Captain 'Old King' Cole: Port Phillip pioneer to Victorian patriarch

By John Botham

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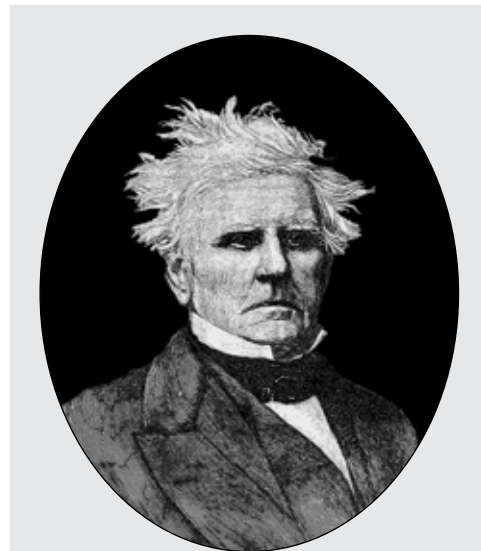
This is a revised version of a paper given in the Members Talk to Members program, 13 August 2017.

I first became aware of Captain George Ward Cole when I came across an S.T. Gill picture of Queens Wharf in the State Library Victoria collection. It shows immigrants disembarking from the paddle steamer *Gipsey* in the mid-1850s with a mysterious-looking Cole's Wharf in the background. But my curiosity was aroused when I read a most remarkable letter written by the then former Lieutenant-Governor, Charles Joseph La Trobe, to Captain Cole following the death of Captain Ferguson in 1868.[1] Captain Ferguson was the harbourmaster of the Port of Melbourne, and previously the captain of the barque *Rajah*.[2]

What was the story behind Cole's Wharf and who was this Captain Cole to whom La Trobe wrote, entrusting him with ensuring that Captain Ferguson's widow was looked after? It turned out that Captain Cole was a war hero, an entrepreneur, a respected politician, and was a big influence on Port Phillip life, from 1840 for forty years.

Unknown artist
The Hon. George Ward Cole
Wood engraving
Victoria and its Metropolis: Past and Present
(Melbourne, McCarron & Bird, 1888, Vol.2, p.469)

The story of Cole's Wharf

When Captain Cole came to Melbourne in 1840, he, like nearly all people arriving in those days, arrived by sea. There is deep water near the shore where Station Pier is today and so the larger ships anchored there, and cargo and passengers had to come ashore in small boats. They had two choices: to follow the 8½ mile narrow winding Yarra to Melbourne where they had to scramble ashore on a muddy bank, or to

take a shorter journey to the beach in Sandridge (Port Melbourne), where refreshments and rest could be obtained at Liardet's Pier Hotel before taking a carriage to the Yarra punt to Melbourne. Both journeys were expensive.

There were many proposals to improve access to the town centre. Even before La Trobe arrived in 1839, Hoddle proposed a railway from the beach to the town, and in 1854 the first railway in Australia started operating on this route. Others proposed canals to improve ship access to the city: cutting across direct from the deep-water anchorage, or cutting off the long bend of the river. Captain Cole proposed this idea. It was not, however, until 1886 that the Coode Canal opened, following much the course of this proposal.[3]

In the 1840s, Captain Cole saw that a wharf was badly needed to service the developing city. Private enterprise had worked well in Sydney to develop the port infrastructure when government funds were lacking. Legislation allowed private wharves to charge a landing fee to pay for the building and maintenance of the wharf. In 1841, Captain Cole applied to La Trobe to build the first private wharf on the Yarra. He bought just over an acre of land, on the north bank between Spencer and King Streets, for £1,000 per acre at auction. This was quite a contrast from the £20 an acre La Trobe had paid the year before for the land which became his Jolimont estate.

