

Sir Thomas Makdougall Brisbane

1773-1860

Born in Brisbane House, Largs, in 1773, Thomas Brisbane began his military career at the age of 15, seeing service with the Duke of Wellington in Ireland and subsequently in Flanders, the West Indies, the Peninsula and Canada. He was twice wounded, decorated for his services in the Peninsula, appointed KCB and reached the rank of Major-General. In 1816 he saved the Paris Observatory from destruction by allied troops and was created a Knight of the Cross of Hanover.



Portrait of General Sir Thomas Brisbane
c. 1840, by Robert Frain

In 1819, at the age of 46, he married Anna Maria, the daughter and heiress of Sir Henry Hay-Makdougall of Makerstoun, Kelso and added her name to his. They were to have four children, all of whom predeceased their parents. In 1821, on the recommendation of the Iron Duke, Brisbane was appointed fifth Governor of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania) succeeding Governor Macquarie.

New South Wales principally comprised the penal settlement of Botany Bay, but Brisbane promoted voluntary free immigration to the colony. He encouraged the planting of grapevines, sugar cane, tea and tobacco plants as well as the rearing of sheep and cattle and pure-bred Arabian horses. He also licensed a

free press. In 1822 he established an astronomical observatory at Parramatta, Sydney. Until then, the southern hemisphere skies were virtually uncharted. Brisbane sponsored exploration towards what is today known as Queensland and John Oxley, in exploring northwards from Sydney along the coast, discovered a river which he named Brisbane, on which the eponymous capital of Queensland came to be built. In 2003 the city erected a memorial plaque and seat to Sir Thomas Brisbane.

He was recalled to Britain on 1st December 1825. Thereafter, he concentrated on astronomy and geophysics at Makerstoun and Largs. In 1832 Brisbane was elected President of the Royal Society in Edinburgh, in succession to Sir Walter Scott. In 1836 Sir Thomas was created a Baronet of the UK by King William IV and a KGCB, being further appointed GCB in 1837. To present it, William IV invited him to dine at the Palace 'next Wednesday'. Alas, the King died on Tuesday, 20th June 1837.

At Makerstoun in 1841, Brisbane began important magnetic observations through which he discovered magnetic north and erected north and south meridian stones either side of the Tweed.



Drawing of Makerstoun observatories from
Transactions 1844 of the Royal Society of Edinburgh

MILITARY CAREER

9th April 1789: became an ensign in 38th Foot, serving in Ireland where he met Arthur Wellesley, later Duke of Wellington.
1791-95: promoted in several regiments, serving in Flanders, was wounded at Famers, later fought at Dunkirk, Valenciennes, Nieuwpoort and Tournai and was in the retreat to Bremen.
August 1795: served with the 53rd Foot in Barbados. Took part in the capture of St Lucia and Trinidad, the suppression of civil disorder on St Vincent and the failed invasion of Puerto Rico, returning home on sick leave in 1798. He was fortunate – many regiments lost over 90% of their strength to yellow fever.
1800: appointed Lieutenant Colonel of the 69th Foot and sailed for Jamaica. Left in 1803 on sick leave; did not go with his regiment to India in 1805 because of ill health.
1810: promoted Colonel, serving with the York Rangers. After 18 months as Assistant Adjutant General in the Peninsula, he took command of the 1st Brigade of Picton's 3rd Division with the rank of Brigadier-General, leading the brigade at the battles of Vittoria, the Pyrenees, Nivelle, Nive, Orthez and Toulouse where he was once again wounded.
1813: advanced to Major-General and was decorated for his Peninsular service.
1814: appointed KCB, he reached Canada with reinforcements, commanding a brigade during General George Prevost's abortive attack on the American stronghold of Plattsburg, thus missing Waterloo, although he did command a division in the army of occupation in France until 1818.
[1821-25 Governor of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land].
27th May 1825: promoted Lieutenant General.
16th December 1826: appointed Colonel of the 34th Foot, which he held until his death in 1860
23rd November 1841: promoted General.

ASTRONOMY AND GEOPHYSICS

1798: Brisbane was nearly shipwrecked on his way back from Jamaica, which led to his developing navigation at sea through the stars.
1808: he built Brisbane Observatory near Brisbane House in Largs. It had three clocks and Troughton's 2 foot mural circle (which was the first of its kind and a model for the 6 foot circle installed at Greenwich Observatory).
During the Peninsular War he took regular observations with a pocket sextant, helping to navigate the fleet and prompting Wellington to remark that 'he kept the time of the army'.
1810: became a member of the Royal Society of London (vice-President 1827).
1818: during the occupation of France Wellington asked him to compute a table determining time from the altitudes of heavenly bodies and also to draw up a comparison of English weights and measures with French ones.
1821: Brisbane took his instruments with him to NSW observing Encke's comet and the transit of Mercury. A catalogue of 7,385 stars mostly in the southern hemisphere was prepared at his observatory at Parramatta in Australia. (His Parramatta observatory was demolished in 1855 and an obelisk erected in 1880).
1826: built Makerstoun Observatory with an adjacent magnetic laboratory in 1841 (for years the only one in Scotland) as part of Gauss's Geomagnetic Union. The shell of his observatory at Largs remains, while Makerstoun's astronomical observatory building was restored in 1986/7.
1828: received the gold medal of the Astronomical Society from Sir John Herschel.
1832: succeeded Sir Walter Scott as President of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, endowing a Royal Society 'Brisbane Biennial' medal. Honorary degrees were awarded by Oxford (1832) Cambridge (1833), Edinburgh (1834).
1834: presided over the meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in Edinburgh.
1848: Royal Society of Edinburgh's Keith Medal for his work at Makerstoun
1860: died at Brisbane House in the room where he was born.