

Information Sheet No. 13



City of
Greater Geraldton
Regional Library



Heritage Services

Geraldton Regional Library

WILLIAM BURGES – First Resident Magistrate

1807, Aug 23	- Born in Fethard, Co. Tipperary, Ireland.
1830, Mar	- Arrived in Western Australia on the Warrior.
1841-1844	- Returned to Ireland.
1846	- Appointed a Justice of the Peace.
1860-1868	- Returned to Ireland.
1869-1876	- Returned to Ireland.
1875, Nov -1876, Jul	- Member of WA Legislative Council.
1876, Oct 16	- Died in Fethard, Co Tipperary, Ireland.

Having established a pastoral station in the Avon Valley during the 1840s, William Burges was forced, by economic necessity and pasture decline, into seeking expanded pastures north of Perth. Along with his brother, Lockier, he drove their sheep to Geraldton, arriving in November 1850 at their new leases of 60,000 acres around modern Northampton, north-east of Geraldton. After Lockier left to take up his own land, William accepted the position of Resident Magistrate of the Champion Bay district, centred on Geraldton. He was therefore the colonial government's eyes and their main agent. He held court both at his Northampton station, The Bowes, as well as in Geraldton. In 1853 he was appointed Sub-Collector of Customs and Visiting Magistrate at the Port Gregory convict depot. Life was a constant journey by horse between there and Geraldton.

At times he worked under what would be today termed 'conflict of interest' in adjudicating on the cases involving Aborigines and Europeans for stock theft and other charges on his own station. He was also part of the eventual push to subsume the rights of local Aborigines, for instance organising a punitive expedition of settlers in 1854. In contrast, Bain's suggestion that Burges, holding trial across a flooded Chapman River, shot dead on the other bank an Aboriginal prisoner he had just proclaimed guilty, is not supported by evidence.

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William Burges. Photograph from *Twentieth Century Impressions of WA*.

His correspondence with the Government contains a useful record of Geraldton's earliest development. For example, a description of the cottage built on the shores of Champion Bay for Lt. Elliott, commander of the 99th Regiment detachment, show Burges's eye for detail: "With respect to Mr Elliot's house, it is a comfortable little cottage, consisting of a sitting room of about 14 feet by 11, with a fire place, and a sleeping room of about 14 feet by 7, clay floors. The walls are of wattle and plaster..."

He resigned his Resident Magistracy in 1860. During the next 15 years, mostly spent in Ireland, Burges actively promoted the interests of the Geraldton district, organising the export of quality breeding stock and shepherd labour. He returned to Perth in 1875, sat for eight months in the Legislative Council but took ill. He made a final trip back to Ireland and died there in late 1876.

References

Text taken from **Geraldton: 150 Years, 150 Lives**, Local Studies Department, Geraldton Regional Library, 2001, p. 27.

Copies are available from the Library, 37 Marine Terrace, Geraldton (PO Box 101, Geraldton 6531) for \$27.50 (plus \$6.50 postage and handling).