But Cole's site did have river frontage, which he described as 'a tea-tree swamp, at high tides covered with water'.[4]

Cole spent around £60,000 in constructing the wharf. He said: 'I was… encouraged to make a dock… and also formed a wharf… with a good platform, on which goods could be landed in safety; and I also built a wall nine feet high all round, as required by the Government'.[5] Thus, by 1842 he was running a successful operation landing goods from his own ships and those of other shipowners. Although other private wharves were being built, the government's Queens Wharf remained primitive with vessels tied up to stumps and stakes along the bank, and where raised walkways and planks were used to access the settlement through the swamp.[6] Cole also built a bond store north of Flinders Street between King and William Streets for storage of imported goods.

When building the wharf, Captain Cole had not counted on the government moving the goalposts. In 1843, the authorities ordered wharf owners to give a third of their wharfage fees to the government. Then came separation from New South Wales, and Victoria's new colonial government required Cole to buy a twelve-month licence to continue to charge wharfage fees. Nine months into the licence period, however, the government abolished wharfage fees altogether. This was in the middle of the

Sir Oswald Walters Brierly, 1817–1894, artist
Man overboard: rescue launch from HMS St Jean d'Acre
Oil on canvas (after 1854)
National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, BAC 3619
During his naval career George Cole rescued men overboard on three occasions.

gold rush when Cole could have expected the wharf to do well. Cole appealed to La Trobe for compensation for the loss of earnings from the remaining three months of his licence, and was awarded £3,469.

The final indignity came in 1854 when the government imposed a wharf rate on all goods landed, in order to fund their own wharf building. Private owners were not permitted to keep any of the fee to fund their own wharves, and so Cole had to suffer the injustice of having to pay wharfage fees on his own goods landed on his own wharf to fund the government works. Cole conducted a long campaign for compensation, or for the government to buy the wharf, but it was not until 1868 that the government bought his wharf for £19,000, a fraction of the initial construction costs and the lost income due to governments changing the rules.

Before Melbourne

But what of Cole before he arrived in Port Phillip? John and Eliza Cole gave birth to their fourth son, George Ward, in November 1793, at Lumley Castle, Durham, where John worked. At the age of fourteen, he joined the Navy.[7] As a midshipman, he took part in the action to retake Santo Domingo from the French. Cole served in ships in the Downs[8] and the Baltic before joining *HMS Tonnant*, the flag ship of Sir Alexander Cochrane and on its way to Bermuda for the 1814 campaign against the United States.

Cochrane planned to attack Washington, and Cole was attached to a launch which helped convey soldiers and marine artillery up the Patuxent River. Although Cole was wounded in the leg, he marched with the guns overnight to join the army at the Battle of Bladenburgh. The British won the battle and continued overnight to Washington where they destroyed the city, setting fire to the White House – in part a payback for the American destruction of Port Dover in Canada.

The British retreated and headed north to Baltimore where they attempted to take Fort McHenry. Cole was employed in a bomb vessel that kept up continual fire on the fort. During the action, Cole got too near a thirteen-inch mortar and lost the use of his left ear. However, the defences held and the British were pushed back.

The *Tonnant* sailed to New Orleans, where a British force planned to take the city. Cole was second in command of a launch, with an eighteen pounder on the bow and thirty-two men. As part of a squadron of boats, they pursued five American gun boats, and after rowing for thirty-six hours they captured them. Cole took part in the boarding and was slightly wounded in the shoulder. Cochrane promoted him to Acting-Lieutenant, placing him in command of one of the captured gunboats. However, poor tactics by the superior British force led to their evacuation. Two of the soldiers fell into the sea and Cole leapt overboard and succeeding in saving one of them.
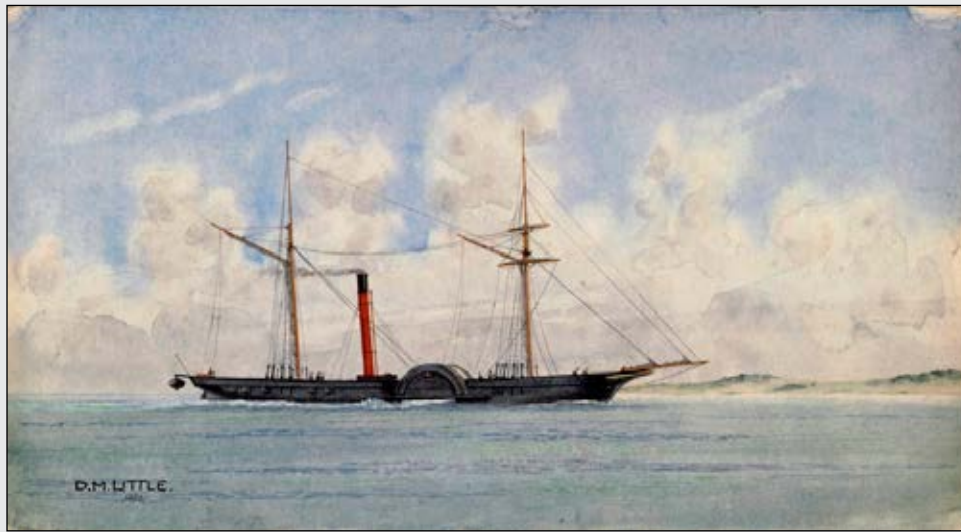
Upon return to England, Cole's promotion to Lieutenant was confirmed and he joined *HMS Primrose*, eighteen guns, and sailed back to Jamaica. On the voyage, he again saved a life by jumping into the sea after a sailor. He was made First Lieutenant and having moved to *HMS Pique*, thirty-two guns, he jumped into the sea for the third time to save a life.

