

PETER EGERTON WARBURTON 1813-1889

British military officer; Commissioner of Police for South Australia; Australian explorer

Kath Gee

This article began as simple fact-finding for a walk around Norley: A Tale of Two Manors, which was part of the Frodsham Festival of Walks 2017.

Peter Egerton Warburton was the 7th of 10 children of Reverend Rowland Egerton and his wife, Emma. Emma was the only daughter of James and Emma Croxton. Their family home was Norley Bank, one of two large estates in Norley, Cheshire. 19th century maps and documents convey the extent of the estate and historic images show the size and character of the house.



FDN0489 Norley Bank house, south side (undated). Sadly, it was demolished in 1957

Emma Croxton was a sister of Sir Peter Warburton, 5th Baronet of Arley. When Sir Peter died without issue on the 14th May 1813, Rev'd Rowland and Emma were living at Norley Bank House. Their first child, Rowland Eyles Warburton, aged 7, inherited the estates of Arley and Warburton, and Rev'd Rowland and Emma were granted royal permission to append the name 'Warburton' to their own. It is, perhaps, unsurprising that their next child & 4th son, born on 15th August 1813, was christened Peter. It is aspects of Peter Egerton Warburton's life that I have researched and presented here.

Peter was educated at home and by tutors in France until the age of 12 when he entered the Royal Navy. Peter served as a Midshipman on HMS Windsor Castle (1) for the next 3 years. Then, in 1829 he entered the Royal Indian Military College at Addiscombe, Surrey, and on 9th June 1831 he became an ensign (2) in the 13th Native Infantry Battalion, in Bombay. Peter served in the army for 22 years.

He was promoted to lieutenant on 18th July 1837 and to captain on 24th January 1845. He had married Alicia Mant of Bath, the daughter of a solicitor, on 8th October 1838. They had 3 sons and 3 daughters.

Peter retired from the army, with the rank of major, in 1853. Soon afterwards he, and presumably his family, visited his youngest brother, George and his wife, Augusta, in Albany, Western Australia. George Egerton Warburton was a pioneer settler. His sister-in-law, Eliza Grey had married George Grey, a British explorer who had mapped the coast of Western Australia in the 1830s. George Grey had been appointed the 3rd Governor of South Australia (1841-45) which was followed by Governor of New Zealand (1845-54). In these positions he gained a reputation of trouble shooter. Through these connections Peter and his family travelled to Adelaide, South Australia, where Peter took up the post of Commissioner of Police. He was also appointed a Justice of the Peace.

For almost 14 years and with increasing financial support from the South Australian Government, he was able to develop morale-boosting reforms in the Police Service and a policing presence as the 'economic frontier' of South Australia expanded.

Throughout this time there were exiting opportunities to explore little-known districts with the purpose of identifying potential grazing lands. Peter's first 4 explorations into the hinterland included the areas around Lake Torrens & Lake Eyre.



Lake Eyre Basin map by Kmusser for *The Rand McNally New International Atlas* (1993) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=9643977>

During his 5th expedition, to the north shore of Lake Eyre in 1866, Peter discovered a large river which he traced back from Lake Eyre to near the Queensland border. It was subsequently named after him: the Warburton River.



Fast flowing Warburton River which follows the eastern edge of the Simpson Desert

Peter's fascination with exploration and frequent absences from his post as Police Commissioner antagonised members of the provincial government and after a secret hearing he was pressured to resign. This he refused to do claiming he'd been victimised and unfairly treated. However, on 24th March 1869 he accepted the appointment of Chief Staff Officer and Colonel of the Volunteer Military Force of South Australia.

Three years later, at the age of 59, Peter embarked on his 6th 'great expedition' - the largest, longest, most life-changing and last.

On 21st September 1872, Peter Egerton Warburton left Adelaide, leading an expedition of 7 men, 17 camels, plentiful provisions and with the aim of finding an overland route to Perth and evaluating the nature of the country between. The team of explorers included Peter's son, Richard; JW Lewis, an experienced bushman; 2 Afgan camel drivers plus an assistant; an expedition cook; and Charley, an indigenous Australian tracker. They reached Alice Springs on 21st December in the midst of drought and decided to wait there during the summer months. They set off again on 15th April, but were soon having to deal with extreme heat and lack of water. They headed for two rivers, but discovered their courses had been wrongly mapped. As they crossed Northern Territory they passed two distinctive, previously mapped mountains and reached the furthest point of an earlier expedition by other pioneers on 20th August.



The explorers pressed on across the arid desert terrain and survived only by hunting out the natives to discover their wells. At one point they lost 4 camels and for three weeks in October they subsisted on the meat of a single camel and were plagued by ants. By 12th November Peter had lost the sight of one eye and believed he was close to death from starvation, but, they supported each other and struggled on reaching the Oakover River in Western Australia on 11th December. They were still 800 miles north of Perth and 200 miles from the coast. They followed the course of the river with Peter strapped to one of the two remaining camels, all of them exhausted and poorly nourished. On 30th December they were lucky to meet settlers who took them to the DeGrey [Sheep] Station, near Port Hedland on the north coast, which they reached on 11th January 1874.



