

Royal Western Australian Historical Society's
Annual Pioneers Memorial Service
on Sunday 27th May 2001 at St Bartholomews Chapel, East Perth Cemeteries,

Commemorating the contribution of Dr John Ferguson and Isabella Ferguson to early settlement in Western Australia.

Citation by W de Burgh, Read by Andrew Plunkett

John Ferguson described as small, wiry, tough and red bearded, came from a farming background at Eastern Dalmabreck in Scotland. Born in 1802, he was well educated and graduated with a medical degree from Edinburgh University. He practiced, apparently profitably at Auchtermuchty until 1835, when he moved to Dundee. There he met and married on 12 June 1838, Isabella, the nineteen year old eldest daughter of Dr. John and Elizabeth Maxwell. Dr Maxwell had practiced for 39 years in the West Indies and owned a plantation in Jamaica before retiring to live in Dundee where he married Elizabeth Stormouth of ancient lineage. There were eight children of this marriage and Isabella was to keep in touch by letter with her sister always.

Times were tough in the 1840's, in many parts of the British Isles, and migration to the colonies became an attractive alternative. Especially as comparatively large areas of land were available to those with limited capital, but an adventurous spirit. Such was our Dr John Ferguson who decided to join, as a farmer, the large Australind settlement set up by the Western Australian Company on the eastern shore of the Leschenault Inlet. He had sufficient funds to purchase 400 acres of rural land and sixteen town allotments at Australind before embarking and, although not a farmer himself, he had plenty of experience of how farming worked.

So it was that John Ferguson at age 40, his wife Isabella, 23, and their infant children, Elizabeth and John Maxwell arrived aboard the *Trusty* on December 6, 1842. With an eye for good land he soon exchanged his rural allocation, for 400 acres at the foot of the granite range between the Collie and Brunswick Rivers. They named this property Weddenburn after some of Isabella's relatives.

With hard work and the help of William and Margaret Forrest, who came on the *Trusty* with them, the Ferguson's made a viable farm of Weddenburn over the next three to four years. However, with the doctor's background it was inevitable that his services would be sought elsewhere. Soon after landing he accepted the position of Medical Officer for the Company at a salary of £150 a year and in December 1843 he was made a Justice of the Peace for the Colony. His medical and magisterial duties caused him to become widely known and respected by the settlers and the Government.

In May 1846, the Colonial Surgeon, Dr Joseph Harris, died. Of the six applicants Dr Ferguson was chosen to succeed him. This new appointment led, inevitably, to the leasing of Weddenburn and a move to Perth. Here the doctor found himself in charge of a rather ramshackle Colonial Hospital and Medical Officer to the Government officials and their families. His initial salary was £275 a year and the right to practice privately. Although very busy, he managed to keep in touch with the latest advances in his profession and reputedly, only a year after chloroform was used in the United Kingdom, he used it when he amputated an Aboriginal's leg.

By 1851, after the arrival of shiploads of convicts with their guards and families, the doctor became a driving force behind the building of a new hospital, on high well drained land in Murray Street. It was opened in 1855 and became the beginning of what is now Royal Perth Hospital.

It was nearly a year before suitable residential accommodation could be found for Dr Ferguson and Isabella with the children were able to move to Perth. In the meantime, John lived at Leeders Hotel on the corner of William St and St Georges Tee. In due course, Mrs Camerons Cottage on Bazaar Terrace, now the Esplanade became available. There a second son, Charles William, and two more daughters, Helen and Isabella were born. Later the Government built them a fine two storey house, near the eastern end of St Georges Terrace, much closer to the hospital. The family was readily accepted into the social set of Perth Society and became firm friends with Colonel Bruce, the acting Governor and his family. They took an active part in the festivities surrounding the first royal visit to the colony, that of Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh in 1869.

The Fergusons were a thrifty family, as befitted their tradition and upbringing. They were able to give all of their five children a first class education. Each in turn was sent to Isabella's sisters in Scotland for two years. The three girls to complete their schooling at a good boarding school. John, the eldest son, was of a rather restless and adventurous nature. After attending St Andrews in Scotland, he joined the British merchant navy, graduated to having his own ship and eventually settled down to being a prominent Perth businessman. Charles, after his two years in Scotland returned to be one of the inaugural students at Bishop Hales school in Perth. Before taking up his life's work, as manager and later owner of Houghton.

Dr Ferguson never lost his love of good land. His salary was increased from time to time and during the 1850s he sold his interests in Australind. This enabled him to invest in urban blocks in Perth and rural properties within easy reach. Principal among these were the 322 acres of Houghton, which he purchased for 350 pounds in January 1859. To this he added the adjoining 250 acres of Strelly in 1863. Houghton was the fertile river end of Swan Location 11, one of the original grants on the Upper Swan river flats. Houghton became a famous vineyard and wine making venture under Charles Ferguson's lifelong management and later that of his sons. Although sold by the family in 1950, it is still a famous vineyard and winery. The farm land was not sold until 1972. Another acquisition of note was that of Barndon Hill, now the suburb of Rivervale, which he bought from Solomon Cook in 1871. This 500 acres was part of the original Swan Location 35 and was leased for a good many years to Archie Clifton, a grandson of their old friend Marshal Clifton of Australind. Archie ran a dairy farm from there for 26 years.

Dr Ferguson held the position of Chief Medical Officer and was Chairman of the Medical Board from its institution in 1870. He retired on a pension in August 1879, and died at his residence in St Georges Tee on September 11, 1883, aged 81.

Four of John and Isabella's five children married into well known pioneer families, and their descendents continue to play a prominent role in Western Australia's affairs. Helen the middle daughter did not marry. She was active in many ways and was the first secretary of the Karrakatta Club. She and her mother moved to a house in Mount St, where Isabella died aged 91 in 1910 and Helen 3 years later. They are both buried in the doctor's grave, which we honour today, in the East Perth Pioneers Cemeteries.