Peace having broken out, ships were decommissioned and men paid off. Cole was placed on half-pay in October 1817 and promoted to Commander in December.[9] Cole had had an outstanding naval career; in just ten years and aged only twenty-four, he had proved himself resourceful in action and was well on the way to Post Captain and then Admiral. But peace had intervened and he did not sail with the navy again.

Like many naval officers at this time, Cole then entered the mercantile marine service. At times he commanded vessels, some of which he owned. He engaged in many types of enterprise, such as fur trading on the north-west coast of America, pearl fishing in the Society Islands, the sandalwood trade in the New Hebrides, and whaling. At times he was based in Sydney, where he also purchased land.

Cole managed to find time during his travels to marry Eliza Cauty in 1824. She had been married twice before and brought two sons and a daughter to the marriage. They had a son, Ward Luke, in 1825. Unfortunately, Eliza died in Singapore two years later.

Melbourne

After many years of travel and adventure, Captain Cole was probably looking to put down roots. He would have heard that there were opportunities in Melbourne, as it was in the very early stages of settlement. He decided to move there, arriving on 4 July 1840 in his schooner *Waterlilly,* with his son and two step-sons. At forty-seven, he was much older than the others in Melbourne at the time. La Trobe was thirty-nine, Lonsdale forty and Fawkner thirty-seven. Therefore, it is not surprising that he was known as 'Old King Cole', especially in his later years when he kept his grey hair long and unruly.

Captain Cole was in the forefront of a revolution in sea transportation. Although he had grown up with sailing ships, he could see that steam propulsion was the way of the future. As an illustration of the contrast between sail and steam, when William Broughton, the Bishop of Australia, left Melbourne in 1843 to return to Sydney, he booked a passage on the barque *Midlothian*. He spent three days on the ship while it attempted to sail through the Heads. On the third day, the paddle steamer *Shamrock* came into view heading for Sydney via Launceston. Bishop Broughton transferred to the *Shamrock* and by nightfall he was two-thirds of the way to Launceston.[10]

Cole could see that Melbourne needed steamships to move passengers and cargo from Hobsons Bay to the developing town, and across the bay to Geelong. He became a director of the Port Phillip Steam Navigation Company which

John Irvin, 1805–1888, artist
Mrs G W Cole, 1857
Formally Thomas Anne McCrae
Oil on canvas
Bayside City Council Art and Heritage Collection

John Irvin, 1805–1888, artist
Mr G W Cole, 1857
Oil on canvas
Bayside City Council Art and Heritage Collection

operated the paddle steamer *Aphrasia* twice a week to Geelong (it was this ship that La Trobe used to visit his house in Shortland's Bluff), also the *Sea Horse* twice a month to Sydney, the *Corsair*, twice a week to Launceston, and the *Governor Arthur* twice daily to Williamstown.[11] In 1851 he built the *City of Melbourne*, the first screw (propeller) steamer built south of the equator, which commenced the first regular steam ferry service across Bass Strait. And, of course, he built Cole's Wharf.

