

WHO WERE OUR FOUNDING MEMBERS?

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In 1822 the founding members of what would become the Royal Agricultural Society of NSW (RAS) could see where opportunity lay. With land rapidly opening up in all directions, everyone who was anyone got cracking, establishing or further developing their agricultural interests. Altogether they were a marvellous collection of mavericks and malcontents, who had fingers in every colonial pie.

When the Agricultural Society was formed in the winter of 1822, ninety-nine gentlemen signed up as the first subscribers. Leading the push and taking positions as office bearers and committee men were many whose names are famous: Marsden, Wollstonecraft, Berry, Cox, Macarthur, Lawson and Oxley, just to mention a few. But almost without exception, all of the other members were men of action too. Back then, anyone who fetched up in New South Wales was unlikely to be an ordinary person. It was no place for shrinking violets. It was at the end of the world. It was a prison. But for those who came with a little class or capital there were fortunes to be made and lives full of interest to be led. One could be a player, a taker or a maker in a way which was not previously possible.

As a group of strong individuals they started with so many differences, but in the common goal of agricultural improvement they managed to come together, forging a Society which would go on to play a key role in the development of New South Wales and the nation.

While independent types spread to the outlands, Agricultural Society members with strong links to towns were very social indeed. New business initiatives and community organisations were constantly forming and, as citizens of influence, Society members were involved in them all. They were directors and shareholders of the Bank of New South Wales, the Bank of Australia, the Australian Agricultural Company; they founded the Philosophical Society; they served on the boards of the Benevolent Society, the Orphan Schools, the Native Institution; they supported churches and other charities; they formed turf clubs; they were magistrates; they became appointees to the Legislative Council.



Most Society members who weren't solely devoted to agricultural pursuits fell into one of three main occupational groups – military personnel, civil servants or merchants. Only a handful of other occupations were represented: there were two engineers, a few clergymen and solicitors, and one scientist. Three members arrived as convicts – at least that's the current tally. Further research may reveal others with convict pasts. The Agricultural Society's convicts were, naturally, of the gentleman kind. Society member D'Arcy Wentworth is counted as one, though he actually arrived in the colony as a free man. Finding himself in court for the fourth time on charges of highway robbery, he prudently volunteered for transportation.

The inclusion of ex-convicts might suggest that the Society as a whole was a tolerant organisation, blind to social divisions. However nothing could be further from the truth. Internal wars between those who were sympathetic to the emancipist cause and those who were not, were vicious.

By nature, Society members were independent types and risk takers with strong wills and opinions. Most were in positions of authority, at least on their own estates or as local magistrates. It was impossible to remain a cleanskin for long in the colony and everyone had a tangled history of alliances, all further complicated by intermarriage. Some of the Society's meetings must have been tricky: there were members who had dined at Government House on the night Governor William Bligh was deposed, and there were members who had done the deposing. How did they cope sitting down together? There were also members who supported Lachlan Macquarie and those who did not. Of the twelve 'discontented and seditious persons' in NSW named by Macquarie in a secret letter to the British government in 1817, ten went on to form the Agricultural Society. Over other issues, bitter civil law suits had been conducted between members.

They gave their time and their money and must have liked the place they helped build: only a handful of founding members had been born in New South Wales, yet nearly 70 per cent of the membership ended their days in the colony, giving it their bones. Our streets, suburbs and electorates are named after them and their properties, though no doubt we often fail to make the connections: Riley Street, The Horsley Drive, Norton Street, the Bland Shire, Moorebank, just as a random selection.

Founding member George Johnson was reported to be the first man ashore in Port Jackson when the First Fleet arrived in 1788, but a surprising number of original members were relative newcomers. One thinks of old hands like Samuel Marsden and William Cox and imagines the membership jam-packed with people of comparable colonial experience, but in fact around 40 per cent had been in the colony for less than six years. Of that group, about half were very new, arriving in or after 1820. On the back of complex social changes in Britain, Australia had entered a growth period. At last free settlers felt encouraged to come, expecting land grants and civil positions.

Left: Founding member George Johnson was reported to be the first man ashore when the First Fleet arrived in 1788. (Image: State Library of NSW ML 511)
Above: Portrait of founding member Reverend Samuel Marsden (Image: State Library of NSW ML 29)

Are you a descendent of a founding member?

The secret is out. Under the operational name of Taskforce 2022, a committee of seven councillors and seven staff members has been formed to prepare for the nationally significant 200th anniversary of the RAS. Obviously it is early days, but the committee wishes to involve descendants of the Society's first members in a range of activities when the milestone is finally marked. Doing a family history can be an incredibly time consuming and addictive business so tracking down relatives and collecting family records is a task best started soon.

Are you related to any of the founding members of the Society?

If so, please get in touch with the RAS Heritage Department by emailing heritage@rasnsw.com.au

