

- A Pioneer Piece of Port Phillip -

Dr. John Chapman F.R.N.S.

Alfred Chitty, in a paper titled "Victorian Commemorative Medals", published in the Victorian Historical Magazine, Vol. 2, 1912, stated that the earliest Victorian Medal he had been able to record, was crafted in Gold and engraved by Mr. Walsh, Jeweller, of Swanston Street, for presentation at an Oddfellows Lodge Meeting that was reported in the "Argus" of 17th November, 1949. Although Victoria is credited with the first Australian Tradesmen's Token, produced for Annand, Smith and Co. in 1849 (albeit in England), and our first die-struck medal, Alfred Ronald's extremely rare "Separation Commemorative" in 1850, strictly speaking it was still officially the Port Phillip District of New South Wales until 1st July, 1851.

During the sixties, I had the good fortune to acquire what is apparently the earliest surviving numismatic production of the Port Phillip District, preceding Chitty's nomination (which he had not actually seen) by five years! I postponed publishing this exciting find until I had completed my research, which has revealed a story far more interesting than I dared to expect.

My purchase consisted of a handcrafted 37mm silver medal, almost certainly made by lathe tooling an English Crown flat, and adding two peripheral ornamental grooves, within which the following inscriptions were engraved:

Obverse:

"PORT PHILLIP ACADEMICAL INSTITUTION" in block LETTERS around the circumference, enclosing "ESTABLISHED/AUGUST/1844." in three lines of ornamental script.

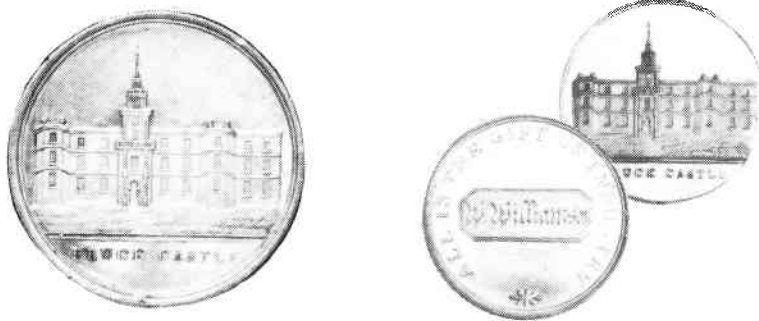


Reverse:

"2nd PRIZE GEOGRAPHY" in ornamental block capitals around the circumference. enclosing "FOR HALF YEAR / ENDING 31st / DECEMBER / 1844." in three lines of ornamental script. "MAstr W. WILLIAMSON" in script around lower circumference.

This medal is contained in a close-fitting circular box turned from dark cedar and lined with black velvet.

In addition, a thin 27mm silver die-struck medal wrapped in tissue. was also enclosed in the box.



Obverse:

A substantial three-level building with a clock tower in low relief. "BRUCE CASTLE" in exergue.

Reverse:

"ALL IS THE GIFT OF INDUSTRY" around the circumference enclosing an elongated octagonal stippled tablet engraved "W. WILLIAMSON." Simple ornament at six o'clock.

My research can be divided into the following headings -

- (1) What was the history of the Port Phillip Academical Institution?
- (2) What and where was Bruce Castle and how could it possibly be related to a medal awarded in a colony on the other side of the world?
- (3) Who was W. Williamson and what is known of his life?
- (4) Who were the medallists?

(1) THE PORT PHILLIP ACADEMICAL INSTITUTE

In 1844, a group of influential Melbourne citizens sponsored the establishment of this school in the Napier Rooms, 76 Collins St. E. (this site later occupied by the "Argus"). The inauguration of the Port Phillip Academical Institution took place on the 4th of August at a public meeting held in the Mechanics Institute.

The curriculum promised a "Classical, Scientific, Literary, and Mercantile Education". The Headmaster was William Brickwood, an Oxford graduate, who since 1841 had accepted boarding pupils at his home, "St. Ninian's" in Brighton.

