

# THE DUCKITT EXPEDITION

## AN ESHER STORY TOLD FROM SOUTH AFRICAN SOURCES

BY

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**T**HE tomb of William Duckett (d. 1801) in the old churchyard at Esher also commemorates his son William who died at the Cape of Good Hope, 'to which Settlement he was sent with a large Establishment by George the Third to introduce his Father's system and implements of Agriculture.'

The story of how the younger William (who became Duckitt at the Cape and will be referred to as 'Duckitt' in the present study) organised his expedition is mainly to be found in his manuscript journal. The entries in black ink in the brown leather-bound volume, which has never left the Cape since Duckitt's first arrival, are still easily legible. Other sources used are quoted at the end of this article. The burial registers are useful as giving the ages of Duckitt's Surrey staff and the death notices even more so as they usually give the place and sometimes the date of birth. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations are from the journal. This starts from 8 December 1799, though in fact it was not till 15 January 1800 that Duckitt 'At home being a Wet Day began Entering my Journal in this Book.'

When, in their war against France, the British occupied the Dutch colony of the Cape in 1796, they found that Boer farming methods were very out of date and would be quite unable to feed the increasing population of Cape Town and the British garrison and those in the numerous naval and merchant ships. The home government decided that they must be improved and, despite the rival claims of a Colonel King and perhaps of others, selected William Duckitt.

Born at Esher in 1768, Duckitt apparently held an appointment in the Treasurer-General's office in London and Colonel King, for one, doubted his knowledge of farming. But there is a letter in the Cape Archives from Sir George Yonge, the Governor-designate of the Cape, to Dundas the Home Secretary, which intimates that 'Duckitt does by no means acquiesce in Col. King's judgment of him, at which he is most indignant and insists upon being put to the Tryal.' Duckitt may well have worked, and perhaps was still working, at Waylands and he could hardly have been selected if he had not been a practical farmer.

His father had started farming at Petersham in about 1760 before moving to the larger acreage of Waylands. Although only a tenant of the Pelhams of Esher Place, the elder Duckett was the inventor of new ploughs and other agricultural improvements and one of the

leading farmers of his day. He was visited by George III<sup>1</sup> and by many other progressive gentleman farmers. The family home was a handsome gabled brick house, dating from the seventeenth century, which still survives as South Waylands, off the Esher road, in the parish of Hersham (Plate IX (a)).

To judge by the laboured writing and haphazard spelling and punctuation of the journal, his son did not receive much education. But by the seventeen-nineties the Ducketts had become of fairly high social status. One of the daughters is said to have been a lady-in-waiting to Queen Charlotte and the Cape Duckitts still own a silver candle snuffer, marked G III R, which is thought to have been given to her. He dined with Miss Pelham of Esher Place and Sir George Yonge calls him 'my friend Duckitt.' As we shall see, he settled the arrangements for his expedition in personal discussion with 'top' people. These included Henry Dundas (later Lord Melville) and William Huskisson, the Under Secretary for War and the Colonies.

Duckitt certainly made a good impression on Yonge, even after he had begun work at the Cape. 'I have found him honest and firm to his Duty,' he tells Dundas. 'His Zeal, his Skill, his Activity, joined to his Probity, has (*sic*) already gained him a General Good Character.' 'He is doing great Service to Government as well as to the Colony' and 'I shall think it my duty to give him the whole Superintendence of every agricultural Matter.'

Little else about his character transpires from the records under review—except perhaps that he was not a good business man—for he went bankrupt in his later years. The Cape Duckitts have a miniature of him, as a man of about thirty (Plate IX (b)). It is unlikely to have been made at the Cape at that date and was no doubt made in England, perhaps shortly before he sailed. It shows him with a long, pensive, rather pale face, black hair, brown eyes and clean-shaven cheeks. A son was born at Esher in 1795 and another there in 1799 and a third at the Cape in 1800.