Sailing ships had traditionally arrived at a port and then advertised for cargo and passengers, departing whenever a load was available and the weather favourable. But steamships could run to a schedule, enabling people to book cargo and passage ahead of the ship's arrival. The first ships to be fitted with steam engines used paddlewheels. Their manoeuvrability made them very useful in rivers and harbours, but in open water the rolling of the ship could expose the paddles, and the loading of the ship varied the depth of the paddles in the water, reducing efficiency. A screw, or propeller, always stayed underwater and was not affected by the ship's roll, so they were quickly developed and took over from paddles. Early steam engines were not powerful or reliable enough to be the only means of propulsion; so they were initially used as an auxiliary power source, the sails taking over in open water when the wind was favourable.

George and Thomas Anne Cole

A key part of 'putting down roots' is finding a wife. However, suitable marriage material was in short supply in Melbourne at the time, but he did identify a possible candidate in Thomasina Anne McCrae, quaintly known as Thomas Anne,[12] sister-in-law to Georgiana McCrae. Unmarried at thirty-one, she was unlikely to have many more suitors. He proposed to her in October 1841, causing some consternation in the McCrae family. At seventeen years older and partly deaf, he did not seem a very inspiring suitor. However, Cole was well-to-do and would be able to offer her a handsome establishment and independence from her brother Farquhar. She sought Georgiana's advice, but Georgiana kept her opinion from her diary. Farquhar's views, though, were plain and after a 'deadly quarrel' Thomas Anne left his household and moved to her sister Margaret's house.

Cole went all out to increase his appeal. He bought beach front land in the new township of Brighton. Perhaps as a thank-you for her acceptance of his offer, he gave a picnic party on his Brighton beach property, for 150 guests, including Superintendent and Mrs La Trobe.[13] He quickly built a house, *St Ninian's*, and the Coles spent their honeymoon there after their marriage in March 1842.

Edward La Trobe Bateman, 1816–1897, artist
Captain Cole's house, William Street, Melbourne, c.1854
Pencil and wash with Chinese white
Pictures Collection, State Library Victoria, H81.193

Houses

Cole had bought his land in Brighton from Henry Dendy. Dendy had taken up the offer to purchase land under the Colonial Office's 'Special Survey' scheme, devised to promote the development of townships in the colonies. Applicants had to purchase eight square miles for £1 an acre, that is £5,120. Once in the colony they could select their land. The only restriction was that it must be in one block, and be not more than twice as long as broad.

When Dendy arrived in Melbourne in 1841 he caused consternation.[14] The order authorised the holder to monopolise the whole suburban area of Melbourne if he liked. La Trobe refused to honour the Special Survey before he had received advice. After three months of negotiation with La Trobe and Governor Gipps, it was agreed that Dendy could choose land not closer than five miles from an existing town and no more than two miles of bay frontage. The northern boundary of the land he chose was exactly five miles from Melbourne at what is now North Road, Brighton. The land extended two miles down to South Road and four miles east to Boundary Road. It will be clear now how those roads were named. J.B. Were became his partner and a subdivision plan was drawn up by surveyor H.B. Foot, with its elegant crescents, and the beach front villa blocks to the north west, with Cole's land in its centre. Dendy was in a position to make a fortune with his land

potentially worth up to £100,000. However, he did not have a good head for business and when the depression hit in 1843 he was out-manoeuvred by Were and he lost everything.

Cole, also hit by the depression, managed to find the second instalment on his land, but he had to rent out his town house in William Street, and he leased *St Ninian's* to William Brickwood who was to 'receive young gentlemen to board and educate'.[15] The Government taking a third of his wharf fees would not have helped his finances. He had to reach an agreement with some of his creditors to avoid bankruptcy, but in the end he paid them all back in full.

