

Borrow Collection

Audiocassette 001A, Box 1

The Pioneers' Association of South Australia

R Grandison, "William Baxter, Botanist, with particular reference to Kangaroo Island in the 1820's."

24/8/1989. Track A. 25 mins.

KT Borrow – Pioneers' Association of South Australia, I have apologies from Dr and Mrs Verco, Miss S Cameron-Wilson. Are there any other apologies? Mrs (Paech?). Thank you.

We are to be addressed tonight by Mr Ralph Grandison on "William Baxter, Botanist" with particular reference to Kangaroo Island in the 1820's illustrated. You will all remember that Mr Grandison addressed us some little time ago on Depot Creek. He is now dealing with Kangaroo Island, the south, he's dealt with the north. Mr Grandison is a well-known Botanist and you will all remember that he has studied ST Gill and the Horwitz Expedition, so I'll just recall that Colonel Torrens paid a great deal of attention to the saltpans in Kangaroo Island. It's curious to remember that his book "The Colonization of South Australia" made considerable reference to this fact. He said on page 199 when he referred to a review in the Westminster Review of a book called the "Eastern Archipelago" by John Crawford, he said "Perseverance of the reviewer in knocking his head against facts. He pickles himself in the salt of Kangaroo Island and quarrels with Crawford. When Kangaroo Island shall be made the seat of an industrious population, when roads shall be constructed from the salt grounds to the port, when wharves and warehouses are erected, and when skilled labourers can be obtained for hire in sufficient numbers, then the given portion of

Australian labour will bring to market a supply of salt many times greater than that which the same quantity of Javanese labour brings to market. The returns involved in gold, ivory and specie will give to South Australia increased power in commanding all the varied products of European industry.” So without more ado, I’ll call upon Mr Grandison to address you. Mr. Grandison. (25) (*Applause*)

Mr Grandison – Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, it is a pleasure to be back here again. I thought before I began I’d better give you a little geographical background to where William Baxter [word inaudible - loud scraping noise on tape]. It was over a very considerable distance, especially considering the day and age of the 1820’s, things were harder to (find?) even in Sydney as most of you are probably well aware. (Thank you, Keith.) You will recognise, of course, a map of Australia. We have Sydney about here, Kangaroo Island here and as much as I would like to oblige Mr Borrow by saying that William Baxter concentrated his efforts at Kangaroo Island, my finding is that he didn’t. Apologies to Keith, I’d like to say that most of William Baxter’s botanical effort was concentrated solely and wholly in his mind, at least, in one particular place, King George Sound here in Western Australia, which some years prior to Baxter’s coming, Robert Brown when with Matthew Flinders in the ‘Investigator’, recognised potentially as a region of great concentration of the botanical family Proteaceae, which includes the Banksias, Hakeas, Grevilleas and a whole lot of others. So with that in mind I would just like to set the geographical setting right on this. Baxter had to go a long way and he was doing this before the founding of Perth, or the Swan River Colony as it was called then, and so if anything went really wrong he was really quite a long way from any assistance. Here he was, here’s Sydney, and not much in between - except Kangaroo Island.

(*Laughter*)

So, to further set the stage, I would like to say that the collection of plants mainly on Australia's east coast, by Banks and Solander while sailing with Captain Cook in the 'Endeavour', marks the first substantial interest by the English in the Australian flora. You are probably aware that some flora had been collected by Dampier, it still exists in the Oxford Herbarium but none the less there had been no profound interest following Dampier's efforts. (57)

After the settlement at Sydney in 1788, a steady trickle of Australian plants made their way back to England both for taxonomic study and for gardening novelties. The taxonomic study of course being investigating to which families, which plant group they belonged, mainly because there were many new kinds to be found. So as far as the botanist, both taxonomic and horticultural work was concerned, here was the new bonanza following on what they had found in Southern Africa.

Before Robert Brown set sail with Flinders in the Investigator for Australian shores, he had the benefit of easy access to the Banks' Collection. He was not only an ardent plant collector but rated in the forefront of taxonomists of the day. During the voyage and then an extended stay in Australia, Brown amassed a large collection of plants.

During the voyage, however, he seemed to have been quick to recognise the particular diversity of the family Proteaceae about King George Sound in Western Australia.

