

PHOTO

(courtesy x)

**Thomas Henry Johnson Browne** (1818-1882) was born 7 April 1818 in London. Browne enjoyed articulated training as an architect and civil engineer. He worked on the London to Birmingham railway under (Sir) Charles Fox from 1832-1839, then with William Nicholson, a civil engineer of Manchester, to whose practice he succeeded in 1848, and his own London practice in 1854-1862 [according to Browne in 1878]. During this period Browne married and had a large family. At the London Central Criminal Court in May 1862, he was convicted of forging money orders and sentenced to ten years transportation to Western Australia, arriving at Fremantle late in 1863 on the *Lord Dalhousie*. Years later Browne claimed that he was guilty only of shielding his wife.

For eighteen months Browne was employed in the Office of Works Department of the Convict Establishment at Fremantle, working on the large lunatic asylum erected during 1861-65. His watercolour of the completed building, *The New Lunatic Asylum, and Invalid Depot, Fremantle, Western Australia*, was painted in 1866. After receiving his ticket of leave on 12 June 1865, Browne was self-employed. It seems that at least two extant watercolours were commissioned at this time: an attributed view of houses in the High Street, Fremantle, and *Ravenswood Hall, Murray River*. He may have moved to Bunbury around this time, and at the end of 1865 Browne was appointed schoolmaster at Ferguson. Browne attempted to have some of his children brought to WA as assisted migrants, apparently unsuccessfully, and resigned his teaching position about the time he gained his conditional pardon, in December 1869.

After a period away from Fremantle, possibly at the abortive 1870 Peterwanga gold-rush to the Irwin River near Geraldton, Browne set himself up as an architect-engineer and land agent at the port. Because of the numerous Tom Brown(e)s, he acquired the distinguishing nickname of 'Satan', a reference to his black hair, sallow complexion and lean visage. His sentence expired on 11 May 1872 and he was declared a free man, an expirée. The major public work proposed for Fremantle from 1869 to 1875 was the Harbour Improvement Scheme, for which three tenders were received: from Browne, S.W. Bickley and

from the surveyor and director of Public Works, Malcolm Fraser (who also happened to chair the commission which was to award the contract).

Predictably, Fraser's tender was chosen, but the new Governor Robinson persuaded his council to over-rule the recommendation and send Browne's cheaper scheme to London for professional appraisal by Sir John Coode, a leading civil engineer. In the interim Browne was appointed inspector of works on the Geraldton to Northampton railway. He started planning a connecting system of railways throughout WA, including a Fremantle-Perth railway that crossed the Swan River at Point Resolution. Difficulties soon arose with the organisation and finances of both projects and Browne was dismissed in 1876.

By this time Browne had cut off all English ties, his wife being dead and his children indifferent. In October 1875 he married the much younger Mary Ann Letch in the Fremantle Congregational Church, but was soon facing problems with this marriage. Their first child, a daughter, was born at Geraldton in May 1877, but died of sunstroke when she was six months old. Compounding their difficulties, engineer and contractor Browne was adjudged a bankrupt at Geraldton in August 1877. They moved to Perth, but by then no civil engineer's position in government service was open to an expiree. He made a precarious living as an architect-engineer-draftsman, one commission being to draw a bird's-eye view of the Jarrahdale Timber Company's works. He also spent much time and effort on a plan for a new road and traffic bridge. Again this came to nothing, partly because of a vicious personal vendetta against Browne by the new director of Public Works, James Thomas.

In 1878-1879 Browne advertised as a surveyor, civil engineer and architect with offices in Hay Street, Perth. Around this time he provided articulated training to the first WA-born architect Henry Stirling Trigg (1860-1919), also the first Australian-born architect to practice in the State. Professional architectural practice requires certain affluence, or a market, to exist. With the impoverished days of pre-gold rush Western Australia, little could be spared for enriching the built environment. Generally early building was crude and, away from Perth and Fremantle, often owner-designed and built. In the difficult economic surroundings and with little optimism for the immediate prospects of the colony, it was very difficult for Browne to earn an income in private practice.

Browne continued to maintain a precarious living with his various occupations in Perth until April 1880, when he opened a grand hotel and pleasure garden around the disused mill in South Perth, renamed the Alta Gardens Hotel. Despite a healthy trade, as Browne had no capital, the venture was debt-laden. On 12 January 1882 the 63 year old was found guilty of criminal activities over a land transaction. In prison that night, waiting to be sentenced, he committed suicide by taking strychnine. He left a note blaming his second wife for his troubles. 'Restored' with the assistance of government intervention from the 1920s, the mill at South Perth is one of the Swan River Colony's earliest extant structures. Browne remains best known for his water-colour paintings of colonial buildings from the 1860s.

