

Surgeon's Mate Lowes of H.M.S. *Sirius* and the First Fleet

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The pioneers of Western medicine in Australia included the seventeenth century *incogniti* of the *Pera* (1623)¹ and the surgeons of the other Dutch and Spanish ships which voyaged in Australian waters.² With Cook on H.M.S. *Endeavour* were Surgeon Monkhouse and Surgeon's Mate Perry³ and on *Resolution* (1776) was William Anderson (c. 1750-1778)⁴ who first described ciguatera in the Pacific.⁵

1. W.C.H. Robert, *Contributions to Bibliography of Australia and the South Sea Islands*, Supplement 2. The Dutch explorations 1605-1756, of the north and northwest coast of Australia. Extracts from journals, log-books and other documents relating to these voyages. Original Dutch texts, edited, with English translations, a critical introduction, notes, appendices, a bibliography and indexes. Philo Press, Amsterdam, 1973.

It is a privilege to record thanks to the late Dr Rob Simpson, surgeon to the 1987-1988 Reenactment Fleet. Dr Rob Simpson's tragic death robbed Australia of an adventurous expeditioner, a fine doctor and a good friend to many in the Australian Society of the History of Medicine. It was he who notified the writer of the discovery of the Fowell Letters, of their subsequent purchase by the Mitchell Library and their subsequent publication. The writer also most gratefully acknowledges the help and encouragement of Dr Christopher Gardner-Thorpe, of Exeter, Devon.

2. J.N. Green, ed, *The Loss of the Verenidge Oostindische Compagnie Jacht. Vergulde Dr Aeck, Western Australia 1656*. An historical background and excavation report with an appendix on similar loss of the *Fuit Lastdrager*. Part 1. British Archaeological Reports Supplementary Series 36. Brit Arch Reports [UK] Oxford, 1977.

3. J. Pearn, "Surgeons of the Queensland Seas", in *Bridgeheads of Northern Health*, eds J. Pearn & P. Carter, Amphion Press, Brisbane, 1996, Chapter 8.

There were eleven medical men on the First Fleet⁶ of 1787 and 1788. The lives of several, such as those of Surgeon-General John White⁷, Thomas Arndell⁸ and Thomas Jamison⁹ have been the subject of comprehensive biographic publication. One, Lowes, has remained a ghostly figure — not due to any supernatural presence, but rather to the fact that he was not listed on the original H.M.S. *Sirius* muster roll; and probably due also to the fact that he did his work well and conscientiously. Neither infamy nor glory lead to his name being entered in any of the official records of the day. The first written record of him dates from 1793, in Tench's *Complete Account*¹⁰ and mentions Lowes having been on an expedition in 1789. By 1992 it was believed that any further information on Lowes was unlikely to surface, "...existing only as a shadow from the past and efforts to construct even a fragmentary biography of his life have proved fruitless".¹¹ In 1988 I wrote that "the elevation of the eleventh medical man of the First Fleet, Lowes, to surgical respectability 200 years later still awaits even the discovery of his Christian name".¹²

4. J. Pearn, "Surgeon William (c.1750-1778) in *Medicine and Botany, An Australian Cadaster*, Amphion Press, Brisbane, 1990, p. 5.

5. William Anderson, [Surgeon on H.M.S. *Resolution*] letter from William Anderson, marked Deptford, dated 1776, to Sir James Pringle, President of The Royal Society, London. Original held: Library and Archives, The Royal Society, 6 Carlton House Terrace, London. [Describes the onset of the symptoms of poisoning, in both sailors and the ship's dogs, "after the eating of a certain species of fish", caught in the Pacific Ocean, producing "symptoms of a certain, peculiar nature". this is the first description of ciguatera in the Pacific.]

6. J. Pearn, "Gentlemen of the Faculty: A Synopsis of the First Fleet Surgeons. Comparisons and Contrasts of the Personalities who were the Founders of Medicine in Australia", *Medical Journal of Australia*, 1988, vol 149, pp. 639-643.