ORIGINAL SOCIETY MEMBERS



- Acre, George (Mr)
- Allan, Andrew (Esq.)
- Antill, Henry Colden (Esq.)
- Atkinson, James, (Esq.)
- Bayly, Nicholas (Esq.)
- Bell, Archibald (Esq.)
- Berry, Alexander (Esq.)
- Black, John Henry? (Mr)
- Bland, William (Esq)
- Blaxland, John (Esq.)
- Blaxland, John Jnr (Mr)
- Blaxland, Geo Jnr (Mr)
- Brabyn, John (Capt)
- Brooks, Richard (Esq.)
- Brooks, Henry (Mr)
- Broughton, William (Mr)
- Browne, William (Esq)
- Campbell, William Douglas (Esq)
- Campbell, J T (Esq) John Thomas.
- Campbell, J (Esq) . Carne, Thomas (Esq)
- Cavenagh, Philip, (Mr)
- Chandler, Jas (Esq)
- Close, Edward Charles
- Cordeaux, William (Esq)
- Cox, William (Esq)
- Cox, William Jnr (Esq)
- Cox, George (Esq)
- Crawford, Robert (Esq)
- De Arrietta, JRL (Esq) Jean Baptiste Lehimas
- De Mestre, P (Esq) Jean Charles Prosper
- Dickson, John (Esq)
- Douglass, Henry Grattan (MD)
- Drummond, John (Mr)
- Dunn, William (Esq)
- Field, Barron (Hon Mr Justice)
- Fitz, Robert (Mr)
- Fulton, Henry (Rev)
- Garling, Frederick (Esq)
- Gollidge, John (Mr)

- Goulburn, Frederick (Major)
- Hall, James (Esq)
- Harris, John (Esq)
- Hassall, Thomas (Rev)
- Hassall, Samuel (Mr)
- Hassall, Jonathon (Mr)
- Hawes, Henry (Mr)
- Heylin, Henry (Esq)
- Hill, Patrick (Esq)
- Hook, Charles (Esq)
- Horsley, John (Esq)
- Howe, William (Esq)
- Jamison, John (Sir)
- Johnston, George (Esq)
- Johnston, Robert (Esq)
- Johnston, David (Esq)
- Irvine, (Capt)
- King, Phillip Parker (Capt RN)
- Laing, (Mr)
- Lawson, William (Esq)

- Lowe, Robert (Esq)
- Macarthur, Hannibal (Esq)
- Macarthur, Charles (Esq)
- McHenry, John (Esq)
- McLeod, Donald (MD)
- MacVitie, Thomas (Esq)
- Marsden, Samuel (Rev)
- Middleton, George Augustus (Rev)
- Moore, Thomas (Esq)
- Moore, William Henry (Esq)
- Moore, Joshua John (Esq)
- Murdoch, Peter? (Mr)
- Nicholson, John (Mr)
- Norton, James (Esq)
- Norton, Nathaniel (Esq)
- Oxley, John (Esq)
- Palmer, John (Esq)
- Palmer, George Thomas (Esq)
- Panton, Goerge (Mr)
- Philips, Jas (Mr)
- Piper, John (Esq)
- Rankin, George (Esq)
- Reddall, Thomas (Rev)
- Riley, Edward (Esq)
- Robertson, James (Mr)
- Ross, Daniel Maclaine (Mr)
- Rowe, Thomas Deane (Esq)
- Street, John (Mr)
- Throsby, Charles (Esq)
- Throsby, Charles Jnr (Mr)
- Townson, Robert (LLD)
- Walker, William (Esq)
- Walker, Thomas (Esq)
- Webber, James Phillips (Esq)
- Welsh, John (Esq)
- Wentworth, D'Arcy (Esq)
- West, Major (Esq)
- Wollstonecraft, Edward (Esq)
- Wood, John (Esq)



Above: North view of Sydney in 1822 – the year the Society was formed (Image: J.Lycett, State Library of NSW)

Seen through the lens of colonial division, the new Society was a desperately needed unifying force. Despite all the intrigue and disagreement at least one belief was held in common – belief in the economic importance of agriculture. Individual fortunes relied on agricultural success, but no single person could significantly improve their own agricultural outcomes without advancement also occurring on neighbouring properties. Only cooperative effort could provide what was urgently required: a skilled workforce, access to better breed stock and reliable information about best practice.

Fortunes were made, especially by those members who jumped to take up additional holdings around Bathurst and beyond as new land became available at exactly the same time the Society was formed. Later, these grants and runs often came to be owned by sons, forming pastoral empires.

Quite a few of the Agricultural Society members who first took land in these areas were

recognised explorers (like Lawson and Oxley) but other lesser known souls were also incredibly intrepid. One can't help but admire foundation member George Ranken and his wife, Janet. As recent arrivals in 1821 they leased 2,000 acres in Petersham from Captain John Piper and set up as cheesemakers. They were successful but soon complained the place was too close to Sydney. After a fourteen day journey with all their possessions loaded on bullock drays, the couple, along with their toddler child, arrived at the Bathurst grant they called 'Kellosiel'. At the time the region was so sparsely populated with settlers that only two other gentlewomen lived west of the Blue Mountains. With the Frontier Wars intensifying as the Wiradjuri people defended their country, the Ranken's new start could not have been as peaceful as they had hoped.

Life on the land, then as now, was precarious, and even those who had amassed riches were not insured against ruin. Drought and financial recession eventually destroyed quite a few of the Society's most successful foundation members.

Hannibal Macarthur, who by 1824 had the second largest flock of sheep in the colony and a whole host of land holdings, became insolvent in the 1840s. The aforementioned John Piper also went bung. Although a renowned spendthrift, his position had seemed unassailable. Debt and falling wool prices in the late 1820s helped bring down Charles Throsby, a surgeon, pastoralist and explorer who had roamed extensively through the Illawarra, the Bathurst and Goulburn Plains and all the way to the Murrumbidgee River. He was one of several foundation members who took their own lives, which shows that loneliness and depression in present-day rural Australia are not 'modern weaknesses' but an age-old scourge.

Behind every single name on the list of first members lie tales of enterprise and adventure – and difficulties. As the bicentenary approaches and research continues we'll learn a lot more about these fascinating individuals and their achievements, and in sharing and celebrating that information we'll learn a lot more about ourselves and the country we live in. ■