



museum without walls

MANDURAH COMMUNITY MUSEUM

Theodore Fawcett

Theodore Fawcett, Captain of the Pinjarrah Mounted Volunteers, was an important settler and community leader in the Murray District from the 1850s to the 1890s. His role in the shift of the centre of power in the district from Mandurah to Pinjarra was significant and illustrates the change that occurred in the 1850s/60s which led to the rich farmlands around Pinjarra and beyond finally being opened up to large scale European settlement.

Fawcett's family background was deeply embedded in the British armed forces. His great grandfather brought the news of victory against the French at the battle of Marburg in 1760 to King George II, and was later Commander in Chief of the British army. Fawcett's grandfather was a Major General in the American War of Independence, and his father was a Colonel with the Duke of Wellington in Spain during the Napoleonic War. He even had an uncle who was a midshipman with Nelson at the battle of Trafalgar. It is little wonder then that the young Theodore Fawcett was bought a commission in the 6th Dragoon Guards in 1851. At this time promotion was still obtained through purchase and it was not long before Fawcett saw service in the Crimea. After the conflict had ended he resigned his commission and found himself in a position to take up one of the family estates in Australia. It seems he had a choice between a few hundred acres in Tasmania or 10,000 acres at Pinjarra and we can thus see why the young man chose to relocate to the Swan River Colony. It's interesting to suppose what might have been had he known that the Tasmanian land was much more fertile than the location he was to take up on the Murray, but we can be sure that the Murray district would have been the loser if Fawcett had set his compass for Hobart instead of Perth.

The land that Fawcett took up was known as Murray Location 1. It was originally granted to Richard Wardell in January 1830. At that time during settlement, the Murray was a remote and daunting area with its original inhabitants, the Binjareb people, still proudly in control of their land. It is reputed that Wardell took one look at his grant and exchanged it with a Captain Briggs for passage back to England. Briggs later sold it to Francis Day Wickham, the brother-in-law of Fawcett's father. Initially the 'fee simple' duties, which were the obligations of a grantee to improve the land before title was officially granted to them for their lot, were carried out by W. E. Oakley. This was valuable work for many settlers like Oakley who would perform this service for absentee landlords. But by the time the property came in to the Fawcett family, the block had returned to its natural state. Fawcett began work again on the block in 1858, living in a rough shed. This must have been a great contrast to his former life as a cavalry officer and shows that far from being a stereotypical landed gentleman, Fawcett wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty.

One element that made life for the settlers of the 1850s different to that of their forebears was the introduction of convict labour to Western Australia in 1850. For Fawcett this meant labour to help with the construction of farm buildings such as his imposing barn and the main house on his property which he named Pinjarrah Park.



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Theodore Fawcett cont'd

In 1861 Fawcett's father died in England. After returning to the 'old country' to settle the affairs of the family estate, the newly established landholder felt he was in a position to marry and bring his new bride Eliza to an established estate at Pinjarrah Park. Eliza's family were also of military background, and instead of returning straight to Western Australia Fawcett took the popular 'grand tour' of Europe. This however could be looked upon as a working holiday, or at least a study tour as this farming gentleman made a special study of the grape growing regions of southern France and Spain, taking cuttings and looking at techniques for warm climate grape growing which was to put to use at Pinjarrah Park.

Upon his return with Eliza, Pinjarrah Park was developed in to a model estate. Besides pioneering winemaking in the Murray district, Fawcett introduced scientific methods and meticulous record keeping of the various crops he planted. Agriculture in Western Australia was to profit greatly from this during 1887 when Fawcett was able to provide some of the best testimony, backed by evidence, to the Royal Commission on Agriculture.

During this period it was men like Fawcett and Singleton who now saw themselves as the 'gentry' in the Murray district and made sure that they fulfilled their obligations to the other settlers in a way that Peel before them did not. Fawcett was very active on the Murray Roads Board after its foundation in 1871, and before that in road construction which was often financed straight from his own pocket. He was active in lobbying the colonial government for funds to build bridges and other necessary pieces of infrastructure for the district. This was helped by his membership of the Legislative Council during 1866-74 and 1886-89 for the Murray-Williams district.

Another leadership role that Fawcett took up was the foundation of a volunteer military unit after British troops were proposed to be withdrawn from Australia in 1859. Thus, the Pinjarrah Mounted Volunteers were duly constituted on the 23rd October 1862 with an authorised strength of 15-17 men. This maximum enlistment was met at once, and Fawcett was duly appointed as Captain Commanding. This now left the Murray district as being the only area, outside of Perth and Fremantle to have managed to raise any kind of defensive force for the Colony. This goes to show how the fortunes of the district were picking up by the 1860s, allowing such a force to be formed on the initiative of the local population.

Fawcett set out to uniform his corps along the same lines as his old regiment from England. Black over boots and white pantaloons were complimented by a scarlet tunic with white Austrian knot lace at the cuffs and five rows of white lace frogging across the chest. For headwear a white 'foreign service' helmet, a type of tall pith hat, with a horse hair plume was selected. It was a spectacular uniform, but not one entirely suited to local conditions. Supply of the uniform was also intermittent due to delays and misunderstandings of the army ordering system in England. Delays of up to two years were experienced at times.

For many years the volunteers provided a focus and recreation for young men of the district at a time when few such opportunities existed. Attendances at muster were dropping by 1870, falling to 30 in 1873 and 26 in 1882. Age, and 20 years of voluntary service at their own expense had taken its toll. The PMV were officially disbanded on the 3rd of November 1882.

Theodore Fawcett cont'd

Fawcett went on to lease large acreages for grazing and bought a sizeable grant of land at Marradong. It was in pursuit of developing this land which was more fertile than the Pinjarrah Park property. Fawcett used his army scouting skills to blaze one of the first tracks through to the Marradong district. It serves as another reminder that Fawcett was no mere 'tea and cucumber sandwiches' gentleman, but a skilled bushman and surveyor in his own right. But as the years passed, his profile in the district began to fade. Pinjarrah Park with its groundbreaking experimental work was never a great source of income. Fawcett was supplemented by an income from England but when this dried up and his public expenditure on roads and activities such as the Pinjarrah Mounted Volunteers added up, his fortunes declined. Leadership in the district was moving on once more to families such as the McLarty's whose assets were very much on the rise by the 1890s.

When Captain Theodore Fawcett passed away in 1898 he was mourned by the entire district and his funeral was one of the largest held in Pinjarra. His old comrades from the Pinjarrah Mounted Volunteers turned out in their uniforms to form a guard of honour for their captain. It truly was the passing of an era. In a way that Thomas Peel could never be, Fawcett was a practical, hospitable, thoughtful leader who gave back so much of his time and wealth to the community. He was a gentleman in the true spirit of the time, but it was a time which was passing, with Federation and a new century only a few years away.



*The spelling of Pinjarrah to Pinjarra changed in the early 1900s