey of the Murrumbidgee River.

He reached the Lachlan on 23rd June and proceeded along its course past the present towns of Hillston and Booligal until again stopped by marshes and shallow lagoons. Once again he was denied the honour of discovering the Murrumbidgee.

Perhaps the last two verses of the poem by Andrew Barton (Banjo) Paterson, published in The Bulletin on 25th April, 1896, and entitled "Hay and Hell and Booligal" truly describe Oxley's feelings:

"Just now there is a howling drought
That pretty near has starved us out -
It never seems to rain at all;
But, if there should come any rain,
You couldn't cross the black soil plain -
You'd have to stop in Booligal."

"We'd have to stop!" With bated breath
We prayed that both in life and death
Our fate in other lines might fall:
"Oh, send us to our just reward
In Hay or Hell, but, gracious Lord,
Deliver us from Booligal!"

Today in Booligal there is a memorial to John Oxley constructed from a tripod surmounted by a theodolite and some 100 kilometers further along the Lachlan than the explorer was able to proceed, is the small township of Oxley.

He had been a victim of that Australian phenomenon where a river has no defined channel so that, in the summer heat, water evaporates or percolates into the ground to form artesian basins.

Oxley decided to return to the Macquarie River, and after crossing the Bogan River, he reached the Macquarie near the location of the present town of Wellington where he finally discovered fertile valleys and well wooded hills. A depot was established and the location named after the Duke of Wellington. He thence proceeded to Bathurst where they arrived on 29th August after a journey of 19 weeks covering a distance of 2,000 kilometers.

During the latter part of the journey he discovered an expanse of water which he named Regent's Lake in honour of the Prince Regent, later King George IV. Twenty years later, Thomas Mitchell re-named it Lake Cargelligo.

Oxley's conviction that the western rivers flowed through barren, useless country into an inland sea held back further exploration of the western area for three years.

In his report, John Oxley described the area south of the Lachlan as "barren desolation". He went on: "I am the first white man to see it, and I think I will be the last". He could not have foreseen the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area.

On 28th May, 1818, Oxley left Bathurst on a second expedition to solve the river problem and to try to prove his theory of the existence of an inland sea. He was accompanied by his deputy, George Evans; Charles Frazier, botanist of the Sydney Botanic Gardens and Surgeon John Harris formerly of the New South Wales Corps.

On 2nd June, they left the Wellington Valley depot established the previous year, and followed the course of the Macquarie River using boats and horses until, once again, further progress was prevented by swamps and marshes. They were only about 100 kilometers from the Darling river, the discovery of which was yet another honour denied him!

In the meantime, George Evans, who had been left behind at the Mount Harris depot, had set out in an easterly direction and had succeeded in discovering the Castlereagh River.

Evans and Oxley both returned to the Mount Harris depot which was situated about 50 kilometers north of the present town of Warren. In Macquarie Park in the town, a monument has been erected to honour John Oxley.

Oxley now set out in a north easterly direction and, on 8th August, crossed what is now the Warrumbungle Range. After travelling further east, the party discovered the rich Liverpool Plains which Oxley named after Lord Liverpool under whom he had been appointed Surveyor-General. The Goulburn Vale was found and named in honour of the Secretary of State for the Colonies.

The Peel River, named in honour of the British Statesman, Sir Robert Peel, was bridged by felling large trees and then the Cockburn river was crossed.

The anchor from his ship "Sealark" has been erected at the point where he crossed the Peel.

The expedition reached the head of the Macleay River and a camp was established near the present town of Walcha while Oxley explored the Apsley and Tie Rivers.

On 23rd September, 1818, the party crossed the main dividing range from a high point on which Oxley was rewarded by a view of wonderfully fertile areas with the Pacific Ocean in the distance.

Oxley wrote: "Balboa's ecstasy at the first sight of the Southern Sea could not have been greater than ours when, on gaining the summit of this mountain, we beheld old ocean at our feet; it inspired us with new life, every difficulty vanished and in imagination we were already at home."

The party descended along the course of the Hastings River, named in honour of the first Governor-General of India, and, after a journey of 650 kilometers from the Macquarie marshes, arrived at the ocean at a location which Oxley named Port Macquarie.

They then worked south along the coast to Port Stephens after crossing the Manning River in an old boat found on one of the beaches and carried for 150 kilometers. On 5th November, 1818, the party was transported by sea from Newcastle to Sydney.

Oxley's "Journals of Two Expeditions into the Interior of New South Wales" were published in London in 1820 and gave the first detailed information of the Australian inland. These reports, however, described much of the country as useless for all the purposes of civilised men. The districts through which he passed, and viewed through sailor's eyes, and upon which he reported so adversely, were to prove some of the richest and most valuable in Australia.

His judgement was better, however, when he wrote of the Peel Valley: "No place in the world can afford more advantages than this extensive vale."

Oxley then made several survey trips by sea and, on one of these, in 1818, he took Meehan and Hamilton Hume to Jervis Bay. In 1819 in the "Lady Nelson", during which he charted Port Macquarie, he was accompanied by Phillip Parker King in the "Mermaid".

