

Royal Western Australian Historical Society's
Annual Pioneers Memorial Service
on Sunday 24th May 2009 at St Bartholomews Chapel, East Perth Cemeteries,

Commemorating Pensioner Guards

Citation by Gillian O'Mara

We are here today to honour the contribution made to the Colony of Western Australia by the Pensioner Guards. Pensioner Guards were enrolled as pensioners from the British military through Chelsea, Chatham and several other appointed pensioner hospitals throughout Britain. They applied to come out to this Colony and guarded the convicts on the voyage. The exception was the Naval Brigade which brought out a contingent after the transportation of convicts ceased. There are always exceptions to the rule and this applied also to a handful who were pensioned off in Western Australia when their regiments were moved to another colony or overseas. They became Pensioner Guards when they were employed by the War Office and put in charge of convicts at such faraway places as Breaksea Island. These included a few who came on ships such as the *Travencore*. Their pensions were paid by Britain and the amount varied according their service and sometimes their injuries. Ages normally ranged from the early 20s to the late 50s.

Those who remained in the pensioner service had to parade weekly in full uniform and be on call by the Colony for use at any time. Others were employed on arrival at the Chief Convict Establishment in Fremantle, others to Ticket of Leave Depots and government departments throughout the Colony. Some were only hired for the voyage and had to seek fresh employment on arrival. Many brought their families with them, some sent for them later while others married in the Colony.

After seven years service, some qualified to obtain or purchase an allotment of land which was normally registered as a P location. Locations ranged from Butler's Swamp, Coogee. North Fremantle, Geraldton, Guildford, Kojonup, South Perth to Toodyay and York. On their death, this land was either retained by the family, or the family was displaced and the land given to another Pensioner Guard. Pensioners who gained or owned the title to their lot were able to sell their land and in some cases Pensioners' widows were able to keep plots. The average land block was about two acres.

When representative government came to Western Australia, a few Pensioners were retained in the new Enrolled Pensioner Force but many, according to records, were unemployable through ill health or age. Nevertheless, all still received pensions.

Military funerals became part of Pensioners' duties. Today we honour two men who were but a very small sample of the Pensioner Guards. The red ribbons you see fluttering in the breeze with name tags are spread over what remains of the several cemeteries which hold about 10 per cent of pensioner gravesites. Take time to have the opportunity of visiting these sites today.

The two men we are honouring are Martin O'Dea and William Thomas Wimbridge both of whom brought their families to Western Australia and who have many descendants. Martin O'Dea was born in County Clare, Ireland about 1832 He enlisted as a private of the British Army in the 41st Regiment of Foot, which by 1881 was called the 1st Battalion of the Welsh Regiment Jean McDonald, (who is here with me) from the Enrolled Pensioner Guard Special Interest Group of the Western Australian Genealogical Society writes that he served in the

Crimea becoming a Lance Corporal, although the War Office listings on arrival state he was a Private. Martin married Bridget Warren in 1856 at Ennis, County Clare, Ireland. Between 1857 and 1863 they had four children—John Martin, Bridget, Mary Anne and Michael. There is no record of Bridget and Mary Anne arriving in WA and it is assumed they died in Ireland. After his term of service in the military, Martin's pension was paid to Ennis, his birthplace. He enrolled as a pensioner and applied to serve as a guard to the convicts on the ship *Vimiera* in December 1865.

More children were born after their arrival in the Colony—Francis (1868) was joined by Mary Rosary (1870), Peter (1872) and Patrick Joseph who, although unregistered, was said by family to have been born in 1873. Both Francis and Peter died in 1873 aged four years and eight months respectively.

The family lived in the Barracks at the top of St George's Terrace before Martin was transferred to the Avon Valley and then to the South West. He acquired Perth Location Y145 which we now know as the Northbridge area of West Perth, near the site of St Brigid's church.

Bridget died in 1886 aged 46 years and Martin died on 23 September, 1893 aged 60. Martin was honoured with a military funeral. The photo of the procession, showing an impressive number of Pensioners in full regalia, is shown in *The Dismal Trader: the undertaker business in Perth 1860—1939* by Leonie Liveris. They rest together here in the Roman Catholic Section. Their son Michael became a partner in Bowra and O'Dea.

William Thomas Wimbridge was born at St Marylebone, Middlesex about 1806. He enlisted as a private in Manchester in April 1827 with the occupation of a cotton spinner. In 1840 he was promoted to corporal in the 69th Regiment which was later to become the 2nd Battalion of the Welsh Regiment. During his service of 19 years and 47 days, he spent seven years in the West Indies and British North America. He became a sergeant in 1845 and held two good conduct badges. He was discharged from the Salford Barracks, Manchester, at the end of 1846. William arrived in WA on the second voyage of the *Pyrenees* in 1853 and in September of 1854 was appointed to the Chief Convict Establishment without the sanction of his commanding officer. William brought with him his wife Eleanor Barbara, known as Ellen, son Thomas, aged three, and three other children. In 1857 he was employed with a pension and granted an allotment in North Fremantle, paying a shilling per day for nearly a year towards his cottage. By 1878 his pension was increased to 1 shilling and 7 pence per day as Commissariat Messenger. His record notes that the staff office returned his old pension certificate to the War Office in the first quarter of 1880.

During his life he was a subscriber to the Florence Nightingale Fund in 1857 and in 1869 subscribed to the Pensioners Benevolent Fund of which he was a founding member. These subscriptions were seen as compulsory for Pensioner Guards.

William died on 4 January, 1881 and was buried in East Perth Cemetery with his 17-year-old daughter Sarah, who had died 7½ years before him. Eleanor died 10 years later and her gravesite is just west on the pathway around the chapel.

Today's ceremony is only possible because of the co-operation between the Royal Western Australian Historical Society and the National Trust which is now in charge of this resting place of many citizens of Western Australia but historically our Colonial settlers one and all.

May they all rest in peace. Thank you.