7. E. Ford, "Medical Practice in Early Sydney: with Special Reference to the Work and Influence of John White, William Redfern and William Bland", *Medical Journal of Australia*, 1955, vol. 2, pp. 41-54; R. Simpson, "John White MD, RN. Surgeon General to the First Fleet", in *Pioneer Medicine in Australia*, ed J. Pearn, Amphion Press, Brisbane, 1988, Chapter 2.

8. R.M. Arndell, *Pioneers of Portland Head*, Library of Australian History, Sydney, 1986; M. Raven, *Assistant Surgeon Thomas Arndell, The Man He Was*, privately published by the author, Sydney, 1988.

9. J. Pearn, "Here to Observe. a Bicentenary Wayzgoose for the First Medical Journalism in Australia", *Australian Journal of Paediatrics*, 1988, vol 24, pp. 369-370.

10. W. Tench, *A Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson, in New South Wales. Taken on the Spot by Captain Watkin Tench of the Marines*, London, 1793, sold by G. Nicol, Pall Mall. [Pages referring to Lowes include: 37, 97, 146, 168, 176, 211, 215]

11. N. Dan, "The Medical Men of the First Fleet", in *Australia's Quest for Colonial Health*, eds J. Pearn & C. O'Carrigan, Department of Child Health [Amphion Press], 1983, Chapter 1.

12. J. Pearn, "First Fleet Surgeons", in *Pioneer Medicine in Australia*, Chapter 3.

Lowes' name, recorded in contemporary accounts from 1790 as Lowes of the *Sirius*, has always been an enigma. His name did not appear on the *Sirius* manifest¹³, and I had speculated that he might *ab initio* have joined *Sirius* as Surgeon's Mate on the resupply run to succour the starving colony at Port Jackson, arriving at Sydney Cove on 9 May, 1789¹⁴. Lowes is not listed in Chapman's 1788 - *The People of the First Fleet*¹⁵ nor in the 1788-1930 *Pioneer Register of the 1788 - 1820 Association*.¹⁶ Although the Convict Register from the First Fleet has been reconstructed and is probably now complete, not all sailors and marines had their names entered in contemporary registers.

Research at the National Maritime Museum (Greenwich, U.K.) did not reveal any known Surgeon or Surgeon's Mate by the name of Lowes; and research of examination records showed that no Surgeon's Mate by the name of Lowes, who could have been on *Sirius*, had passed any surgical examination.

Thus the matter had rested. Fortunately, a collection of private letters from a midshipman on the H.M.S. *Sirius* was found in an attic in Devon in 1987 and subsequently bought at public auction in London; and later published in Australia.¹⁷ One of those letters (letter six), written off Portsmouth on 4 March 1787 whilst H.M.S. *Sirius* was waiting for the marshalling of the transportation fleet, prove indeed that Lowes was a Surgeon's Mate, and therefore is confirmed as one of the eleven medical men of the First Fleet.

The Newton-Fowell Letters

Newton-Fowell of Devon entered the Royal Navy aged 12, as a midshipman. He had been born at Blackhall, in Devon, and passed his Royal Navy examinations for midshipman in 1786. He had served on

13. J. Pearn, References and Notes to "First Fleet Surgeons" in *Pioneer Medicine in Australia*.

14. J. Hunter, *An Historical Journal of the Transactions at Port Jackson and Norfolk Island*, Australian Facsimile Edition, Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1968, pp. 89, 116, 125.

15. D. Chapman, 1788, *The People of the First Fleet*, Doubleday Australia, Pty Ltd, Sydney 1986, p. 7. [1300 named members of the First Fleet, compiled "from convict lists and musters and colonial returns", held in the Mitchell Library, Sydney]

16. C.J. Smee & J.S. Provis, *The 1788-1820 Association's Pioneer Register, Vols 1-IV*, 1788-1820 Association, Sydney, 1981.