If he held a Treasury post he would presumably have had a home in London. But this is not mentioned in the journal and the Esher births suggest that he lived in Esher. The journal shows him staying in Esher, sometimes at Waylands and sometimes with his friend Simpson. Other friends recorded are a couple named Joyce, apparently Londoners, who helped him choose furniture (his wife being presumably unable to help at first in this because of the birth of their second son in November 1799). Joyce also came to see Duckitt in Esher on 27 April 1800 and slept at the Grapes, an inn which survives in Esher High Street as a private house.

As Duckitt told Lord Melville long afterwards in 1808, he accepted the Cape appointment 'quite against the wishes of my Father and

<sup>1</sup> The Secretary of the Board of Agriculture published in 1811 a book *On the Husbandry of three Celebrated Farmers*, one of whom was the elder Duckett, and mentioned a report on Waylands of about 1790 'by a Great Personage . . . whose present situation excites the deepest feelings of our hearts,' a reference to the king's subsequent insanity.

friends, being well aware that my Prospects were good at home.' Nevertheless, he was greatly aided in his arrangements by his father and others of the family. Chief of these was his brother John, born at Petersham in 1770 and now manager of the estate and model farm of the fifth Duke of Bedford at Woburn.<sup>2</sup> John used to come up for discussions in London, where he slept at the Cross Keys Inn.

The full circumstances of Duckitt's appointment are not known from Cape sources and the journal never mentions George III, who is said to have had him sent out. Perhaps the king's insanity now prevented him from taking any further part in the matter. The earliest relevant document at the Cape is a memorandum in Duckitt's handwriting, of 28 July 1799, though unsigned, giving the conditions under which he was appointed 'by the recommendation and in the presence of His Excellency Sir George Yonge.' His first designation was the humble one of Upper Gardener but this was changed to Agriculturist on 19 January 1800. His annual salary was to be £500 from 29 July and, as a later letter claimed, he was orally promised a private grant of land. If he died at sea or at the Cape his widow Mary would receive an annual pension of £150. He would be allowed every expense for the conveyance to the Cape of himself, his family and all their personal effects. He was to recruit agricultural staff and take them out and their wages were laid down. Dundas lived at Wimbledon Green and Yonge was also living in Wimbledon and the agreement was signed there.

The transport selected for Duckitt's voyage was the *Wellesley*, a new ship and perhaps an East Indiaman, the property of a Mr. Prinsep of 147 Leadenhall Street. She was armed with six nine-pounders and five six-pounders on each side of the gun deck, with two more guns on the quarter deck—and they were to be very thankful for all this armament when they fell in with a French privateer on the way out. As the ship could not travel unescorted under wartime conditions, she would have to await a convoy and it was hoped at first that she would be able to join an India Fleet which was due to sail shortly before Christmas 1799.

In the meanwhile Duckitt had much to do. He had to recruit staff, collect the farm implements, seed, fruit trees and animals which would be most useful at the Cape and gather up his family's effects and furniture and to arrange to have everything put on board.

He needed staff, not only to start the work at the Cape but also to look after the gear and animals in England and on the voyage. 'I am confident,' he records, 'that my Father and Brothers would Exert themselves to procure good hands' and no doubt they did so. Most, if not all, of the hands were Surrey men and some may have been on the strength at Waylands.

A good second-in-command was essential and this he secured. 'When these Proposals [of 29 July] were delivered by me to Mr. Dundas I proposed Mr. Isaac Iles to go as my Assistant at Sixty

<sup>2</sup> Bedford was a leading agriculturist of the day and this is the theme of his statue in Russell Square, London. One hand holds ears of corn, the other is on a plough. Below are farming scenes and farm animals.

Pounds per Annum with Board and Lodging' and he was appointed accordingly. Iles had been an official in the Excise Department and was to continue on his old salary. He was a bachelor, aged twenty-nine, and he came of an Esher family who were related to the Ducketts: for Duckitt's mother had been an Iles and his sister Elizabeth would marry a John Iles at Stepney three years later.

