

# Sir James Stirling – Western Australia's first Governor

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Sir James Stirling, the first Governor of Western Australia, was born in 1791, the fifth son of eight of the fifteen children of Andrew Stirling, of Drumpellier, Lanarkshire. His mother, Anne was his father's first cousin, the daughter of Admiral Sir Walter Stirling and the sister of Sir Walter Stirling, first baronet of Faskine.

The Stirling family was well known and celebrated in the naval annals of the 18th century. As he came from a naval background it was not unnatural for James to enter the navy and at the age of 12 he joined up as a first-class volunteer, embarking on the store ship *Camel* for the West Indies.

Stirling was fortunate at first in having the patronage of his uncle, Rear-Admiral Charles Stirling.

Soon after arriving in the West Indies, young James became midshipman of the *Hercules*, and in 1805 he went to serve in his uncle's flagship *Glory*.

He saw action off Cape Finisterre against the French and Spanish fleets, and later served under the flag of his uncle on the *Sampson* and the *Diadem* in operations on the Rio de la Plata. After watching the fall of Montevideo and being incorrectly reported as killed in action, he served for a time on the *Home Station* and on 12 August 1809, at the age of 19, was promoted to Lieutenant on the *Warspite*. In 1811 he was Flag Lieutenant to his uncle who was, by that time, Vice Admiral in command at Jamaica.

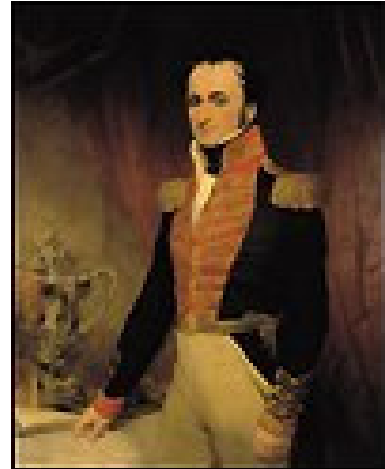
On 27 February 1812 he received his first command, the sloop *Moselle*, and soon afterwards the larger sloop *Brazen* in which he was employed during the American War in harassing forts and shipping near the Mississippi. He rendered excellent service and succeeded in damaging greatly the commerce of the American gulf ports as well as making the coast very insecure for the enemy.

Later Stirling was sent to Hudson Bay, the North Sea, the Gulf of Mexico and the West Indies and during this period was given full Captain's rank. To attain the rank of Captain, even in those days of strenuous naval activity, within 15 years was not altogether a common occurrence.

On the conclusion of his service in American waters the then Commander-in-Chief of the station wrote the following minute to the Lords of the Admiralty:

*I cannot permit Captain Stirling to leave this station without expressing to your Lordships my entire satisfaction with his conduct while under my command.*

*The zeal and alacrity he always displayed in the execution of whatever service he was employed upon are above praise; but it is to his acquaintance with foreign languages, his thorough knowledge of the Station, particularly the Spanish Main, and his gentlemanlike and conciliatory manners, that I am so much indebted for the preservation of friendly intercourse with the foreign colonies in this command. I conceive it will be as gratifying for your Lordships to hear, as it is for me to make, so honourable a report of this able and intelligent officer, whom I detach from my command with considerable regret; but I feel at the same time a very sincere pleasure in thus recommending him to the notice of your Lordships.*



On such a report being made by the commanding officer early promotion was sure to follow, therefore there could be no surprise when Captain Stirling was promoted to post rank in 1818.

Although he had no qualifications for shore employment he had been awarded a fair sum in prize money and received a small but secure income from the Treasury and for a while he travelled in Europe and moved in London and country society.

At Woodbridge, Surrey, he became acquainted with the Mangles family whose wealthy head had extensive interests in the East Indies, had been High Sheriff for Surrey in 1808, was a director of the East India Co., and in 1832-37 represented Guildford in Parliament. His third daughter, Ellen, attracted Stirling's attention and the couple were married at Stoke Church, Guildford on 3 September 1823 on Ellen's 16th birthday. They had five sons and six daughters.

Stirling's next appointment was in January 1826 when he was given command of the new *Success* and sent to form a settlement in Raffles Bay, Torres Strait, because of French activity in the Pacific.

The successful manner in which he carried out this duty earned him the hearty commendation of the Governor of New South Wales who next sent him on the same vessel later that year to visit and report on the west coast of Australia.

Stirling was impressed with the land in the vicinity of the Swan River and in glowing terms described it as an ideal site for establishing a permanent settlement. Similarly impressed was the New South Wales government botanist, Charles Fraser, whose report added weight to Stirling's political and commercial arguments in favour of its immediate acquisition and Stirling's appointment to establish a new colony there.

Both opinions were supported by the New South Wales Governor Darling, though not by the colonial administrators in London who were loath to assume a further territorial burden and who in Stirling's words 'trembled at the thought of the expenditure involved'.

