

They rowed their way into history

Who really was the first European to discover the site of Melbourne? The record has been set straight: it was surveyor Charles Grimes.

Melbourne recently gave a brief and long overdue retrospective salute to Grimes and his companions, a ship's captain and an emancipated convict, who rowed into Melbourne's history 200 years ago in February 1803.

Charles Grimes, then deputy Surveyor General of the Colony of New South Wales, was charged by Governor King with making a detailed survey of Port Phillip and identifying sites for settlement, based on the perceived threat of French settlement after the Baudin expedition along the Victorian coast a year earlier.

The convict/gardener was James Flemming, who noted soil quality, collected specimens and evaluated the agricultural potential of the area.

The captain was Acting Lt Charles Robbins of His Majesty's Colonial schooner *Cumberland*, who conveyed the party and took soundings of the Bay.

(The *Cumberland* later achieved fame under the command of Matthew Flinders when it was seized by the Governor of the French Colony of Mauritius, and Flinders imprisoned for 11 years.)

Victoria's Surveyor General, Keith Bell, was among the community and historical groups who celebrated Grimes' pioneering survey at re-enactments at Williamstown,



Maribyrnong, and the Yarra's turning basin near Queen St.

The Living Museum of the West and Friends of the Maribyrnong worked with sponsorship from Melbourne Water, City West Water, Parks Victoria and local gov-

ernments of Hobson's Bay, Maribyrnong, Moonee Valley and the City of Melbourne.

Keith Bell says popular history needs revising:

"I believe history must judge Grimes with respect. His survey of Port Phillip played a crucial role in the future settlement of the district and the location of Melbourne," he said.

"These were the first Europeans to find the rivers now called the Yarra and the Maribyrnong and to chart the full extent of the bay.

"For decades, the official credit for locating the site of Melbourne has been given to Batman and Fawkner. However, Grimes located and mapped the location some 32 years before those gentlemen.

"Like so many of Australia's and Victoria's surveyors, who explored and mapped the wilderness of a new continent, Grimes is an unsung hero.

"Only relatively recently did he receive some public recognition when the new bridge across the Yarra, downstream of the

Above: From bush and swamp to city: the re-enactment approaches the Turning Basin the the Yarra River.

Right: Re-enactment participants and guests surround the Grimes map at ceremonies in Melbourne.



'Charles Grimes' waves from the re-enactment rowboat.

Spencer St Bridge, was named in his honour.

"Does this phrase sound familiar? – 'The most eligible place for a settlement I have seen is on the freshwater river.'

"That's Flemming's assessment, almost a third of a century before John Batman made the history books by speaking about 'a place for a village'!

"Mind you, Grimes' own report was not very flattering about the possibility of major agricultural settlement."

The Grimes party entered Port Phillip on 20 January, 1803 and spent five weeks surveying the bay. On February 3, after a night of rain and thunder, they entered the river at its head.

They employed then state-of-the-art surveying technology to describe the site of the future city - making observations by compass, sextant, leadline and spade.

"The information survives," Keith Bell says. "While their record may not give us the names of the five seamen from the Cumberland who did the hard work behind the oars, or any detail about the natives they passed - the people of the Kulin nation, the survey endures as an excellent work.

"Grimes and his expedition did not have the modern surveying and computer technology that we now take for granted.

"In my early days as a hydrographer, I initially used a sextant, whilst working in and around the various ports and coastal channels in Queensland.

"It can be very challenging, especially in choppy sea conditions.

"Grimes would have used the best available technology of the day for undertaking the complex mathematical calculations necessary for the survey - using logarithms with pen and paper! - a bit different from modern surveyors using robotic total station theodolites and global positioning systems to receive satellite signals to determine their position and instantly making complex surveying calculations using computer programs and programmable calculators."

Grimes, born in England in 1772, was appointed deputy Surveyor-General of the Colony of New South Wales when he was 22.

He returned from Port Phillip to be appointed Surveyor-General in early 1803, succeeding Baron Augustus Alt, who had arrived with the First Fleet in 1788.

The office of Surveyor General-Victoria



emanated from the office of the Surveyor General of the then colony of New South Wales. As such, the office of the Victorian Surveyor-General can trace its lineage back to the First Fleet, making it an institution.

"Grimes was caught up the Rum Rebellion, was appointed Judge Advocate (now that's multi-skilling!) and fell out with everyone," Mr Bell recalls.

Barely half a century later, the 'little hill' where they paused to eat, later Batman's Hill, became landfill under the present site of Spencer St Station.

"He resigned due to ill health in 1811, returned to England to enlist in the army, where he saw active service in the war against America, retiring in 1848 aged 76, and died 10 years later."

Much of what the Grimes party recorded is history, literally and metaphorically.

The way of life of the Kulin people; the west Melbourne swamps which are long gone, even the northward curve of the Yarra near the Maribyrnong disappeared when the river was straightened.

Barely half a century later, the 'little hill' where they paused to eat, later Batman's Hill, became landfill under the present site of Spencer St station.

At the present-day site of Queen St, they

had to carry their boat around a little waterfall (long gone) to start four days exploration of the Yarra as far as Studley Park and Dight's Falls – probably the one area where you can see rocky treed hillsides little changed since their visit.

Later generations turned billabongs into the Botanic Gardens Lake and Como Park, and created Herring Island.

Flemming's journal teases in its brevity.

Tues 8th: 'Sowed some seeds by the native hut where we slept'. What seeds? What fate did they have? Later, near the Yarra: 'I went about two miles inland and fell in with seven natives'. He leaves you to imagine this cultural collision.

So the record is now set straight, Keith Bell says. Throw away the old social studies text books which give the credit to Batman and Fawcner.

Surveyor Grimes was indeed the first European to discover the site, and map Melbourne, the world's most livable city.

During February, Keith Bell launched a CD ROM on the Grimes expedition, in conjunction with Melbourne's Lord Mayor, Cr John So. The CD ROM, an interactive tool designed for historians, teachers and students, was sponsored by The Surveyors Board of Victoria and the Association of Bayside Municipalities.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

You can find all the details at www.surveyorsboard.vic.gov.au or contact: Keith Bell, Surveyor General
Tel (03) 8636 2525
Email keith.bell@nre.vic.gov.au