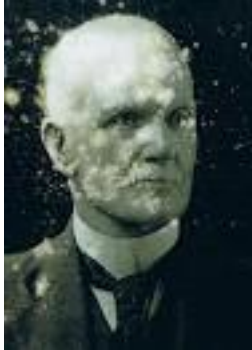


## **An early member leaves their mark on history**

### **Robert Francis Talbot (1842-1935)**

With thanks to interest by family members who have contacted the League, we are able to provide the following information about his life.



Robert Francis Talbot lived a long and full life, first travelling the world with the Royal Navy and later living a pioneering existence in Australia where he left his mark on history by naming the town Swansea in New South Wales. He wrote extensive memoirs, much of which are taken up with describing his time in the Royal Navy. He was born in Tumavara, County Tipperary, Ireland, became an Ordinary Seaman 2nd Class on 10th October 1860 and was serving on HMS Clio when it was appointed Flagship to the Australia Station from 1870 to 1873.

Robert's memoirs record that, during the ship's stay at Port Jackson, he met a Sydney family of free settlers, John Mason and his wife, Sarah Ann Mason and married their eldest child, Annie on September 4, 1873 at St Phillips Church, Sydney. At this time HMS Clio was concluding its three year term as Flagship to the Australia Station and Robert returned with the ship to England. On completing his duty he secured a position as Emigrant Storekeeper on the barque Jerusalem and sailed back to Sydney from Portsmouth on the 5th April 1874. The journey took 78 days.

On reunion with his wife, Robert and Annie moved to Catherine Hill Bay, in 1874 known as New Wallsend, near Newcastle. His initial employment was in mining at the New Wallsend Colliery until sometime in 1875 when he gained employment as a Lands Surveyor. It was around this time that he built a hotel.

The 'New Wallsend Hotel', as it was originally called, was later renamed 'Warallah Hotel' and it still stands today. By 1876 Robert Talbot also owned the main town store. In early 1877 the local Postmaster, Thomas Caldwell, resigned his office and in an application to the Postmaster General, Robert advised he wished to apply for the position of Postmaster, Catherine Hill Bay, and supported his claim by advising them of his stability of residence as the local Hotel and "Mainstore" owner. He indicated that there was adequate spare space off the store to serve as a Post Office and according to the records Robert was appointed the 4th Postmaster in that area.

On the 3rd September 1879 Robert wrote to the Postmaster General's Department as follows:

"The New Wallsend Colliery at Catherine Hill Bay and other works being permanently closed, I am about to remove my residence to Lake Macquarie Entrance, five miles distant North from Catherine Hill Bay, where a large population have settled down and extensive works are opening up. The improvements to Lake Macquarie Entrance will employ over 150 men, £20,000 having been granted for this purpose. Messrs. Lamb, Knox and Parbury are

opening a Colliery and large Saw Mills which will also employ a large number of men so that in a very short time, in addition to the settled population, we will have something like 300 men on the ground, when a Post Office will be absolutely necessary. I would therefore humbly suggest that you allow me to continue the position of Post and Money Order Officer at Lake Macquarie Entrance where a large business is to be done." A petition supported Postmaster Talbot's request, the petitioners claiming that "the mining works having collapsed; the township of Catherine Hill Bay was deserted."

In October 1879, Robert Talbot advised that his wife and their three children, Hugh, Ethel and William, had moved to the settlement of Lake Macquarie Entrance. Robert remained at the Catherine Hill Bay Post Office advising "only one family still live at Catherine Hill Bay". He further reported that the mailman, John Gordon, serving the new settlement could use Boyd's Ferry which meant five miles less travel.

The Postal Inspector verified the above report by Robert Talbot and recommended that the Post Office be removed from Catherine Hill Bay to the new settlement area on the South side of the sea entrance to Lake Macquarie, where extensive quarrying had commenced to feed a steam tramway line to convey rock for the breakwater construction and deepening of the channel for expected shipping-out of coal, sawn timber and local products.

The Postal Inspector also reported that:

"The settlement area is known locally as Pelican Flat which should be the name of the Post Office. The Postmaster, Robert Francis Talbot of Catherine Hill Bay, who has built a general store and also a nice place for a Post Office, might be appointed the Postmaster. The removal of the Post Office from Catherine Hill Bay to Pelican Flat will shorten the mail line from Charleston by five miles."

The Postmaster General's approval was granted to close the Post Office at Catherine Hill Bay, transfer and reopen it at Robert Talbot's new site at Pelican Flat. So it was that the first Post Office in Pelican Flat was opened on the 1st December, 1879, and Robert Francis Talbot appointed as Postmaster. Mail was conveyed from Charleston via Belmont each Tuesday and Saturday with returning mail the same days.