This family includes the well known Banksias, Hakeas, Grevilleas, Triandras, Isopogons and many other genera, and some of these today are well established items of the cut flower trade.

In 1810, Brown privately published his book "Prodromus Florae Novae Hollandiae" which contained the bulk of his Australian Collections. He intended to publish a follow-up volume, but response was unfortunately so poor that even the first volume was withdrawn by Brown from further sale. (77)

During the previous year Joseph Knight, a nurseryman of West London, assisted by Richard Salisbury, published the book “Proteaceae”, a facsimile copy of which is here. The book was inclusive of the South African genera, particularly Proteas and Leucadendrons, which you may well know. As well as Australian representatives, the book only included plants from the eastern areas of Australia and none collected by Brown in the King George Sound area. It did, however, establish new genera such as Isopogon. Thus Brown was forced to quote Knight and Salisbury in his book having been, you might say, beaten to the punch by a small margin of time.

The ensuing decade not only saw a rapid rise of a number of West London nurseries but aesthetic interest in growing Australian plants. In the clamour to promote extra novelties, two nurserymen, John MacKay and Francis Henschman, both of the Clapton area of West London, financed a private collector, William Baxter, to go to Australia and collect for them. Few personal details about Baxter appear to have survived. He was known to Joseph Knight, they were both Roman Catholics, as well as Robert Brown for whom he collected and pressed specimens. The conditions of his employment are not positively known, except to say that he was allowed to make a promissory note for expenses against his employers.

Baxter arrived in Sydney on 7 November, 1821 aboard the ‘Royal George’. For nearly a year Baxter was at and about Sydney, no doubt familiarising himself with the local flora and making contact with the Government gardener, Charles Fraser. But to date no details of his actual activities, at this time, have been discovered.

Baxter’s first voyage to King George Sound started from Sydney on 19 October, 1822, in the 30 ton schooner ‘Newcastle’. Basically the ship was to carry out sealing in Bass Strait but just how much urging was required to get it to sail on to King George Sound is not known nor is Baxter’s status on board. (106)

The ship called in at Kangaroo Island before venturing to Lucky Bay and then on another 400 kilometres to King George Sound. One obtains the impression that whilst the sailors carried out the sealing, Baxter was busy on shore making the most of his opportunity to collect. No formal settlement had taken place in the area of King George Sound at this time and the only dwellings being there were crude, informal shanties, mostly associated with sealers. In spite of little to guide him, Baxter made about a 75 kilometre inland dash to the Stirling Range (it was unnamed at the time), where he collected an endemic plant Robert Brown was later to name “*Isopogon Baxteri*”.

The voyage returned to Sydney on 6 May 1823 with 10 ton of Kangaroo Island salt. This commodity sold in Sydney to the sealing industry for 10 pound a ton. Details of Baxter’s presence at Kangaroo Island will be developed later in the talk. During 1824, the very next year, Baxter again visited King George Sound. The ship used to convey him there is not positively known. A suggestion is the brig ‘Perseverance’, aptly named I would think, which left Sydney on a sealing voyage on 27 November 1823. The Sydney Gazette of the day reported the ship heading for the west coast of New Zealand, but this appears to be an error, for upon its arrival back in Sydney on 6 June 1824, it carried in addition to 4,000 seal skins, 30 tons of salt likely to have been acquired from Kangaroo Island rather from the west coast of New Zealand.

During this venture, Baxter was assisted by the convict gardener, John Richardson, who, no doubt, represented the interests [word(s) inaudible - loud scraping noise] of the botanist Charles Fraser. A good deal of the collecting efforts appear to have been in the Lucky Bay and Cape Arid areas, about 400 kilometres to the east of King George Sound. It was on this trip that Baxter collected the well-known *Hakea laurina*

or Pincushion Hakea. A small collection was made at Kangaroo Island and later reported in Edwards' Botanical Magazine. (138)

The 'Perseverance' returned to Sydney on 6 June 1824 and almost immediately Baxter left for England. His arrival early in 1825 was just in time to have some specimens reported and illustrated in Volume 10 of Edwards' Botanical Magazine. I should digress and just mention perhaps that this Edwards' Botanical Magazine was to promote new botanical novelties and so they were always very keen to get fresh material and illustrated. It's just as well for us that they did. It's a very good source of information. Some additional specimens were added to the success of the volume. Meanwhile, Richardson on his second tour of Australia as a convict, one would have thought that once was enough but he managed twice, (*laughter*), was married, then left with Allan Cunningham, the botanist, on the second Oxley Expedition to the Moreton Bay area in Queensland more or less known as Brisbane today.

