

Redcoat Settlers in Western Australia 1826-1869

A Taste for Adventure

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Thomas Farmer, a Redcoat in the 63rd Regiment, did not settle in the Colony, but he left behind a legacy of those who did. This story first appeared in the 111th edition (December 2022) of the 'Settlers Gazette' and I thank Lyn Coy, editor, for permission to reprint it here.

By Anne Ellis, Guest Writer

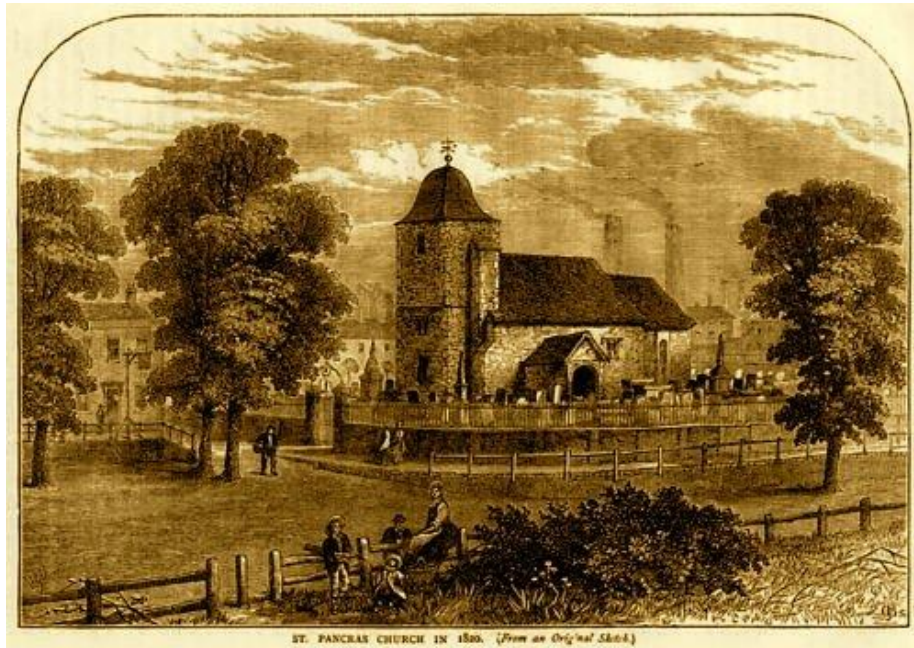
2x great-granddaughter of Ann Farmer née Evans

'The Streets of London are Paved with Gold' is not actually true, however in about 1824 an adventurous young lad from Shropshire decided to go to London to try to make his fortune. Thomas Farmer had been born in 1808 in the town of Shrewsbury, about 158 miles from London, and was 16 or 17 years old when he made his journey.

So how did Thomas travel the 158 miles? Did he walk? Was he able to hitch a ride from someone with a wagon heading that way? Or did he travel in the cheap seats on the top of a stagecoach, open to all the elements, for a penny? By the 1820s stagecoaches were able to travel about 12 miles per hour due to better roads and improved coaches. Coaches such as the *Nimrod*, the *Monarch* and the *Wonder* would set off from Shrewsbury's Lion Hotel at about 5 o'clock in the morning enroute for London and be able to arrive there by the evening.

Once in London, Thomas might not have made his fortune, but he did find love. This was in the form of another adventurous person – a Welsh girl named Ann. Ann Sophia Evans had left her home in Dinas Mawddwy for London after her mother died, and she did not get along well with her step-mother.

Thomas and Ann were married in St. Pancras Old Church, London, on the 21st February 1826.



Old Church St Pancreas, London

After their marriage, Thomas and Ann left London and maybe returned to one or other of their home towns, because on 29th May 1827 at Birmingham, Thomas enlisted in the army. He received two pounds ten shillings for doing so, and became a Private in the 63rd Regiment. Ann was pregnant by this time and the army would provide a living for the young family-to-be.

From Birmingham Thomas went to Coventry, a distance of about 18 miles, before marching about 150 miles from Coventry to Chatham, taking nine days, and was then based at Dover, Sheerness and Chatham. His occupation in the army was a cordwainer (shoemaker).

A son, Thomas, was born to Ann and Thomas at Chatham in September 1827, and a second son, William, was born in the same area at Minster-in-Sheppy in August 1828.

About this time a detachment of the 63rd Regiment, including Thomas, was detailed to sail on *H.M.S. Sulphur* for the Swan River Colony as support for the *Parmelia* which was bringing the first Governor, Captain James Stirling, to the new Colony.



HMS Sulphur – model by Craig Mitchell

As part of the instructions for the 63rd Regiment by the War Office in London, the Commander-in-Chief wrote on 3rd December 1828, that “as many of the married men as possible shall comprise the detachment, attention being paid to the good conduct of their wives.” Thus, it was that Ann and their two children, aged almost a month and a half and five months, also sailed on the *Sulphur* along with sundry other wives and children. The *Sulphur* carried 57 crew and 58 troops plus wives and children.