Later, while serving in the East India Squadron, Stirling suffered from a severe stomach ailment and was invalided back to London on half pay. After having recovered from his illness he lost no time in trying to enlist support for a settlement to be established in Western Australia.

Stirling's persistent arguments attracted the attention of investors and speculators and with rumours that the French had designs on the region he finally overcame official reluctance to establish a colony on the West Coast of New Holland (Australia).

He was appointed Lieutenant Governor of the new settlement and accompanied by his wife and three year old son Andrew set sail for the colony from Plymouth on 9 February 1829 in the chartered transport vessel *Parmelia*.

Packed into the 443 ton barque *Parmelia* were nearly 150 men, women and children, passengers and crew, together with their personal belongings, the stores, cattle and poultry and much of the equipment required to set up the new colony.

The *Parmelia* was accompanied by *HMS Sulphur* carrying a detachment of troops of the 63rd Regiment under the command of Captain FC Irwin. Records indicate that shortly after the *Parmelia* sailed from Plymouth on her 16 week voyage to found the Swan River colony Mrs Stirling gave birth to a son, Frederick Henry, who in later years took command of the British navy in Australian waters and married an Australian girl.

The *Parmelia* arrived off the Western Australian coast near the mouth of the Swan River on 31 May and on 18 June Stirling proclaimed the foundation of the colony.

Stirling administered the Swan River Colony from June 1829 until August 1832 when he departed on an extended visit to England where he was knighted. It had been left to the ingenuity of the settlers and the untried administrative capacity of Stirling to surmount all difficulties.

Although his administration was strongly criticised at various times the settlers were generally happy with the way Stirling, who was appointed Governor in 1831, governed the infant colony.

His popularity was due in no small part to his wife Ellen. Although still only 22 years old when she arrived at the Swan River she greatly assisted her husband in organising the social life of the colony with energy and charm.

Indeed, such was the admiration felt towards Stirling that during his visit to England to press for financial support for the colony, he was presented with a cup called the Swan Cup which carried the following inscription:

*Presented to Captain James Stirling RN, First Governor of Western Australia by the relatives and friends of the settlers at the Swan River in testimony of their admiration of the wisdom, decision and kindness uniformly displayed by him and of their gratitude for his strenuous exertions with the Colonial Department for the benefit of that settlement. London May 1833*

A year later in August 1834 Stirling returned to Western Australia and continued to administer the colony until December 1838. The leading settlers were honestly pained to see Stirling leave Fremantle on the 5 January 1839 as their guiding light and mentor he had shared their speculations in a great adventure.

His tall and dignified bearing, his commanding presence, and his responsiveness to public esteem had enabled the settlers to face an uncertain future. Perhaps the best summing up of this portion of his career can be gathered from the address presented to him by the colonists on his return to England.

It read in part:

*They could testify with confidence and gratitude that the general tenor of His Excellency's administration had been highly and deservedly popular; that they had invariably experienced in him a friend of warm sympathy and individual distress, and an entire and liberal promoter of every good and liberal institution, an able and zealous patron of every enterprise suggested for the general welfare and in all the domestic and social relations of private life an example worthy of high station.*



Stirling was only 48 when he returned to England doubly qualified as a naval commander and civil administrator. At first he toyed with the idea of a further colonial appointment but in October 1840 he was appointed to command the *Indus* on the Mediterranean Station where he remained until June 1844. After another three years ashore he was appointed to the *Howe* which he commanded in the Mediterranean from April 1847 to April 1850 when he was knighted by the King of Greece. At no time did he lose interest in his colony in Western Australia, always ready to join deputations to the Colonial Office or to add his signature to memorials seeking more favourable treatment from the British Government. He was not only willing to help the colony as a whole but also his erstwhile fellow colonists as individuals.

In July 1851 Stirling was promoted Rear Admiral and in the following year served at the Admiralty. From January 1854 to February 1856 Stirling was

Commander-in-Chief of the naval forces in China and the East Indies and he was promoted Vice Admiral in August 1857 the year in which his youngest son Walter was killed at Cawnpore in the Indian mutiny.

Stirling became an Admiral in November 1862 and died in comfortable retirement at Guildford in Surrey on 22 April 1865 aged 74. His wife survived him by nine years and both were buried in the graveyard of Stoke Church where they had been married.

It is at Stoke Church in Guildford that a living memorial to Stirling has been built in the United Kingdom. Opened in 1981 adjacent to the Church the 'Stirling Centre' provides a focal point for community activities within the parish.

The 175 pounds needed to build the centre came mainly from donations made by the parishioners themselves with contributions also being received from the Government and people of Western Australia.

Numerous landmarks in Western Australia today stand as a memorial to this great sailor and explorer whose infant colony, beset by so many problems in its early years, grew and matured into a prosperous and progressive member of the Commonwealth of Australia.