

1829

COLONY ON THE SWAN

The entire Australian continent came under British rule on 2 May 1829 when Captain Charles Fremantle, commanding HMS *Challenger*, formally annexed the area west of longitude 129 degrees east on behalf of the Crown.

It was the first step in an ambitious scheme for a new, convict-free colony drafted by Thomas Peel, cousin of the Tory leader and British Home Secretary, Sir Robert Peel, and a Royal Navy captain named James Stirling.

For more than two hundred years after Dirck Hartog first landed in the vicinity of Shark Bay in 1616, New Holland (as present-day Western Australia was first named) had been rejected as unfit for colonisation by Dutch, British, and French explorers.

Only in 1826 did London, alarmed by increased French exploration in the area, order Governor Darling of New South Wales to set up a base at present-day Albany to show the flag and investigate the possibility of a new penal settlement.

A small detachment of soldiers and convicts landed there in December

1826, but the project did not get off the ground, and by 1831 had been completely abandoned.

While the Albany settlement was still being built, James Stirling, with the permission of Governor Darling, explored an area farther to the north where the Swan River entered the Indian Ocean. He reported enthusiastically that it was an ideal site for large-scale colonisation.

This suggestion was rejected, but soon afterwards Stirling arrived in London where he managed to interest Peel and several other wealthy, influential men in sponsoring such a project.

A syndicate formed by Peel offered to spend £300 000 to send 10 000 settlers to Swan River in exchange for a land grant of 1.6 million hectares in the new colony.

When the Colonial Office refused to grant so much land, Peel's associates withdrew. But Peel (financed by a secret partner, Solomon Leavey) continued negotiations and eventually finalised a deal whereby he would receive 101 000 hectares of land along the Swan and Canning rivers if he was able to land settlers in the Swan River colony before November 1829, and the same amount again once 400 migrants had arrived there.

The Colonial Office, in turn, agreed to establish the colony with Stirling in command and to provide troops and a few officials.

On 5 December 1828 a public statement was issued by the Colonial Office detailing conditions for land grants at Swan River and inviting applications from interested settlers. The Government later extended the offer of free

land grants to the end of 1830, and also upgraded Stirling's position to that of Lieutenant-Governor.

The Colonial Office announcement created great interest in Britain, with many leading newspapers publishing long articles on the 'excellent prospects' of a colony at Swan River, which were based almost exclusively on Stirling's rose-tinted reports. Advertisements by shipping agents, keen to fill their vessels with settlers, were even more misleading:

The new settlement on Swan River is in one of the finest climates of the Universe about 3 months sail from England, highly suited for the production of cotton, silk, tallow, provisions, linseed, hemp, flax, and corn and the culture of vine.

The country is of an open and undulating character, with excellent soil beautifully but not too much wooded; well adapted for wool growing and the raising of stock. The coast and river literally teem with fish.

The shortness of the distance between Swan River and the Cape of Good Hope, the Mauritius, the Indian Peninsula, Timor, Batavia, New South Wales and many other important places, must open a door for commercial enterprise of a vast magnitude.

It has been calculated that rice, at one penny per pound, sugar at 3 pence per pound, coffee at 4 pence per pound, tea at 2 shillings and sixpence per pound, and many other commodities and live stock at equally low prices can be imported from Java in weeks.

The harmless kangaroo seems to be the only wild animal in the occupa-

tion of this immense and beautiful country...

The Emigrant will not have to wage hopeless and ruinous war with interminable forests and impenetrable jungle, as he will find prepared by the hand of nature extensive plains ready for the ploughshare. He will not be frightened from his purposes by beasts of prey and loathsome reptiles. He will not be scorched by tropical heat nor chilled by the rigours of a Canadian winter. He will not be separated from the lofty protection of his native country, nor hardened in his heart by the debasing influence of being obliged to mingle with, and employ those bearing the brand of crime and punishment; and as no convict or any description of prisoner will be admitted into the Colony, those who establish property and families will feel that their names and fortunes cannot be mixed thereafter with any dubious ideas as to their origin...

The reality came as a shock to the first seventy settlers who arrived with Stirling and his wife on board the *Parmelia* on 1 June 1829.

Eighteen days later the Swan River colony was officially proclaimed. Soon hundreds more settlers were arriving to take up vast amounts of arid land which few had the knowledge, or the perseverance, to develop.

Stirling himself wrote: 'People came out expecting to find the Garden of Eden and some of the working class were astonished at finding hard work an indispensable preliminary to meat and drink ... all in fact were in a state of some despondency.'

Another settler noted in his diary: '... I discovered that not one passenger in

ten knew anything about farming, although they all professed their object to be the acquisition and occupation of land’.

By the end of 1830, 404 680 hectares of land had been allotted to a population of just over 4000-yet only 81 hectares were being cultivated.

Even Thomas Peel, who had so eagerly promoted the scheme, could not make his own farming venture pay. When he died in relative poverty on 21 December 1865, his property had hardly been developed at all.

Soon many of the settlers who had rushed so unprepared to the Swan River colony had packed up and left, either returning to England or trying their luck in the eastern colonies.

By the end of 1831 the population had dropped to 1500, and as word of the harsh conditions reached London, the influx of migrants came to an abrupt halt.

In 1833 Stirling went to England to seek a better deal for the settlers. He returned more than a year later with a knighthood and little else, but continued his struggle to develop the colony until he resigned in 1839 to pursue a naval career which saw him eventually reach the rank of admiral.

By 1849 labour was so scarce and the economy so depressed that the settlers decided at a public meeting in Perth to swallow their pride and ask for convicts to be sent to the colony. The first boatload of seventy-five male convicts (women were never transported to Western Australia) arrived on 1 June 1850, heralding the start of a new and more prosperous era.

The convicts built roads and bridges and helped to open up the interior. Once they had served a certain period of their sentence, many were granted tickets-of-leave which allowed them to work for private employers, so boosting the labour force which had been seriously depleted by the discovery of gold in the eastern colonies.

In addition, more than 5000 female migrants were given free passage to Western Australia, helping to increase the population to over 20 000 by 1868 when transportation was abandoned. A partly-elected Legislative Council followed within two years.

The gradually-improving pastoral economy received a tremendous boost with the discovery of gold, first in the Kimberleys in 1885, followed by enormously rich strikes at Coolgardie in 1892 and Kalgoorlie a year later. Suddenly thousands of people were heading west in search of wealth.

In 1895 the population of Western Australia topped 100 000; by the turn of the century this had almost doubled. The once struggling colony entered the Commonwealth as a thriving State — and has never looked back.