17. N. Irvine, *The Sirius Letters: The Complete Letters of Newton Fowell, Midshipman and Lieutenant Aboard the Sirius Flagship of the First Fleet on its Voyage to New South Wales*, The Fairfax Library, Sydney, 1988.

the H.M.S. *Perseus*, H.M.S. *Berwick*, H.M.S. *Ardent* before his posting to H.M.S. *Sirius* as midshipman, in 1787. He joined *Sirius*, at anchor at the Motherbank Roads, off Portsmouth, sheltered by the Isle of Wight, in early 1787. He wrote regularly to his father, a most moving series of loving and dutiful letters, each addressed to "Honoured Father". Newton-Fowell also sailed on H.M.S. *Supply* in 1790, in an attempt to bring food and supplies for the starving colony at Port Jackson. He had been promoted to Lieutenant, but on the return run, via Norfolk Island, died at sea on the 23 August 1790, of an unknown tropical disease. His year of birth is unknown but he almost certainly died still as a teenager.

The entire series of his letters were kept permanently by his family. The Fowell family became bankrupt in 1815¹⁸ and the family home and all its contents were sold. The purchasers did not disturb the folio of correspondence. By a happy co-incidence, Ms Nance Irvine, of the First Fleet Reenactment Voyage, met the present owner of that Devon home at a Bicentenary reenactment celebration party in 1987, and serendipitously learnt of the existence of the letters from the *Sirius*. The letters were offered for sale at public auction by Sotherby's in London on 15 December 1987, and bought by the Mitchell Library in New South Wales. They were subsequently edited by Nance Irvine and published as *The Sirius Letters*.¹⁹

In letter six, dated 4 March 1787, the young midshipman wrote that he had recently arrived on board H.M.S. *Sirius*, at anchor off Portsmouth, and that

The only one I know on board at Present is Mr Lowes, one of the Surg. Mates he is a very genteel young man. I learn all I can of Recommendations but tell Nothing. He was Recommended by Mr Nepean....²⁰

Thus Lowes, albeit still without a Christian name, has been confirmed as a true "medical man" of the First Fleet.

18. P. Brunton, Foreword to *The Sirius Letters*, p. 9

19. Irvine, *The Sirius Letters*.

20. Irvine, *The Sirius Letters*, Letter 6, Newton Fowell to his father, dated 4 March 1787, on board H.M.S. *Sirius*, at Motherbank, Portsmouth.

Lowes of the Royal Navy

Nothing is known of Lowes' life prior to 1787, and his transfer to *Sirius* as Surgeon's Mate. Another John Lowes was a Surgeon's Mate in the Royal Navy, in 1745. Original records concerning him are held in the Royal College of Surgeons (in London) in the Bunt-Pearsall Index of Royal Naval Surgeons²¹ at Greenwich.

Surgeon's Mate Lowes was posted to H.M.S. *Sirius* prior to March 1787. Whilst the ship was anchored off Portsmouth Harbour, at Motherbank Roads, sheltered by the Isle of Wight. H.M.S. *Sirius* had been built in 1780 as the S.S. *Berwick* for the East India trade. She was badly burnt in a fire and re-built by the Royal Navy in 1786, and re-named H.M.S. *Sirius*. She had a displacement of 540 tons, and was a 20-gun warship.

There were three surgeons on *Sirius* — George Bouchier Worgan as the Senior Surgeon, and a Londoner, Thomas Jamison from the Lake District, who had qualified in London and who was a strong personality and an honourable man. Lowes was Surgeon's Mate. The term "Mate" was used as a formal Royal Navy rank, there being such formal positions as Boatswain's Mate, Carpenter's Mate and Surgeon's Mate. It is believed that the Australian use of the word "mate" probably dates from the naval use of the term from the time of the First Fleet.²²

Lowes birthplace is unknown, but the most likely candidate is Ireland, because of the publication of a letter he sent from Port Jackson, for publication in the *Dublin Chronicle*, it appeared on the 17 January 1791.²³ Lowes must have joined the Royal Navy as a young teenager, and embarked on a career either as a Surgeon's Mate *ab initio*, or transferred into the medical branch. Because of the 1922 fire in the *Dublin Record Office*, further attempts to trace him have proved unsuccessful. He must have been born in a bracket of time ranging from 1752 to 1761.