The Academy flourished under Brickwood, later moving to a more spacious villa in Little Flinders St., owned by Dr. Wilmot, the first Coroner. Conventions were held to raise sufficient money for the erection of its own building, but proved unsuccessful. When Brickwood retired to Brighton in 1846, he was succeeded by a Mr. Hay whose modified curriculum and increased fees were not popular and led to the closure of the school.



Rowland Hill

(2) BRUCE CASTLE

Rowland Hill was born at Kidderminster in 1795, the third son of Thomas Wright Hill, who opened a school at Birmingham in 1803 after his business had been ruined by the war with France.

Rowland, with little formal education himself, assisted in teaching at the school which in 1819 was moved to a new school-house, "Hazelwood", built to his design. He became a recognised expert on progressive education and was co-author with his eldest brother, Matthew, of a book on 'Public Education' in 1822.

Rowland Hill married in 1827 and moved into an ancient mansion, Bruce Castle at Tottenham, North London, where he established his own school. This venture proved to be a great success, but his health failed in 1833 and he was forced to hand over the running of Bruce Castle to his youngest brother, Arthur, before moving to the Continent to recuperate.

Having recovered, he was recalled by Lord Brougham in 1834 to become Secretary to the South Australian Colonisation Commission, which promoted the establishment of this new Australian Colony.

Of course Rowland Hill's greatest claim to fame is his subsequent key role in Postal Reform and the introduction of Uniform Penny Postage, with its innovation of adhesive stamps.

His outstanding public service was recognised by a Knighthood in 1860. Throughout his latter career he still maintained his interest in Bruce Castle. He died in 1879.

(3) W. WILLIAMSON

The Williamson Family trace their ancestry back to the 14th Century when they held land in Peebleshire in Southern Scotland. They were Lairds in the Tweed area for over 100 years.

Charles Williamson, the founder of the Victorian branch of the family, was born in Scotland in 1800. He married Elizabeth Waldie in 1827 and twelve years later migrated to Australia with his wife and six children in the "Palmyra", landing at Port Phillip in December, 1839.

