



GOVERNMENT HOUSE  
SYDNEY

**Her Excellency the Honourable Margaret Beazley AC KC  
Governor of New South Wales**

**Excellence in Surveying and Spatial Information Services Awards 2023**

Hilton Hotel, Sydney  
Saturday, 16 September 2023

---

*Bujari gamarruwa*

*Diyin Babana Gamarada Gadigal Ngura*

In greeting you in the language of the Gadigal, Traditional Owners of the land on which we gather, I pay my respects to their Elders past, present, and emerging, as well as to the Elders of all parts of our State from which you have travelled.

Minister<sup>1</sup>, Surveyor-General<sup>2</sup>, distinguished guests all,

As Patrons of the Institution of Surveyors, Dennis and I are delighted to join you tonight for this, the 25<sup>th</sup> Excellence in Surveying and Spatial Information Services Awards.

Although everyone knows, at least in general terms, what a surveyor does, I suspect few would know how important surveying and surveyors have been in our history.

The first Surveyor-General of NSW, Augustus Alt, arrived as part of the First Fleet. His appointment in April 1787 makes the office of Surveyor General the second oldest in Australia, behind only that of the Governor of NSW.<sup>3</sup> Although a google search tells me that there appears to be no major roads named after him, there *is* a street in Ashfield, close to where he lived after his retirement.<sup>4</sup> There is also a small plaque on the Manufacturer's House Building on O'Connell

---

<sup>1</sup> The Honourable Jenny Aitchison MP, Minister for Regional Transport and Roads and Member for Maitland.

<sup>2</sup> Ms Narelle Underwood, NSW Surveyor General

<sup>3</sup> Alt was appointed 'Surveyor of Lands of NSW' in April 1787; the office's name was changed to 'Surveyor-General of NSW' a month later, just before the departure of the First Fleet: Ann Moyal, 'Surveyors: Mapping the Distance, Early Surveying in Australia', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*; available: <https://adb.anu.edu.au/essay/22>; Bernard T. Dowd, 'Augustus Theodore Alt (1731-1815)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*; available: <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/alt-augustus-theodore-1702>

<sup>4</sup> 'Augustus Alt', Dictionary of Sydney Website Archive; available: [https://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/alt\\_augustus](https://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/alt_augustus)

Street in the City, close to where, in 1788, “[he] erected his marquee from which he directed the first Public Works and Surveys”<sup>5</sup> in the Colony.

Alt was succeeded by Charles Grimes, who had been Alt’s deputy and de facto Surveyor General due to Alt’s ill health, although he only received 10 extra convicts for his troubles.<sup>6</sup> Grimes fared a little better, so far as memorials go: an obelisk stands in Kew, beside a bend in the Yarra, erected in commemoration of his exploration of that river in 1803, when Victoria was still part of NSW.<sup>7</sup>

From Grimes’s time on, however, there is a cautionary tale to be told: it helps for the Surveyor General to stay out of politics, or – at least – not raise the ire of the Governor.

Grimes sided with the notorious John Macarthur, instigator of the Rum Rebellion that saw Governor Bligh unceremoniously hiding under his bed in Government House, and then hounded from the Colony. What Grimes didn’t count on was the displeasure this would draw from the Colonial Office.

Skidding through the historical detail, Grimes, who had temporarily returned to England, was considered absent without leave and his salary was withheld. Eventually, he had no option but to resign; although, according to Macarthur, who couldn’t help but be scurrilous, Grimes’s successor John Oxley had paid him to do so, so *he* could take up the position.<sup>8</sup>

Initially friends, Oxley and Macarthur fell out when Macarthur found out the extent of Oxley’s debt, forcing Oxley to break off his engagement to Macarthur’s daughter, Elizabeth. As it turned out, Oxley and debt would remain constant friends until his death.

Surveyor-General from 1812-1828, Oxley liked exploring as much as liked surveying, something which didn’t sit well with Commissioner Bigge’s 1819 -1821 Inquiry into the Colony’s administration, who would have preferred that Oxley had stuck more to surveying, as he was paid to do, and which he did very well.<sup>9</sup>

His legacy lives on, with towns, suburbs, a Highway, and an electorate named after him. He was a member of the Royal Society and a founding member of what became, in effect, the first subscription library in the Colony. The John Oxley library in Brisbane is also named after him, honouring his expedition to the Brisbane River in 1823, which led to the first penal colony in what is now Queensland. He was also a member of the First NSW Legislative Council, established in 1824.

Thomas Mitchell came next. He and Governor Darling didn’t get along. Neither did he get along with the next 2 Governors, the word ‘insubordination’ frequently appearing in correspondence between Governors and the Colonial Office in London in regard to his conduct.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://monumentaustralia.org.au/themes/culture/community/display/111260-institute-of-surveyors-centenary>

<sup>6</sup> Bernard T. Dowd, ‘Charles Grimes’, in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*; available: <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/grimes-charles-2129>

<sup>7</sup> <https://monumentaustralia.org.au/themes/landscape/exploration/display/31786-charles-grimes-expedition>

<sup>8</sup> E. W. Dunlop, ‘John Joseph Oxley’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*; available: <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/oxley-john-joseph-2530>

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> D. W. A. Baker, ‘Sir Thomas Livingstone Mitchell’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*; available: <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/mitchell-sir-thomas-livingstone-2463>

His time as Surveyor General included the period of the Great Depression of the 1840s, when the Survey Department's budget was cut by more than 50%, forcing many Departmental surveyors out, and dramatically challenging the Department's ability to fulfil its function.<sup>11</sup>

In 1851, Mitchell fought what is thought to be the last duel in the Colony, with politician Stuart Donaldson. Luckily, both were totally incompetent marksmen, and both survived.

Finally, Governor Sir William Denison, who built Fort Denison to fortify the colony against a possible Russian invasion in the Crimean War, appointed a Royal Commission to inquire into the disastrous state of the Survey Department, for which Mitchell was responsible. Perhaps fortuitously for him, Mitchell helpfully died, which removed a deal of angst from the work of the Commission.

Along the way, bureaucratic decisions moved the goal posts to-and-fro. Between 1833 and 1835, the Colonial Architect came under the control of the Surveyor-General before it was moved across to the Colonial Secretary. In 1837, the supervision of roads went to the Royal Engineers. In 1890, the Office of Surveyor-General was abolished, replaced by a Chief Surveyor and Superintendent of Trigonometrical Survey. Eleven years later, in 1911, however, the Office was, thankfully, revived.

So, for a profession so-often defined by straight lines and precise angles, you've had a colourful past.

Today, Governors and Surveyor-Generals get on splendidly.

Today, as in fact has always been the case, your industry is rightfully classified as an essential service. Without your expertise - civil engineering, town-planning, architecture, and land management, for instance - is impossible.

Without surveyors, new infrastructure and construction projects cannot proceed.

But we know that there are too few of you and I applaud these awards as a means of showcasing your profession.

I thank the Association of Consulting Surveyors NSW, the Institution of Surveyors NSW, and the Organising Committee for facilitating this opportunity to celebrate, recognise, and encourage excellence in your field.

I thank the judging panel for their careful deliberation.

Finally, of course, I offer the warmest of congratulations to the entrants. The quality of your efforts - whether as individuals or organisations - articulated through projects diverse in scale and complexity - are exemplary. You display a dedication that will not only ensure continued excellence in, but also the continued success of, this most excellent of professions: the surveying and spatial information industry of NSW.

Thank you.

---

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*