In 1883 tenders were let for the construction of an extra telegraph wire from Newcastle to Raspberry Gully and poles and wire to extend from Raspberry Gully to Pelican Flat. Postmaster Talbot considered the Post Office section of the General Store would not adequately contain a Telegraph Office so he offered to construct one to adjoin the South side of the General Store to measure 22 feet by 12 feet with a centrally located bedroom. This new building was sufficient to house both the Post Office and the new Telegraph Station. He offered it to the Post Master General at a weekly rental of eight shillings and it was accepted and commenced operations as of October 1883.

On the 25th August, 1883, in a survey of the new settlement, the publication Town & Country reported that, "Mr. Talbot, who acts as Postmaster at Pelican Flat, may be regarded as one of the leading men in the district in the industrial development and prosperity in which he takes a great interest."

The south area of the entrance to Lake Macquarie was originally known to the early settlers by its Aboriginal name of Galgabba meaning 'a good place to rest'. With the settlement of Europeans on the south side, the area became known as Pelican Flat because the lake abounded with pelicans, black swan and myriad other waterfowl.

The Post Office History of Swansea states that "the most historic event of the year 1887 was the official adoption of the name Swansea for the Pelican Flat Township, and the man who influenced the alteration was the pioneer storekeeper, Mr. Robert Talbot." On October 8th, 1887, Robert Talbot wrote to the Honourable R. Stevenson, Member of Parliament, as follows:

"At a public meeting held here on the 7th instant, it was unanimously carried that the name of this rising township should be altered from 'Pelican Flat' to 'Swansea'. As you are aware Pelican Flat is situated on Lake Macquarie Entrance, as Newcastle is on the Hunter. As soon as there is sufficient water on the bar to admit Steam Colliers (which cannot be very long) this harbour will become one of our most important commercial centres and coaling ports. It has advanced rapidly within the last few years. We have a Post and Telegraph Office, Public School (average attendance of sixty), a Teacher's residence, Police Station and residence, a Resident Engineer for the Harbours and Rivers Department, Pilot Station, besides hotel and other businesses and many private places. We would therefore kindly ask you to use your influence with the Post Master General to have the name altered. And shall ever remain, your obedient servant, Robert F. Talbot. For the Residents"

Subsequent to this submission, the name was changed by the Post Master General to take effect as of the 1st November 1887.

However by 1888 it was clear the Post Office and Telegraph facilities were not receiving sufficient use to justify the running costs and the Post Master General decided to reduce the status to that of non-official Post Office. Robert Talbot was appointed non-official Postmaster and resumed control.

On the 16th March 1894 Robert's wife Annie was appointed Post Mistress, however, by the year 1897 she had tendered her resignation due to failing health. Robert decided to sell the entire business to Thomas Boyd and in 1898 the family moved to Sydney in hope of finding some cure for Annie.

By this time, Robert and Annie had the following children:

Ethel A. J. TALBOT, born 1876 in Swansea, New South Wales

William H. TALBOT, born 1878 in Swansea, New South Wales

Robert Edward TALBOT, born 1880, in Swansea, New South Wales

Hugh TALBOT, born 1883 in Swansea, New South Wales

Lillian Jean Stella TALBOT, born July 31st, 1886 in Swansea, New South Wales

Leslie James TALBOT, born 1894 in Swansea, New South Wales

Annie's health progressively worsened and at the age of 58 on 20th July 1911, she died at 23 Berry Street, North Sydney. On her death certificate the causes of death are given as "Fatty infiltration of the heart (2 years)" and "Chorea (30 years)". She was buried the next day at Gore Hill cemetery in Sydney at a Church of England ceremony.

Following his wife's death, Robert found a quiet haven of retirement at Berowra Waters in Sydney and lived out his life as a Justice of the Peace and a member of the League of Ancient Mariners of New South Wales.

Robert corresponded with his surviving children and grandchildren until his death on 3rd January 1935, at the Royal North Shore Hospital at the age of 92. His death certificate records his previous place of residence as Berowra, New South Wales. The causes of death are noted as pneumonia (4 days) and chronic nephritis (6 months). His two surviving children, Mrs Ethel Tartakover and Leslie James Talbot, laid him to rest on the 4th January 1935 at Gore Hill Cemetery, Sydney, in a Church of England ceremony, beside his late wife and beneath the epitaph he had recorded for her:

"We saw her suffering day by day  
It caused me bitter grief  
To see her slowly fade away  
I could not bring relief  
Not dead to me who loved her dear  
Not lost, but gone before  
She lives with me in memory still  
And will for evermore."

*Thanks to the family of Robert Francis Talbot who have contacted the League*