On 15 December, Duckitt noted, 'In the Evening agreed with all my Men to proceed to the Cape of Good Hope,' and next day 'delivered the names of all the People engaged to proceed to the Cape' to the Agent and Commissioner of the Transport Board. On 10 January Huskisson paid Duckitt a sum of money as an instalment of the wages for his staff and himself. A List of Persons engaged to proceed with Mr. William Duckitt to the Cape of Good Hope, unsigned but dated 7 March 1800, gives the names of the party, most of whom are also frequently mentioned in the journal.

The wheelwright and carpenter was Robert Silver, on fifty-two guineas a year; the blacksmith John Wells, on the same salary. There would be five farm labourers on thirty guineas. Of the three Crowchers—Thomas, Edmund and William—the first was born at Wonersh and the third at Esher. The others were John Bailey and William Kingham. Thomas Buckle is not on the list but is mentioned in the journal and certainly went: he was evidently recruited later. Mary, the wife of Thomas Crowcher, was to draw ten guineas as dairy maid and their son William, aged thirteen, would have ten pounds a year as farm lad. Everyone was also to receive 'a further reward provided the wages of the Country [i.e. the Cape] tolerates it'—a rather vague promise which probably came to nothing. To pay them from time to time Duckitt was usually given a draft on Coutts' Bank but on another occasion he paid cash first into Drummonds', presumably his own bank.

The *Wellesley* had been declared 'a Compleat Transport,' which meant that the men were entitled to the same treatment as troops. Captain Purrier agreed that they should have part of the Great Cabin and Duckitt's family the remainder, and also that 'I should be supplied as an Officer at the Captain's table and the Men as is customary' but, as we shall see, there was much trouble about all this later.

Duckitt wisely got advice on farming matters from three experts—Lord Somerville, Lord Macartney and Sir Joseph Banks. Somerville, who was President of the Board of Agriculture and himself a progressive farmer, received him at his house in Sackville Street on 19 July 1799 and wrote to Dundas on that date that Duckitt 'had conducted himself with much good sense' and that he himself would visit Dundas with Duckitt either in London or at Wimbledon to settle the details of the appointment. Lord Macartney, who had been Governor of the Cape until 1798, gave him advice on which would be the best livestock and seed grains to take out. Duckitt also consulted the famous scientist Banks at his house in Isleworth.

He selected ploughs, drills, tools for mechanics and draining tools, and his father, who had designed some of the ploughs and had them

made to his specification, housed them all at Waylands. He obtained seed at a cost of £300. On reaching the Cape he was able to report that, though only about fifty of the hop plants had come through, nearly all the seed had survived, although the boxes were often drenched with spray, and this he ascribed to the quality of the boxes made for the seed by a Mr. Gibbs.

Duckitt could get good advice on cereals and implements from his father but Waylands was not a stock farm and he was lucky to be able to rely on Lord Somerville where farm animals were concerned. Somerville recommended Devonshire cattle and Duckitt wrote to his brother John whose employer the Duke of Bedford supplied him with a bull and two heifers. For sheep Somerville preferred the half-bred Spanish-Ryelands and twenty ewes and two rams were obtained. By November the cattle and sheep had reached their base which was at Ken Wood, Hampstead, the seat of the Earl of Mansfield. The farm lay on the western border of the estate, near the Spaniards, and some of its buildings are standing to this day. The *Wellesley* was lying off Gravesend but would call at Portsmouth, and it was at first intended to drive the animals down to Portsmouth and load them there. Later it was decided only to drive them to Limehouse and take them downstream to Gravesend on barges. Duckitt had to have pens built for them on board and also to provide enough fodder and water for their long journey, noting for 6 January that 'the Hay at that time was 7/7d. in the Market.' The voyage was expected to take three months but he was advised to lay in enough supplies for four and did so—fortunately, as they eventually took over five months.