21. E. Bunt, *An Alphabetical List of Royal Naval Surgeons*, compiled by Mr Eric Bunt for Mr Pearsall showing dates when they passed various examinations, surgeon's mates of which class, etc. Copy also held in The National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London. Original records held The Royal College of Surgeons, 35 Lincoln's Inn Field, London WC2.

22. Irvine, *The Sirius Letters*, p.153.

23. Lowes, letter published in the *Dublin Chronicle*, 13 January 1791, entitled "State of the Colony 1790", republished in *Historical Records of New South Wales, Vol 111, Grose and Paterson, 1793-1795*, ed F.M.Bladen, Charles Potter, Government Printer, Sydney, 1893, pp. 770-771.

Lowes was aboard *Sirius* off the harbour at Portsmouth, for at least eight weeks before *Sirius* sailed on 13 May, 1787.

The first record of Lowes' life in Australia dates from June 1789. It is probable that he was attached as Surgeon's Mate to Surgeon Thomas Arndell, at the Rose Hill Outpost in June 1789. He was chosen as a member of Captain Tench's six-man team for the expedition west from Rose Hill in June 1789. That expedition discovered the Nepean River. Lowes was also chosen as an expeditioner on the December 1789 expedition which penetrated further west. From this evidence it is probable that he was a strong and robust person; and although no details of his personality are known (indeed not any of those of the First Fleet Surgeons²⁴) it is probable from the content of the Fowell²⁵ letters and from Tench's Account²⁶ that he was of an amiable disposition and fitted in well with others in the sense of teamwork.

In 1790 Lowes was moved to write a letter describing the helpless state of the colony. After the bridgehead settlement and an open air gaol was established at Camp Cove in January 1788, the colony virtually starved for the next two years. Morale was low, and became lower after *Sirius* was wrecked at Norfolk Island in 1790. Lowes wrote to the Dublin Chronicle, giving one of the best first-hand descriptions of the morale prevailing in the colony at that time:

It is now so long since we have heard from home that our clothes are worn thread-bare. We begin to think that the Mother Country has entirely forsaken us. As for shoes, my stock has been exhausted these six months, and I have been obliged since that time to beg and borrow among the gentleman, for no such article was to be bought. In this deplorable situation famine is staring us in the face. Two ounces of pork is the allowance of animal food for four and twenty hours, and happy is the man who can kill a rat or crow to make him a dainty meal. We have raised some excellent vegetables, but such food, without the mixture of the animal, does not supply strength, but keeps us lax and weakly. I dined most heartily the other day on a fine dog, and hope I shall soon again have an invitation to a similar repast. The animals that were meant to stock the country are almost all butchered. Hunger will be appeased [only] while any eatable remains.

Several of the convicts have perished by the hands of the natives, by rambling too far into the woods. I accompanied two of our gentlemen on a shooting party. We

24. Pearn, *Gentlemen of the Faculty*.

25. Irvine, *The Sirius Letters*.

26. Tench, *A Complete Account*.

penetrated near 30 miles in two days over delightful country, free from underwood, when we arrived at a rapid river that was not fordable [the discovery of the Nepean River, as recorded by Tench²⁷]. On the other side the country seemed to be in a state of romantic and uncultivated nature. The landscape was finished by a range of hills that rise one above another, in a very grand style, to a considerable height [the Blue Mountains, not surmounted until 1813].

The loss of the *Sirius* was the first cause of our being put to such short allowance, being obliged to supply the party a second time from the common stock. To prevent murmuring, officers and men share alike.

Our births have far exceeded our burials; and what is very remarkable, women who were pregnant past child-bearing, and others who have not been pregnant for 15 or 16 years, have lately become mothers.²⁸

How long Lowes remained in the colony, and his subsequent fate remain unknown. The information from the Fowell Letters gives hope to medical historians that other documents may yet surface for researchers of the future.

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27. Tench, *A Complete Account*.

28. Lowes, letter to the *Dublin Chronicle*, 1791.