He had built a fine house in William Street on the corner of La Trobe Street, opposite the Flagstaff Gardens. The Flagstaff Railway Station now takes up the site. When Bishop Broughton came to Melbourne in 1843, Georgiana wrote: 'Bishop Broughton stayed at Capt Coles [*sic*] house which he has lent for the Bishop's accommodation with the servants to attend to him'.[16] This was probably while Cole was trying to let the house—having the Bishop staying there would do no harm to its rental prospects.

In the meantime, the Coles moved into apartments at Cole's Wharf. It would have been very convenient for Captain Cole, but Thomas Anne may not have been so pleased. At the time of the flood in Melbourne in October 1844, Georgiana wrote: 'The water in Mrs. Cole's

dining room at the wharf was up to the top of the table, while she herself looked for refuge in the upper floor of the house.'[17] Thomas Anne must have been relieved when William Brickwood, who had leased *St Ninian's*, was appointed as Headmaster of the Port Phillip Academical Institution when it opened in 1844, freeing up *St Ninian's*.

Cole's beachfront property in Brighton totalled twenty-five acres, with the house built near Point Cole. The first building was a two-storey brick house. This became the servants' wing when a new wing built out of Indian teak with a long verandah was added in the 1850s. In front of the house, stretching away from the low verandah, was a croquet lawn, with fine trees, shrubs and flowers beyond. In 1854, Edward La Trobe Bateman was working on the garden. His friend Alfred Howitt wrote: 'He is now at Brighton at King Cole's, turning His Majesty's garden upside down and back again — shifting trees, raising gullies, building a bower and levelling hills.'[18] In the 1860s *St Ninian's* hosted the celebrated Brighton Flower Show and in 1863 Governor Sir Charles and Lady Darling visited the Brighton Flower Show at *St Ninian's* and ignored convention by lunching with the Coles, which must have delighted Thomas Anne. Captain Cole rounded off the day by winning prizes for a specimen of pelargonium and for a peacock in the poultry section.[19]

Thomas Anne formed a genuine friendship with Governor Sir Henry Manners-Sutton's wife Georgiana, visiting Government House in Toorak regularly for private meals.

The children were of a similar age, visiting each other at Toorak and Brighton. Captain Cole took his daughters down to the ship to see off the family when the Governor left the colony in 1873. Thomas Anne had a private farewell with Lady Manners-Sutton.[20]

There were eight acres of fruit and vegetables, with apples, grapes, peaches, apricots, damsons, plums, almonds, pears, cherries, strawberries, figs and quinces, often given away. The gardeners carted sea-weed to the paddocks and ploughed it in; Cole pioneered the practice in the colony.[21] The house staff in the 1860s consisted of cook, needlewoman, house and parlour maid, and laundress, but it was difficult to keep servants with ten new servants in one four-month period in 1867.[22]

St Ninian's survived for many years. After Thomas Anne's death in 1898, the only surviving child, Margaret, could not afford to maintain the house. It was sold to Sir Thomas Bent, who in the early 1900s subdivided the land and in 1933 the brick servants' building was demolished. But *St Ninian's* could not survive the 1970s; the National Trust was unable to prevent its demolition in 1974. There is now a commemorative plaque on what was once Point Cole — no longer a point, the bay having been filled in to its north.

Business activities

As well as managing his wharf and bonded store, Cole was chairman of the Port Phillip Steamship Navigation Company and owned

or co-owned many steamers. He imported the latest steam engines and built ships. He salvaged ships in the bay, bought wrecks for scrap, and held frequent auctions at his wharf, mainly of unwanted goods landed from ships. He was connected with several banks, Chair of the Coal Mining Company, auditor of the Corporation of Melbourne for a year, and agent for Lloyds. For a few years he devoted himself to squatting, with interests in *Muckleford* and *Cairn Curran* on the Loddon and a station at Mount Cole near Ararat. Mount Cole was not, as may be assumed, named after Captain Cole, but was named by Major Mitchel in 1836.[23] Perhaps Captain Cole bought the land because of the name.