In 1823, Oxley sailed north in the "Mermaid" as far as Port Curtis in search of a site for a new penal settlement. On his return journey, he anchored in Moreton Bay where, to his surprise, he found a white man named Pamphlett who

was living among the Aborigines. Pamphlett was one of a party of four men who had been shipwrecked on Moreton Island. One of his companions had died of thirst, a second had started to walk to Sydney and the third, Finigan, was away hunting with the head of the Aboriginal tribe who had treated the white men with great kindness.

The next day Oxley met Finigan who guided him to a large river along which he sailed for some 80 kilometers and which he named the Brisbane River in honour of the then Governor of New South Wales, Sir Thomas Brisbane, who had assumed office following Lachlan Macquarie's recall in 1821. Oxley later acknowledged his indebtedness to Pamphlett and Finigan.

As a result of Oxley's recommendation, a new penal settlement was established at Redcliffe on Moreton Bay in 1824. When sickness broke out the settlement was moved to the site of the present city of Brisbane.

John Oxley achieved much besides exploration. He was responsible for drafting regulations for sales of land in the colony and his work was praised by successive Governors whom he served and by Commissioner Bigge.

Oxley was a keen supporter of the cultural life of the colony and, as a sheep breeder, was a regular exhibitor and prize winner at early shows of the Agricultural Society which he helped to organise in 1822.

He served on the first Legislative Council in 1824 and was also a founder of the Bank of New South Wales.

He received extensive grants of land and was offered the town site of Bowral in 1815 but could not pay for it. Years later the land was given to his sons in recognition of their father's services. His total land holdings amounted to some 1,800 hectares.

In 1828 the Wombeyan Caves complex was discovered by Oxley and his pioneer grazier neighbour John Macarthur while searching for new pastures.

The Sydney suburb of Oxley Park bears his name and throughout New South Wales there are many monuments and geographical features named in honour of John Oxley. Three which are prominent are the Oxley Highway, the Oxley Wild Rivers National Park and a statue on the northern facade of the Lands Department building in Bridge Street, Sydney facing Macquarie Place and the Port Jackson he knew so well. The Royal Australian Navy has a submarine named HMAS Oxley.

On 9th June, 1976, Australia Post issued an 18 cent stamp depicting John Oxley against a background of the Brisbane River. The paper is unwatermarked and perforated 13½ x 13½. The designer was Brian Dunlop and 10,797,500 stamps were issued.

John Oxley was a Freemason. He was a member of the Lodge of Social and Military Virtues No.227 Irish Constitution attached to the 46th Regiment of Foot, 2nd Battalion Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry. The original warrant was issued on 4th March, 1752. His Master Mason's Certificate, has three panels in the design giving details in Latin, English and French.

It reads:

"We the R.W.M. and officers of L. No.227 on the Registry of Ireland, bearing the distinctive Title of "Social and Military Virtues" held in the H.M. 46th Reg. of Foot, do hereby certify and affirm that our Brother (master mason) John Oxley the bearer hereof is one of our members and hath worked with zeal among us.

We therefore recommend him to all regular lodges and Brethren wheresoever dispersed as a true and faithful Brother, praying for him Masonic Reception as we will give in similar cases to those who may come to us well recommended. And that these presents may serve him alone we have caused him to affix his name in the margin.

Given in L under our seal this 6 MARCH A.D. 1817."

The certificate is signed by:

E. Sanderson	W.M.
H. O'Connor	S.W.
Tho. McVitie	J.W.
D. L. Cox	Sec.
H. McDonald	Treas.

It is one of the oldest masonic documents extant in Australia and is housed in the museum of the United Grand Lodge of New south Wales.

Although his certificate is dated 6th March, 1817, Oxley must have been initiated some time earlier as he is recorded in the "Sydney Gazette" of 9th November, 1816 as having attended as a member of the Lodge of Social and Military Virtues No.227 I.C. at the ceremony of laying the foundation stone of Brother Captain John Piper's home at Eliza Point on 2nd November, 1816.

His name received masonic honour when Lodge Oxley No. 225 was consecrated at Nyngan, Lodge John Oxley No. 879 was formed at Tamworth and John Oxley Lodge No. 513, Queensland Constitution, in Brisbane. Other masonic orders have also commemorated his name.

John Oxley, and Emma, daughter of John Norton of Mulgoa, New South Wales, were married at St. Phillips Church, Sydney, in 1821. The minister was the Revd. William Cowper. Their home in Sydney was at the corner of King and Macquarie Streets.

John Oxley remained Surveyor-General of New South Wales until his death which occurred at his country home "Kirkham" on 26th May, 1828 and was buried in the Devonshire Street Cemetery, the Government according him a public funeral. When the cemetery was demolished to make way for the present Central Railway Station, the grave of John Oxley could not be found. Later, the headstone which had been removed, was discovered being used as a doorstep to a suburban house.

He was survived by Mrs. Oxley and two young sons. Mrs. Emma Oxley died at Hunters Hill in April, 1885, fifty-seven years after John, and was buried in the churchyard of St. Anne's Church of England, at Ryde, New South Wales.

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