#### References:

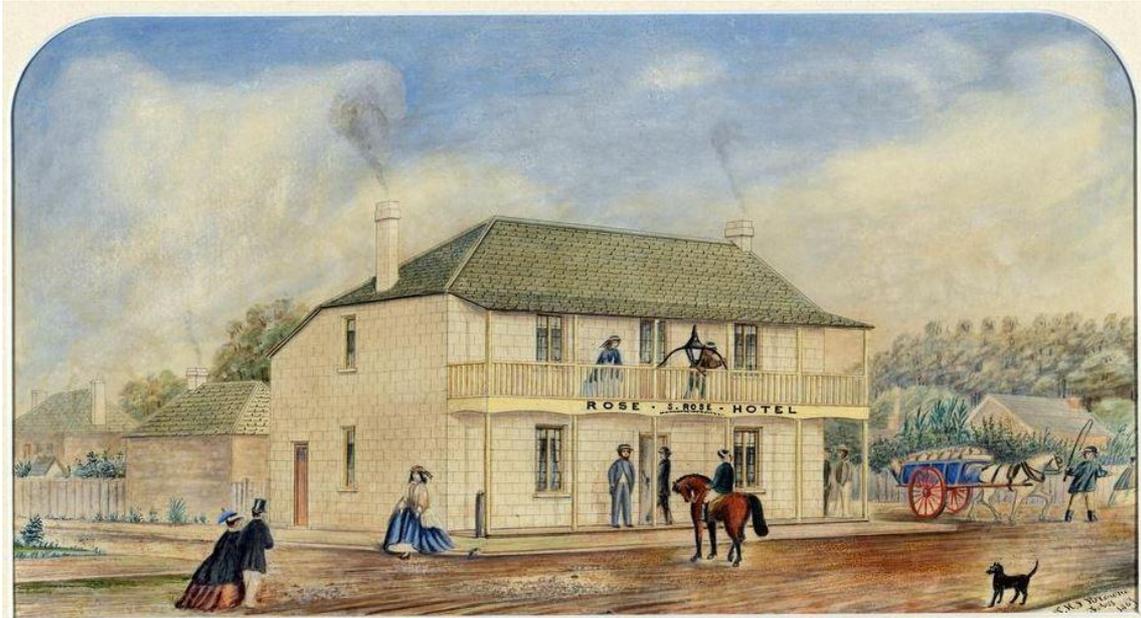
- 'Marriage', *Western Australian Times*, 5 October 1875, p.2 (to Mary Ann Glassbrook Letch).
- 'Harbor Works at Fremantle', *The Herald*, 8 May 1875, p.1 (public meeting to hear Browne).
- 'Harbor Works Fremantle', *The Herald*, 16 October 1875, pp.2-3s (Browne's open letters).
- 'Harbor Works Fremantle', *The Herald*, 23 October 1875, pp.2-3s (Browne's open letters).
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- 'Births', *Inquirer & Commercial News*, 16 May 1877, p.3 (birth of daughter at Geraldton).
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#### **Citation details:**

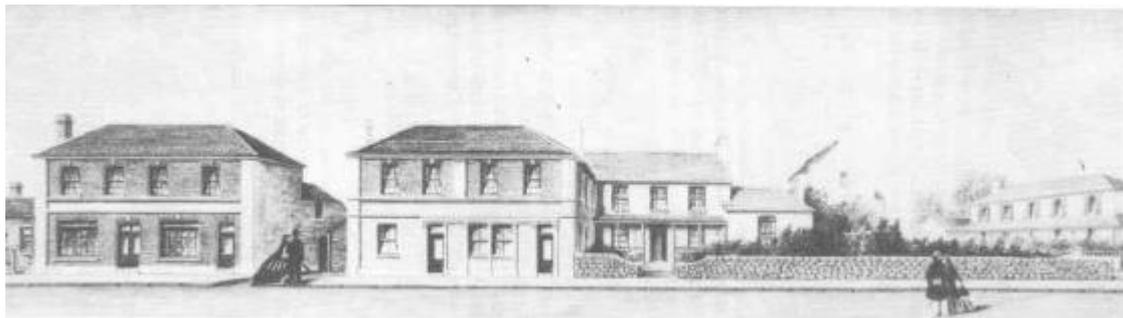
Taylor, Dr John J., 'Thomas Henry Johnson Browne (1818-1882)', Western Australian Architect Biographies, <http://www.architecture.com.au/> accessed DATE.



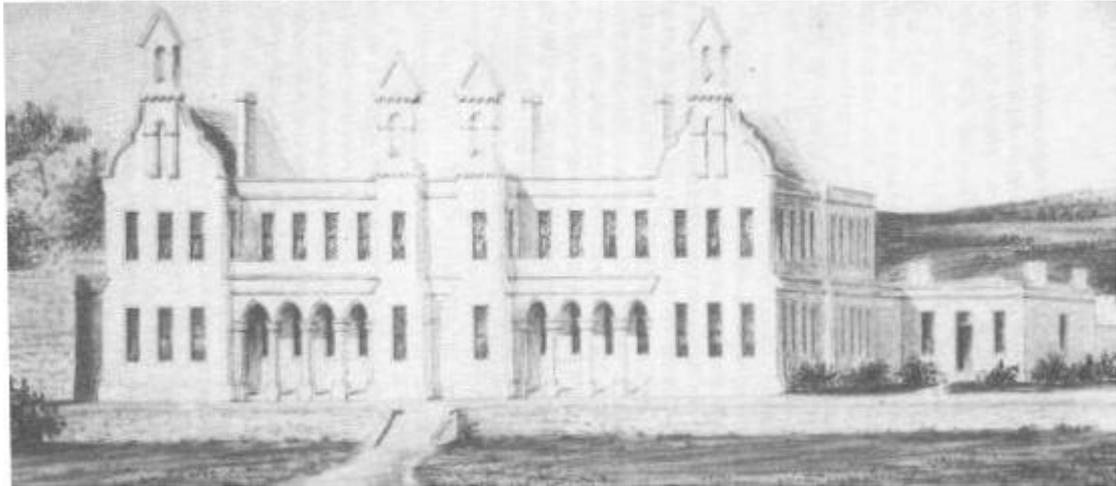
Rose Hotel, Bunbury 1865 (Wordsworth Collection, National Gallery of Australia)