The *Sulphur* sailed out of Chatham on 9th January 1829 into a wild gale which demonstrated that she was very over-loaded and caused the doctor attached to the regiment to complain to the Captain that the soldiers, and particularly their wives, were in a bad way; “the women were benumbed from wet and exposure, some afflicted with febrile symptoms and with faintings and paroxysms from being cramped up and from want of ventilation.” As a result of this, when the *Sulphur* arrived at Plymouth, some cargo and people, including some women and children, were taken off. Even so, conditions on board were still very constricted but would have to be endured for almost six months. Eventually the *Sulphur* and the *Parmelia* left England on about the 13th February 1829. Frequently the two vessels sailed so close that those on board could speak to each other, but eventually the slower *Sulphur* fell behind, meeting up again at Cape Town, and then arriving at Swan River a week after the *Parmelia*, on 8th June 1829.

On arrival at the colony, the *Sulphur's* passengers remained cooped up on board for another week or so, while, after various alarms, the *Parmelia* passengers were disembarked onto Garden Island for a couple of months. Meanwhile, Governor Stirling had to decide where to site the main town of the colony. Thus, it was not until June 18th that the soldiers and their families embarked in boats and, after being dragged over the bar at the entrance to the Swan River, were rowed up to the place that Stirling had selected.

How strange everything must have looked to Thomas and Ann – such unusual vegetation, gum trees, blackboy trees, black swans, strange birds, maybe kangaroos and a glimpse of the native people. Eventually arriving at the place we now know as Perth, the soldiers sprang ashore whilst the sailors helped carry the women and children onto dry land. Ann was apparently the first to be helped ashore, thus earning her the right to be known as the first white woman to set foot at Perth. Thomas carried his two little boys.

Now the soldiers had to set about clearing some land and erecting tents for all to stay in before more permanent housing could be built.

Eventually the town site was surveyed, huts and barracks appeared, the river explored further, and small boats were constructed. The Swan River became an important means of travelling before suitable roads could be developed. The river had its drawbacks however, as drownings occurred due to lack of swimming abilities.

Thomas and Ann now had another son, Samuel, with a fourth on the way, and all seemed well until the 23rd February 1832.

Early on the morning of Thursday the 23rd February Sergeant Edward Barron requested three Privates to accompany him to the river flats to retrieve a boat belonging to Henry Trigg. Fatefully one of these Privates was Thomas. The boat was duly located, along with another small boat which was then used to tow Henry Trigg's boat. Thomas and William Steel were manning the oars in the first boat, when the tow-rope suddenly broke and Henry Trigg's boat started drifting away. William, who was a good swimmer, was about to jump into the water to grab hold of the tow rope, when Thomas, calling out that there was no need for swimming as he could touch the bottom of the river, jumped in himself. Unfortunately, the river was

deeper than Thomas thought, and he was immediately out of his depth. William managed to pull him back on the boat, saying, “For God’s sake Farmer, don’t play the fool again”, but Thomas persisted and this time, after trying to paddle the way a dog does, he disappeared from view.

Edward Barron and William Steel both tried valiantly to find and rescue Thomas but with no success.

The next day, the river in that area was dragged for some considerable time and eventually Thomas’s body was found in a depth of about ten feet, still in his shirt, trousers and boots. The Inquest held the same day ruled out that Thomas was intoxicated but noted that he had been feeling unwell previously.

1832							
50	Feb. 1 st	Richard	Stacey	died of the dysentery from excessive drinking	Perth	Mariner	J.B. Witherspoon Chaplain
51	Feb. 25 th	Thomas	Farmer	drowned on the Swan	Perth	Private of the 63 rd Regt	J.B. Witherspoon Chaplain
52	March 9 th		Robinson	hanged himself	Perth	Shipwright	J.B. Witherspoon Chaplain
53	Dec. 28 th	Richard	James	Apoplexy or Epilepsy	50 years Perth	Tavern Keeper	J.B. Witherspoon Chaplain

Parish burial register entry [Perth Burials 1832 Reg.75-86]

Thus, Thomas’s youthful bravado and sense of adventure was finally the cause of his downfall.

Thomas, aged only 24, was buried in the East Perth Cemetery. He and Ann had been married for a highly eventful six years and two days, and now Ann was left a widow with three young boys and another on the way and any family support many thousands of miles away.



Ann Sophia Farmer with granddaughter Annie

Thomas Farmer and Ann had four children as follows: Thomas Farmer (b 24 Aug 1827 – d 19 Oct 1891) William Farmer (b 12 Aug 1828 –d 10 Jul 1887) Samuel Farmer (b 25 Sep 1830 – d 28 Aug 1920) Joseph Farmer (b 21 Oct 1832 – d 24 May 1897) born after Thomas died and took name “Watson” after Ann’s next husband William Watson.

Children of Ann and her subsequent husband William Watson: James Watson (b 8 Oct 1834 – d 3 Aug 1865) Charles Watson (b 6 Dec 1836 – d 24 May 1905) Annie Watson (b 8 Dec 1838 – d 4 Jun 1911) Henry Watson (b 2 Oct 1840 – d 29 Sep 1861)

Isaac Watson (b 6 May 1844 – d 14 Sep 1900) born after his mother had remarried Thomas Walker, thus took the name “Walker”.

Ann Sophia Walker formerly Watson and Farmer, née Evans died 27th December 1870 and was buried in East Perth Cemetery.

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