His steamship fleet needed fuel and so he investigated reports of coal at Cape Patterson, and good quality coal was mined there. As a source of firewood, he bought land at Red Cliff on the Bellarine Peninsula. He established a town there, St Leonards, building a pier, and by 1858 there were six houses, a store and a hotel. He had ambitious plans drawn up for a substantial township with streets named after his family. Although his plan was not implemented, there are Cole and Ward streets in St Leonards today. There is a monument to Cole on the foreshore, to commemorate his involvement in the establishment of the town.

He had other property interests. He bought land in Williamstown, Footscray,

Frankston, and Gippsland. He owned land at North Melbourne and at least one house he built still stands at 456 Victoria Street. It was later named *Osbourne House*.

Community activities

Cole threw himself into the local affairs by joining committees and expressing views on the key issues of the day. He joined many committees in diverse fields, including one to plan for Governor Gipps' visit to Port Phillip in 1841, one to determine the best sites for lighthouses, and he was vice-president of the Mechanics Institute. He was an uncompromising opponent of transportation, and subscribed to the Australasian Anti-Transportation League.

He would often offer a solution to issues raised in the district. As mentioned earlier, he advocated cutting a deep canal to shorten the meandering Yarra River to make it accessible to larger ships and to reduce the risk of flooding, which was a frequent occurrence in the town. It was not until just before Cole's death in 1879 that Sir John Coode's report recommended such a canal.

He was a strong advocate of separation from New South Wales and in 1848 he opposed electing people to represent Port Phillip in Sydney and advocated the nomination of the Duke of Wellington and other lords in protest.[24] The next year he was present when Governor

Unknown artist
Funeral of Captain Cole, 1879
Wood engraving
Pictures Collection, State
Library Victoria, A/S10/05/79/20
Published in The Australasian
Sketcher, 10 May 1879
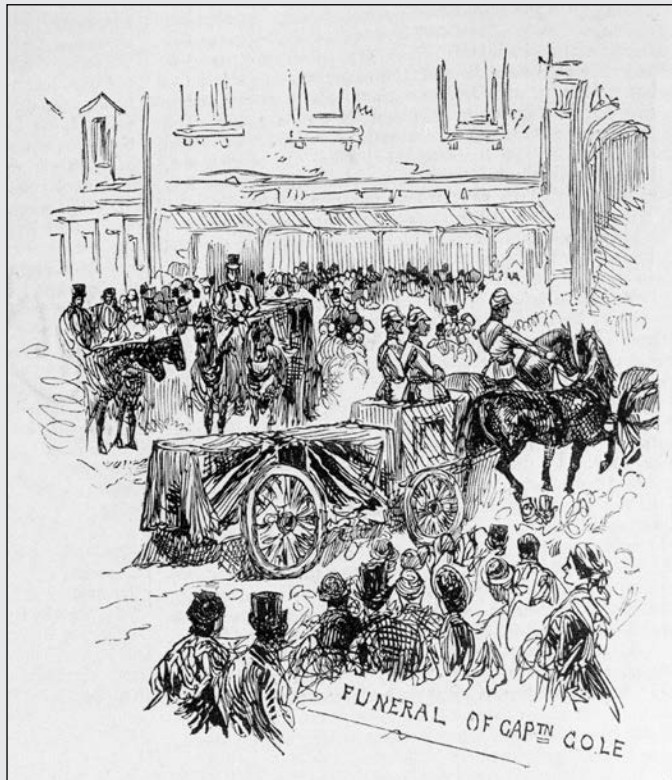
FitzRoy was being entertained by fine society of Melbourne. FitzRoy expressed his regret that the prospect of separation would mean he would be officially disconnected from the district,[25] but one cannot help but feel that he would be relieved to be rid of the complaining residents of Port Phillip.

Cole offered to lease and drain the swamp to Melbourne's west.[26] He solved the problem of supplying water for ships in Hobsons Bay by building a floating water tank that could be filled with water from the Falls and towed to the ships.[27] He was a passionate advocate of railways and he put forward a plan for the development of railway lines to the major settlements in Victoria and argued against building roads which were simply washed away each winter.[28]

In 1863 Cole introduced sugar-beet to the colony. He obtained seed from Holland and distributed it freely. He wanted to improve agriculture and advocated the establishment of agricultural training schools. He was appointed as a magistrate for the City of Melbourne and later a territorial magistrate.