Baxter returned to Sydney about November 1825 and by this time Richardson was on his way, with his young family, to the penal settlement of Melville Island where he was appointed Government gardener. Late 1825 and early 1826 Baxter made a voyage in the 'Newcastle' to Wilsons Promontory in Victoria, but apart from a few known collections no details of this trip is yet available.

On 6 April 1826, Baxter left Sydney on the schooner 'Brisbane'. By June he was back at Wilsons Prom where he collected *Hakea ulicina*. Some time was presumably spent about Bass Strait but localities are unknown. On 26 September the 'Brisbane' showed up at Port Dalrymple near Launceston in Tasmania and was immediately seized by Customs as being unregistered. Apparently his English sponsors, tired of receiving promissory notes for payment, had stopped funds. (166)

Soon after Baxter took the 'Lord Rodney', the ship to Sydney. For a while he was in prison until finally being cleared of all charges. In a letter from Sydney dated 21 January 1827, Baxter wrote to Sir WJ Hooker complaining of his shabby treatment and looking for new sponsorship. On 21 June he left Sydney on the 'Glatton' and after a difficult, long voyage due to foul weather, landed at Twofold Bay where he made a small collection. No further details of this trip are available. No other trips are known for 1827, nor for most of 1828.

Apparently with fresh financial backing, possibly from Sir WJ Hooker, Robert Brown and John (Lowden?) a horticulturist in England, Baxter sailed from Sydney on 10 October 1828, on board the 'Lucy Ann' to King George Sound. Besides taking supplies to the penal settlement now established in King George Sound, known as Albany, the 'Lucy Ann' was to return the garrison from Melville Island which was to be abandoned. Melville Island, you may well know, is off the northern coast out from Darwin. The 'Lucy Ann' returned from Melville Island to King George Sound and it is likely that as Richardson, his old friend was on board, Baxter once again made his acquaintance. During the four months since his arrival, Baxter had been very busy collecting and arranging for the specimens to be transported to Charles Fraser by the 'Lucy Ann'. John Richardson may have had some custodianship of the specimens but this is not recorded. I might add that John Richardson at this stage was certainly not a free man, so he had to stick with the ship, but he may have been given some oversight of the specimens collected by Baxter, on the way back to Sydney. During his stay Baxter appears to have ranged far and wide from the infant Albany settlement. Another excursion was made to the Stirling Range and *Grevillia depauperata* was collected, well to the west in the Marri forest. (197)

On 14 July 1829, Baxter left King George Sound for Sydney on board the 'Prince of Denmark'. On approaching Backstairs Passage, Captain Forbes decided to investigate rumours of a nearby large freshwater lake. Details of this excursion was expressed by Thomas Gill in Volume Eight, of the Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of South Australia of 1906, under the title, "Who discovered Lake Alexandrina?".

Baxter seems to have been one of the landing party coming ashore to the east of present day Victor Harbor and then travelling towards the suspected lake. Here, Baxter collected a little *Helichrysum*, a daisy-like plant, later named after him by Cunningham as *Helichrysum baxteri*. This is the only mainland exploration of South Australia known to have been made by Baxter.

The 'Prince of Denmark' arrived at Sydney on 1 September 1829, no further record of Baxter in Australia is known nor any details of his ultimate travels back to England and he disappears literally off the face of the earth.

Well in summarising his trips, Baxter made three trips from Sydney to King George Sound. On two of these trips, 1823 and 1824, he certainly landed on Kangaroo Island. Initially he was sponsored by MacKay and Henschman but this association lapsed in 1826, much to his horror. After this, only one other trip was made to King George Sound. After his return from the last trip Baxter's whereabouts and circumstances aren't known. (221)

As for Richardson, he later acquired a ticket of leave, later had it cancelled, and some years later ended up on Major Mitchell's expedition to the inland rivers. He performed well and as a reward finally acquired his freedom.

