

When James Grasby arrived at the Sydney Records Centre in The Rocks at 9.00 am one morning, having just flown in from London at 6.30 am, we knew we had found the first subject for our profile of passionate researchers in the reading rooms

James Grasby meets George Wyndham

James Grasby has traversed the globe from London to Sydney to continue his research into another Englishman, George Wyndham, who made the journey between the same two cities 175 years ago. Whilst Grasby's 24-hour journey involved a short hiatus in the rooftop succulent garden at Changi Airport in Singapore, George Wyndham's five-month trip was aboard a full-rigged ship that rounded the Cape of Good Hope to arrive in Sydney on Boxing Day 1827.

James Grasby became interested in George Wyndham during research into the Wyndham family home — one of 27 houses and 1000 other buildings that Grasby represents in his role as a curator for the National Trust's Wessex region in England. Places of note in this region include Stonehenge, TE Lawrences' home

'Clouds Hill' and 'Montacute', a house Grasby says is so beautiful that 'people weep when they see it'. His work for the Trust ranges from research and interpretation to overseeing security, environmental control and emergency planning.

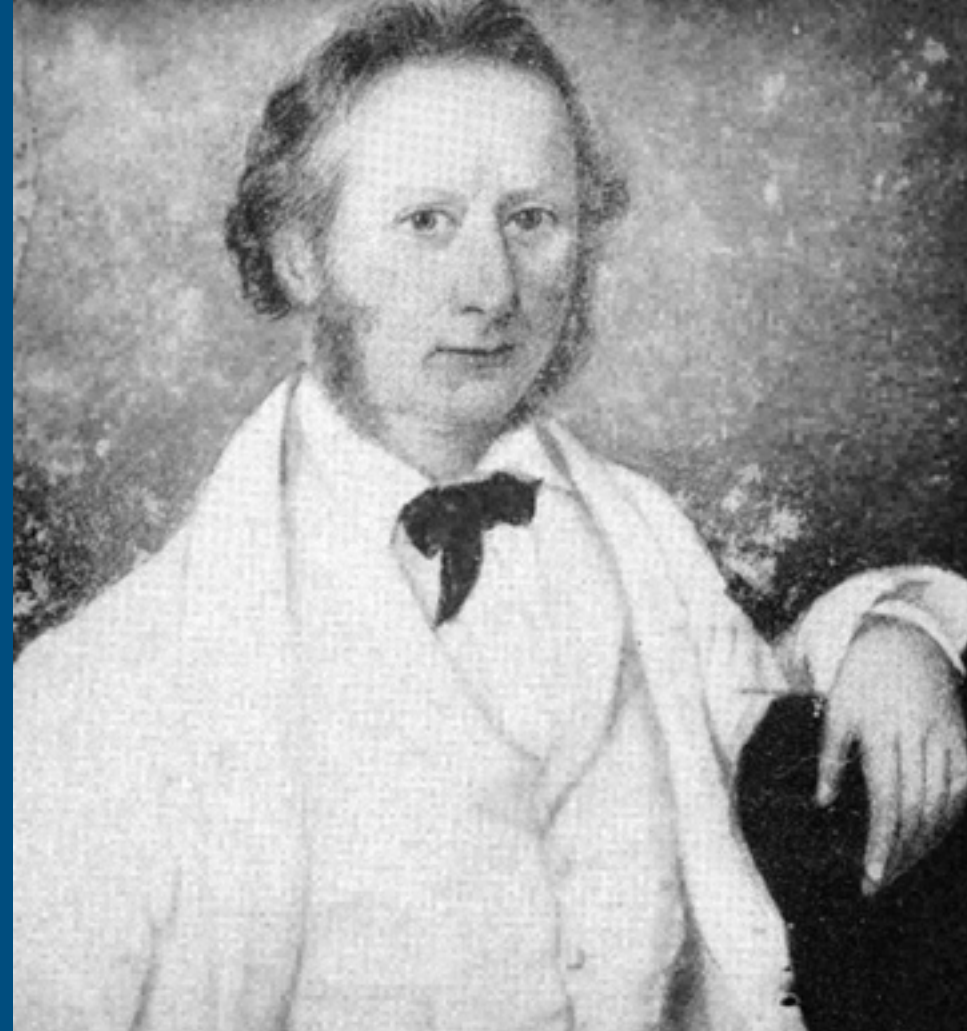
George Wyndham stood out in Grasby's research as the most original child in a distinguished landowning family, known for its involvement in agriculture, politics and foxhunting. George Wyndham was appalled by the politics of the day, particularly treatment of the Irish, and after travels in North America and Europe, resolved to emigrate to Australia with his new wife Margaret Jay. He was just 26 years old.

Grasby's research reveals that once Wyndham had disembarked at Circular Quay, he proceeded to walk

up George Street with the sheep he had brought with him from England, until he found a resting place for them in the garden of a pub. He then bought a newspaper, saw an advertisement for the 'Annandale' estate in the Hunter Valley and bought it at auction, site unseen.

The journey to inspect his new property involved a steamboat to Newcastle and a riverboat to the Hunter. As Grasby relates, 'When George looked at the depth and fertility of the soil, he knew he had bought well.' Although Wyndham had intended to be a dairy farmer, he saw others, including his neighbour Mr Kelman, experimenting with vines. Grasby observes that it was 'unusual for an Englishman at that time to drink wine that hadn't been fortified with brandy. But George Wyndham

DRAWING OF GEORGE WYNDHAM: REPRODUCED COURTESY OF ORLANDO WYNDHAM GROUP



↑ National Trust curator James Grasby and the subject of his research, George Wyndham (left)

wanted to drink "good wine". He wanted to drink fermented grape juice, just as the French did.'

Wyndham began planting vines and producing wine in what has become the oldest surviving vineyard in Australia. The vineyards are now owned by the Orlando Wyndham Group, who, like Grasby got 'gripped by George's story' and have supported his three-week study trip to Australia. This has been a seven-year project for James Grasby, which is part personal and part National Trust work. He is impressed by the man.

'George was a religious man with a profound moral code, who treated people with respect. He sheltered Aboriginal people on his land who had been persecuted by his neighbours. There are references in letters that show that he ate with the

PHOTO OF JAMES GRASBY: PENELOPE CLAY

Aboriginal people and tried to encourage his family back home to try similar food. He also published two pamphlets on the Colony's approach to immigration; labour was scarce and it made sense to George to encourage Chinese and Indian labourers to come and work in the country.'

Since his first research trip three years ago, Grasby has been wanting to return to Australia to follow the story trail through documents held by State Records. 'Your website is a most helpful, excellent guide. From it I learnt what records you hold and their location. I've come to Sydney to study your holdings of Colonial Secretary's papers, particularly census and musters material and records related to labourers, so that I can piece together a picture of the people who worked for George.

The records create a skeleton for other research. They provide the official line and official engineering — a chronology of events which can then be fleshed out.'

Grasby's research will be published in two forms: 'an historical scholarly work to set the facts out plain and a more condensed version that draws out the narrative'. He likens the research process to his hazy remembrances of a scene from *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, where 'Jones enters a large vault-like space with a complex pattern of symbols cut into the floor. He knows the symbols mean something, but he's not sure what. Then a leap of imagination prompts him to press a lever, which opens up the floor to disclose another space. Even more clues are revealed ...'

Susan Charlton