He had also to arrange his own affairs. Captain Purrier at first demanded £300 for the family's board and lodging but agreed on 4 February to take them for £150, which was presumably paid by Government. On 22 and 28 January Duckitt took some time off and went up from Esher to London with his wife and Mrs. Joyce to buy furniture. On 3 February 'went with Mr. Hale to a Sale at Epsom bought nothing.' Other trips were more fruitful. On 14 February, for instance, 'met Mr. Knight of Esher at the Ship Charing Cross for the purpose of procuring Necessary Books and paper for my use' and next day 'Mr. Kt and self rambled from one part of town to the other in search of books etc.' In his final accounts there is a payment of £12 10s.6d. to Knight, presumably for books and stationery. On 14 January 'went to Hampton Wick to try my rifle guns' and they evidently proved satisfactory, for eleven days later he paid £9 9s.0d. for two 'Riffle Guns' to Blakey & Co. of 3 Crane's Wharf in Queen Street. Most of Duckitt's buys would be included in the still existing inventory of his furniture which is attached to the insolvency proceedings which followed his death. Relatives bought in a good deal and some of it is in their descendants' homes to this day. He was allowed 'to take what dogs I thought necessary' but they are not mentioned in the journal. Sir George Yonge, who had been made Cape Governor in February 1799, sailed in October, leaving

his jaunty cart and a curricule for his aide-de-camp Major James Cockburn to be brought out by Duckitt.

Despite the supposed interest of the King, Duckitt suffered numerous frustrations and, so far from sailing in December, did not get away till the end of the following May. Bureaucrats are often slow and cautious and no one would stir without a written order from Huskisson. A second reason, no doubt, was that Dundas and Huskisson were members of a Government which was busy fighting the French. There were, at any rate, frequent delays and difficulties. On several occasions Duckitt went to keep an appointment with Dundas, was kept waiting for several hours and then asked to come back another day. As he and his men would have expenses in equipping themselves, salaries were due to be paid in advance but were in fact paid usually much in arrear. Although his widow's pension had been verbally agreed early on, it was many months before he could secure a letter confirming it. He also had a few staff troubles and on 23 December had to record that 'Stephen and Mary Parker relinquished going to the Cape and also the Blacksmith.' He evidently could not afford the luxury of a Christmas holiday and managed to sign on a new blacksmith—on Christmas Day.

Shipboard rations and accommodation proved another headache. Purrier was replaced by a Captain Gordon but the troubles continued. On 3 February the Captain refused, in default of a written order, to 'go further than the usual Rations allowed to troops which would by no means do for My Family.' He also insisted on a written order before he would consent to Duckitt and his family dining at the Captain's table. On 13 April the second officer 'informed me my Men was only allowed two thirds Allowances as King's troops and no more than sufficient for a three Months was sent,' which in the long and uncertain voyages of those days might have been dangerously inadequate. Duckitt went straight to the War Office and got the official concerned to write out an order granting the full allowance and, to make doubly sure, himself proceeded to the Victualling Office to see that the War Office order had been received and was being complied with. On 30 March he paid a bill of £15 6s.5d. to Alder. This was presumably for a further supply of meat, as the Alders were long established Esher butchers.<sup>3</sup> Duckitt was dissatisfied with the small space allotted to his men in the Great Cabin, but the Captain was vexed at having to take them at all and refused to allow any more.

The men who were supposed to erect pens on board ship for the sheep declined to do so without a written order. In the event this did little harm as presently one of the bureaucrats remembered an Act of Parliament of 1788 which, to give protection to the English woollen industry, forbade the export of sheep and the plan to take sheep out had to be abandoned altogether. The Captain at first refused to accept Duckitt's personal effects on board as he had no

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<sup>3</sup> At a later date his nephew William would marry a Mary Alder and their tombs are to be seen near the other Ducketts in Esher's old churchyard.

written order to do so. When he finally agreed the luggage was sent off in lighters from Limehouse to be loaded at Gravesend but one of the lighters was held up for several days by the Customs House. Duckitt wanted to take some horses out but Huskisson talked of charging him £500 to do so and this, too, had to be abandoned. He gave permission for the jaunty cart and curricule to go, but on 28 January the ship owners said they would take up too much room and it looks as though these, too, had to be left behind.