Above, left to right:

Key places on the explorers' route in Western Australia

Richard (son), Peter, JW Lewis c.1874. National Library of Australia

The expedition had become the first to cross the continent from centre to west, to survive a crossing of the Great Sandy Desert and to cover nearly 1000 miles of country hitherto unknown to Europeans.

The explorers were enthusiastically received at Perth and then Albany, on the south coast, before returning to Adelaide. Back in South Australia their success was celebrated at a public banquet and the legislative assembly awarded Peter £1000. Peter attributed his survival to Charley, his aboriginal companion. The expedition's choice of camels for transport probably contributed to their survival, too.

In Britain, the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) awarded Peter their Patron's Gold Medal for 1874 (3). In November 1875 Peter came to England for six weeks and was awarded the CMG (4). With assistance, he published an account of his expedition: *Journey across the Western Interior of Australia*.

Thereafter he lived at his property and vineyard, called Norley Bank (*sic*), in Beaumont, near Adelaide and died there on 5th November 1889. He was buried in the nearby churchyard of St Matthews, Kensington, which is also the resting place of composer, Percy Grainger. Peter was survived by his wife, two sons and a daughter.



Norley Bank, Beaumont, Adelaide, with daughters, Ethel and Mary, plus Alicia and Peter to the right. This property has also been demolished. Image courtesy of Burnside Library via the President, Burnside Historical Society

My researches for this article have mainly used online sources, both British & Australian. I have also benefited from email correspondence with Meredith Ide, President of Burnside Historical Society, Adelaide, and the RGS in London. I have sought to check out a number of minor factual discrepancies in the online accounts I have used, and have noted an improving evaluation of Peter's achievements as time passes. For instance, an Australian biography published in 1949 concluded with the following disparaging statement:

"Coming to Australia when past 40 years of age Warburton had not the outback experience that is necessary for exploration work. Though he succeeded in crossing Australia from Adelaide to the north-west coast it was fortunate that the whole party did not perish, and Warburton can scarcely be ranked among the greater Australian explorers."

However, in later works Peter's reputation and contribution to geographical knowledge have been more widely appreciated and honoured. For instance, the remote settlement of Warburton, Western Australia, two mountain ranges, the Warburton River and the Warburton Beetle, *Stigmodera murrayi*, are named after him. And, he was depicted on one of six Australian stamps, issued on 6th June 1976, which commemorated Australian explorers.



The portrait of Peter Egerton Warburton (1813-1889) above, was taken by an unnamed photographer c.1874.

Notes relevant to the text

- (1) HMS Windsor Castle was a full rigged, timber sailing ship built by the Royal Dockyard at Deptford. Her keel was laid in 1774 and she was launched into the Thames in 1790. She had cost £51,198.8s.6d to build and was manned by a crew of 738 officers, men, boys and Royal Marines. She was of similar age & design to the 'Fighting Temeraire'. Between 1826 and 1829 Peter would have sailed with the ship from Plymouth to Portugal, carrying troops, before returning to Plymouth. The ship also sailed with troops from Portugal to the Mediterranean and to Valletta, Malta for a refit in 1828.

<p>HMS Windsor Castle Type: 2nd rate (size) ship in line (fighting ship); 98 guns Launched: 1790; Disposal date or year: 1839 BM: 1874 tons</p>	<p>HMS Temeraire Type: 2nd rate fighting ship; 98 guns Launched: 1798; Disposal date or year: 1838 Disposal Details: Sold. The subject of Turner's painting when she was being taken up the Thames to be broken up. BM: 2121 tons</p>
<p>Information from the Naval Database www.pbenyon.plus.com/18-1900/W/05251.html</p>	

- (2) **Ensign.** Until 1871, when the term was replaced by 'second lieutenant', **ensign** was the lowest rank of commissioned officer in infantry regiments of the British Army. It was the duty of officers of this rank to carry the colours of the regiment.
- (3) **Patron's Gold Medal.** Since 1832 the monarch has approved the award of two Royal Geographical Society Gold Medals annually. They are awarded for recognised excellence in geographical science and discovery. The Patron's Medal is engraved with the recipient's name and date of the award. One side of the medal displays the head of young Queen Victoria and on the reverse side is the figure of Minerva. In 1874 the Patron's Medal was awarded to:

"Colonel P. Egerton Warburton for his successful journey across the previously unknown western interior of Australia."

- (4) **CMG** is one of the classes of the **Most Distinguished Order of Saint Michael and Saint George.** It is a British order of chivalry founded in 1818 by George, Prince Regent, later King George IV and is named in honour of two military saints. The Order includes three classes, in descending order of seniority and rank: *Knight Grand Cross* or *Dame Grand Cross* (GCMG), *Knight Commander* (KCMG) or *Dame Commander* (DCMG) and *Companion* (CMG). The Order was originally awarded by the monarch to those holding **commands** or high position in the Mediterranean territories acquired in the Napoleonic Wars, and was subsequently extended to holders of similar office or position in other territories of the British Empire.