The Congregational Chapel and Pastors Residence, Bunbury WA  
(<http://mckenziesauctioneers.com.au/MarchAuction2013Lots1-99.htm>)



High Street, Fremantle WA 1865 (Chapman p.50)



The New Lunatic Asylum, and Invalid Depot, Fremantle WA c.1866 (Chapman p.52)



The Convict Establishment, Fremantle, WA c.1866 (SLNSW V5B Frem 4)



Ravenswood Hall, Murray River c.1865 (print for sale on Ebay - original at RWAHS)

**MR THOS. H. J. BROWNE,**  
 Surveyor, Civil Engineer, & Architect.  
 Offices : Hay Street, Perth, W.A.

**I**NFORMATION and estimates furnished on all matters relating to Railways, Machinery, and Engineering. Plans, drawings, contracts, and agreements for work of all kinds prepared. Surveys, sales, and improvements of properties and estates undertaken.

Engineering, Architectural, Mechanical, and Lithographic Draughtsman.

London Correspondents and Agents:—Messrs. Sir Chas. Fox & Sons, Civil Engineers; Messrs. Ransome & Rapier, Railway-material Manufacturers, Engineers, and Contractors; Messrs. J. J. Browne & Co. Marine Engineers, and Iron Steam-ship Builders.

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District Maps, and Road Maps of the Colony to be seen at Mr. Browne's office and copies obtained.

Business of all kinds relating to land transacted at the Survey Office. Applications for land made there, and plans and particulars promptly forwarded to all parts of the colony.

### Immigration Grants.

**M**R. T. H. J. BROWNE, Surveyor and Civil Engineer, undertakes the procurement of free grants of land for Immigrants, and the transaction at the Crown Lands office of business of every description relating to land in any part of the Colony.

Mechanic and tradesman immigrants entitled to select town lots in lieu of rural land.

Full particulars can be obtained on application to Mr. Browne personally, or by letter, at his offices, Howick Street, Perth.

### Notice of Removal.

The offices of Mr. Thos. H. J. Browne, Surveyor, Civil Engineer, and Architect will on Monday next be removed from Hay Street, to Howick Street, facing the Town Hall, Perth Sept. 24th, 1879.

Samples of Browne's various services advertisements (*Western Australian Times*, 19 July 1878, p.4; 27 May 1879, p.1; *The Herald*, 25 October 1879, p.2)

### Support Local Enterprise.

#### Perth and South Perth Steam Ferry.

**H**AVING at considerable expense succeeded in supplying the long-admitted want of steam communication across Perth Water, between Perth and South Perth, I solicit public support and patronage to ensure success to the enterprise.

The *Alta* steam launch, a commodious boat placed on the service, is duly licensed, carries two life buoys and is fully equipped in accordance with the provisions of the Boat Licensing Act.

#### Time Table Summer Service.

Leaves William Street jetty, Perth, 10 a.m., 1 p.m., 4.15, 6, 7, and 8 p.m., and later should inducement offer.

Last trip from South Perth, *Alta* Landing, 10 p.m.; last trip from Perth, 10.30 p.m.

Fares, there and back, sixpence.

Extra boat on Sundays, 3 p.m.

Separate compartments for ladies and children.

THOS. H. J. BROWNE,

Licensed.  
 Alta Gardens Hotel, Mill Point, Jan.

South Perth Ferry advertisement (*Inquirer & Commercial News*, 26 January 1881, p.4).



'The Old Mill' (Shenton's Mill), Mill Point, South Perth (c.1898 SLWA 006177D; Wikipedia 2013).

In 1880 Browne fitted the ground floor as a bar, the first floor as a dining, supper and reading room; and erected the grand balcony encircling the tower, "also approached by outside stairs so that ladies may ascend or descend without passing through the bar. The second floor of the tower forms a capital smoking room and snuggery, communicating with a gallery on the top of the tower from which a view of unsurpassed beauty is obtained". Browne added to the site a dancing and music hall 31 by 18 feet - as a portion of his exuberant plans to lay out four acres of grounds as the *Alta Pleasure and Picnic Grounds*, complete with accommodation, games areas, an aquarium and collections of native plants, birds and animals.