Solving these problems kept Duckitt constantly on the move between Esher and London and Gravesend. At first he used the Cobham Coach but later he adopted other, presumably quicker, means. 'Returned to Esher in my Chair' on 15 February and on other occasions he used the post chair or chaise of one Payne or Paine, apparently an Esher man, while on 16 March he tried something different again when he 'hired Mr. Payne's horse and put him in Mr. Joyce's Gig.'

Duckitt dealt with his problems with patience and good humour and even found time for some other family business and for amusement. On 15 December, for instance, he went with Simpson to the farm of his aunt (Miss Duckett) at Stoke d'Abernon 'to lett the felling of Timber to Messrs. Taylor and Co.' On 24 January he and his brother Mark and their friends Bird and Simpson (both, I think, Esher people) dined with Mr. Masters in Esher. Five days later 'went with Mr. Joyce to Edgware to meet Lord Berkeley's Hounds, had a Bad sport but Killed.' On another day he dined in London with Frances Pelham, the daughter and heiress of Henry Pelham, the Prime Minister, and owner of Esher Place.

At last the time came for the final arrangements. The cattle were eventually driven to Tilbury and ferried over to the ship off Gravesend, and most of the baggage was loaded from the lighters on 3 April and the *Wellesley* started off for Portsmouth. Duckitt said goodbye to his relatives and friends in Esher on 30 April and hired a chaise which took him down the Portsmouth road for £4 14s.6d. He went on board on 2 May but there were many false starts, the ship having frequently to return to its moorings because the wind had changed or dropped, and it was not until 23 May that they finally got under way. They reached Tor Bay just in time to join their convoy, as they 'found our fleet (East Indiamen) and the Grand fleet preparing to make sail.' They had a further three and a half months at sea, enduring the Captain's boorishness and having a skirmish with a French privateer. 'Captain Gordon was very unpleasant to all the passengers till after the Action when he thought proper to change his Conduct.'

They arrived at Simonstown on 11 September and Duckitt never returned to England. His wife brought their eldest son back in 1804 to be educated and he was apparently still doing his medical studies there in 1825 when his father died and he returned to take over the farm. Mary Duckitt died in 1843 and was buried in her husband's tomb on the farm, their descendants replacing this by a new tomb

in 1907. The Duckitts are still one of the leading families in the Darling district to the north of Cape Town, where they occupy fourteen farms, and they are proud of their Surrey origins. They used to possess a farm named Esher and still have a house named Esher in Darling town and a Waylands farm just outside. I am grateful to several of them for help over this study of their ancestor.

*Manuscript Sources in South Africa*

Cape Archives, Cape Town.	Terms of Duckitt's employment, 28 July, 1799. The Melville Papers: Letter from Somerville to Dundas, 19 July 1799. Yonge to Dundas, 22 October 1800. Yonge to Dundas, 22 October 1800. (Second letter.) Yonge to Dundas, 5 January 1801. Duckitt to Huskisson, 6 January 1801. Yonge to Huskisson, 10 January 1801. Yonge to Dundas, 20 February 1801. Duckitt to Huskisson, 26 April 1801. General Dundas to Dundas, 23 July 1801. Insolvency proceedings of Duckitt's estate, 1828. Duckitt family tree, 1853. <i>Notes on the Duckitt family</i> by Clive Ruperti, undated.
Office of Master of Supreme Court, Cape Town.	Death Notices.
St. George's church, Cape Town.	Burial Registers.
South African Public Library, Cape Town.	Journal of William Duckitt.
Witwatersrand University, Johannesburg.	Letter of — November 1799 from Duckitt to Dundas. <sup>4</sup> Letter of 2nd July 1808 from Duckitt to Lord Melville. <sup>4</sup>

*Photographs*

Waylands Farm	By courtesy of Mr. J. A. L. Baker of Weybridge.
Miniature of W. Duckitt	By courtesy of Mr. W. Duckitt of Blouberg, Cape.

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<sup>4</sup> Copies only, the originals being destroyed in a fire in 1931.



(a) SOUTH WAYLANDS, HERSHAM.



(b) WILLIAM DUCKITT.