Well, I'd just like to wrap this up a little bit by referring to the circumstance and Baxter on Kangaroo Island. It appears likely that Baxter visited Kangaroo Island twice, once in 1823, then again in 1824. His late 1828 visit to King George Sound

and subsequent return to Sydney in 1829, shows no trace of the third landing on the island. At the time of Baxter's visit, the island was virtually run by a sealer by the name of John Anderson, better known as Abyssinian Jack. Apparently a man of commanding physical proportions and cast in the brutality of the day, he particularly ruled a critical proportion of the island near present day Kingscote. According to Edith Wells in her book "Cradle of the Colony", Abyssinian Jack had been there since 1818, no doubt lured by the possibility of control of salt production, so important to the sealing trade and fetching 10 pound a ton in Sydney. Inland a short distance from Kingscote even today, is a shallow salt lake fed by an aquifer connected to the sea. During February however, the brine solution dries and the salt can be scrapped off. Nearby is another shallow lake but this time a freshwater, able to support a small settlement in an environment markedly devoid of surface waters. In season, the seals came ashore in large numbers along the rocky parts of the south coast. Here they would be clubbed and skun, usually by loosely-hired natives either from Van Diemen's Land or the mainland. I might add, this appears to have been almost a semi-slavery sort of situation. The skins were then transported to the area of the salt lake to be treated and later perhaps sold to passing ships.

In January 1819, the Kingscote area to be was visited by Captain Sutherland from Sydney, who was employed to obtain salt and seal skins from the Island. In later evidence to the South Australian Association in England, he provided not only an account of his stay but a map of the Island showing, amongst other items, the pathway from the salt lagoons to the south coast. I have a copy of his map here tonight, you may care to view it later, an original. The pathway taken by Sutherland appears to correspond well with the sites of modern day findings of artefacts of the now extinct Kartan aboriginal culture. As the trip was a good two days' walk, it is suggested its

route quite possibly corresponds to the presence of small, but reasonably permanent sources of water. The odds favour that the water hints the route was blazed by natives brought into the Island by the sealers, the original artefact-producing inhabitants even by that time being extinct. (268)

The plant collections made by Baxter on Kangaroo Island appear to have been small in number, possibly not exceeding a dozen. However, the natural distribution of the plants suggests the possibility that the sealers' pathway mapped by Captain Sutherland, may well have been used by Baxter. The pathway would have been the only way he could have made deep penetration into the Island where such a plant collection could reasonably have been made. Short of a new, unlikely journal kept by Baxter being discovered, we will probably never know of this for sure, or his exact whereabouts. It is known, however, that in 1823, the little 'Newcastle' the schooner he sailed in, returned to Sydney from Kangaroo Island with 10 ton of salt and eight hundred seal skins. In a return trip in 1824, the brigantine 'Perseverance' with Baxter and Richardson on board, but not in charge, made a much larger haul of both salt and seal skins. This supplementary cargo, particularly of the 1823 venture, may have been an attempt to defray costs.

Of the known plants collected on Kangaroo Island, only one is today well-known and stocked in the nursery trade. It is the little *Correa pulchella*, first listed in English nursery catalogues as early as 1824 and being the first illustration in Robert Sweet's "Flora Australasica" published in 1827. I am pleased to be able to say there is the plant, there is the book, the original.

While Kangaroo Island was not the main locality for Baxter's collecting efforts, it certainly provided a sailing haven in a long haul from Sydney to King George Sound.

During the 1823 visit the natural resources of the Island may have also assisted in paying for the trip. The following year's visit was on a larger ship organised by business interests in Sydney where Baxter and Richardson may have been expected to lend a hand or perhaps were paying passengers. The presence of Richardson smacks of the influence of his overseer, Charles Fraser, of the Sydney Botanic Gardens. The early presence of Baxter on Kangaroo Island has opened up the circumstance of life on the Island in the days before the proclamation of South Australia. The sharp-eyed sealers able to utilise critical sites and resources on the Island were well matched in another vein by the enterprise and collecting skills of William Baxter. (307)

Thank you Ladies and Gentlemen. (*Applause*)

KTB – Thank you Mr Grandison. He will now show you some coloured photos on the screen. We will just have to take a little latitude while we get this screen right.

Thank you.