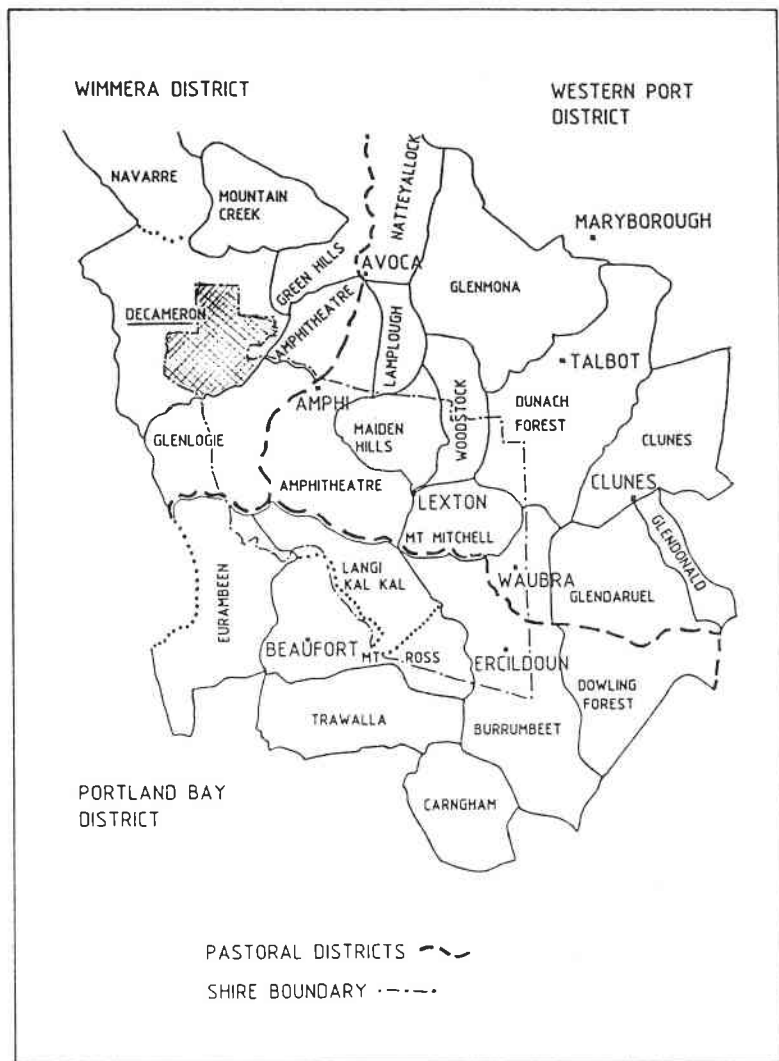


In 1853 he purchased "De Cameron Station" on the Wimmera River, North West of Elmhurst, for £30,000. Originally owned by the Imlays of Two Fold Bay, the property then passed to James Allan Cameron, who named it "De Cameron" after the head of his Clan.

The run was stocked with sheep and cattle and produced one of the best yearly wool clips in the state. When Charles Williamson died in 1875, the property passed on to his eldest son, Walter.



Walter Williamson was born at Hawick, Scotland in 1835. He commenced his schooling at the Port Phillip Academical Institution, Melbourne, in 1844, its foundation year, and was awarded his Silver Medal on 31st December. He continued his education at Bruce Castle, North London and went on to study Medicine at Edinburgh University. He qualified for M.D. Lond. and L.R.C.S. Edin. and finished his medical studies in Paris. However, he never practised his profession, preferring to return to Australia and follow pastoral pursuits at De Cameron Station with his father. In addition, he himself held several other properties, including "Yanga" and "Wongagong" in New South Wales and "Tower Hill" in Queensland.



*Pastoral runs 1835-51
La Trobe collection, State Library of Victoria*

During the latter period when Walter Williamson owned De Cameron Station, it had been pruned to 30,000 acres and carried 13,000 sheep, with a few pedigreed cattle that won many prizes. At the southern end of the property were 40 acres of vines. De Cameron wines won many awards including a Gold Medal at the Greater Britain Exhibition in 1899. Walter Williamson married Annie Morrow, daughter of Charles S. Morrow, an early pioneer of Bungall Station near Lal Lal. They had five sons and a daughter.

He was a member of the Ararat and St. Arnaud Shire Councils, and a Justice of the Peace for Victoria and New South Wales. A keen sportsman, he owned several racehorses including "The Diver" which ran second in the Melbourne Cup.

Walter Williamson died at De Cameron Station in 1901, aged 66. [George Williamson, his younger brother was also educated at Bruce Castle and also graduated in Medicine at Edinburgh University. He served as a British Army Surgeon in India and died in London in 1877 at the early age of 39.]

(4) THE MEDALLISTS

"Kerr's Melbourne Almanac and Port Phillip Directory for 1842." lists 1 Engraver, 1 Silversmith and 1 Jeweller, namely:-

John Green, Engraver, Little Collins Street, Melbourne.

John Pollard, Silversmith, Elizabeth Street, Melbourne.

George Scarlett, Jeweller, Collins Street, Melbourne.

I feel that one of these artisans must have made the handcrafted medal and its box, but which one will probably never be definitely established. Several watchmakers and woodturners are listed in the same directory and these could be considered as remotely possible candidates. Theoretically, the medallist of the English "Bruce castle" Medal should be easily determined, but to date I have been unable to find any record of it in standard references or sale catalogues. Perhaps a reader of this article will solve the problem for me.

I hope that my fellow Victorian numismatists share my enthusiasm for what appears to be the earliest surviving piece of our numismatic heritage.

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