Parliament

Once separation from New South Wales was achieved in 1851, Captain Cole was keen to take part in the first Legislative Council of Victoria. He became a candidate for the city of Melbourne, but he came last of seven candidates having been reluctant to campaign.[29] However, in 1853, the seat for Gippsland became available, and Captain Cole offered himself for the vacancy, and was elected.[30] Soon after his election he was appointed to a select committee to consider the harbour regulations, and he assisted in the framing of the Constitution Act. He remained in the Legislative Council until 1855 when he resigned to make a trip to England.

He made two trips in fact. He sailed firstly on the *Eagle* in May 1855 with his family. They returned at the end of 1856 on the *Royal Charter*. It was this ship that three years later on its return from Australia, was wrecked on the north coast of Anglesea, Wales, with the loss of 450 lives and much gold. A freak storm with hurricane force winds from the north wrecked about 200 ships and it became known as the Royal Charter storm. It was the catalyst for the development of the Meteorological Office under Vice-Admiral Robert FitzRoy, of *Beagle* fame and half-brother of Governor Charles FitzRoy. It introduced the first gale warning service in Britain, to help prevent similar tragedies.

After his return from his second trip to England, Cole was elected to represent the Central Province in the Upper House in 1859. He retained the seat until his death in

1879: 'Age and venerable appearance made him one of the most conspicuous figures of the Council Chamber.'[31]

Captain Cole had his own firmly-held views, and they placed him, as a rule, in opposition to the great majority of his fellow members, but he was undeterred, and struggled gallantly on despite all difficulties.[32] He acted as the representative of the McCulloch Government in the Legislative Council in the 1860s and was made an Executive Councillor in 1867. He was a strong protectionist, arguing that local industry would not grow without a tariff on imported goods, and setting forth his views in a pamphlet.

He took a great interest in the defences of Port Phillip, publishing a pamphlet on the subject. As a naval man, he favoured ships for defence over fixed land batteries. He advocated the purchase of iron-clad gunboats. At this time Captain Cowper Coles was developing his patent design for a revolving gun turret. It was intended to be fitted to iron-clad ships lying low in the water, ideal for coastal defence. *HMVS Cerberus*, equipped with two Coles' turrets was delivered to Victoria in 1871 and served in Port Phillip until 1924, when it was scuttled off Half Moon Bay, Black Rock.

When Captain Cole was re-elected for the Central Province in 1860, *The Age* wrote:

> Captain Cole appears to be one of the few wealthy men, desirous of a seat in Parliament, who have large liberal just views as to what is due to the welfare of the people, and as to what is the best and soundest policy for new countries such as ours. He comprehends the wisdom of being liberal to the working classes, in allotting them their share of the natural advantages held out by a new country. He is a lucky exception to his class; and we, are pleased to see him again seated in the Legislature.[33]

Death

Cole died in his house in Brighton on 26 April 1879 in full possession of his faculties. To the last he continued to manifest a deep interest in the affairs of the Colony. On the day of his death he listened attentively whilst a friend read Sir John Coode's proposals for improvements to the harbour.[34]

His love for his old naval profession never abated, and before death he expressed a wish that he should be buried with the Union Jack around him. He was carried to the grave on a gun carriage drawn by four horses, the coffin draped with Union Jack. The cortége left *St Ninian's* and crossed Princes Bridge at noon, on its way to the Old Melbourne Cemetery where he was buried in the family burying place,[35] next to four of his children and his step-son, all of whom died young.

George Higginbotham, Chief Justice of Victoria, wrote of Captain Cole after his death:

> He was always thinking of the public welfare, and was never wearied in advocating measures which he thought calculated to promote it... No politician in recent Australian history appears to present a record of purer and more sincere patriotism, or of more unselfish and benevolent political action than Captain George Ward Cole.[36]

When Cole's daughter, Margaret died in 1926, his memory died out with her. None of his three surviving children married and his grave is unmarked.[37] A few street names and plaques at Point Cole and St Leonards are the only lasting memory of a remarkable man.

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