

# Dempster Homestead



Dempster Homestead is the oldest building in the Esperance region. It was built by the Dempster brothers, who first came to Esperance Bay in 1863. The land in this area was already home to the Wudjari Nyungar people for thousands of years before their arrival. The homestead is located near Esperance Bay, which is called Kepa Kurl by the Wudjari people, meaning 'where the water lies like a boomerang.'

## Captain James McLean Dempster

was born in 1810 on an estate called Muresk in Scotland. He ran away from home at the age of 14, and became a sailor. In 1830, he came to Australia on board a ship called the Eagle. Ann Pratt was also on board. The two later married, and had seven children.



The Dempster family came from Northam, where they lived on a property called Buckland Estate. James McLean Dempster and his wife, Ann Dempster, had four sons, James, Charles (called Edward, his middle name), Andrew, and William, and three daughters, Annie, Jane, and Marion. When the four sons were old enough to be involved in running the family's pastoral land, they formed a partnership. The brothers began to look for land that they could lease to expand the family's farmland. At the time, the Colonial government was offering very generous land leases to the east of present-day Munglinup.

After an exploratory journey in 1863, the Dempster brothers leased some land at Esperance Bay. They bought sheep, cattle, pigs, and horses overland from Northam to their new landholdings. By 1868, they had 5,000 sheep, 150 cattle, 24 pigs, and 20 horses in the area. Work began on the first section of the homestead in 1867, supervised by James.

That same year, Andrew married Emily Marsden, and they moved into the homestead. Their first child, James Maclean (named after his grandfather) was born in 1868 at the homestead. The brothers cut a track through to Fraser Range, where they leased more land, and dug wells and dams there. The colonial government rewarded them with a grant of freehold land at Fraser Range.

By 1873, the Dempsters employed eight shepherds to tend their sheep, including Benjamin Hannett and Laurence Sinclair. They also employed around 25 Wudjari people as shepherds and workers around the homestead and on their Fraser Range runs. Indigenous workers and trackers played a vital role in the Dempsters' pastoral success. They helped the new arrivals find water and good grazing land for their stock. They were also a source of cheap labour, as the Dempsters didn't pay them in money, but instead paid them rations of flour, sugar and tea, or with clothing or blankets.

Every year, a shearing party would be sent down from Buckland, bringing with them letters and supplies. The shepherds would come in from the outstations, and there would be a great atmosphere at the homestead, as letters from family members were read, and workers caught

up with each other. The shepherds would often go months at a time without seeing anyone except for the workers who would bring them their monthly rations, so this was a greatly anticipated connection to the outside world.

In 1873, the Dempsters' two room homestead was extended, with a second half added alongside the original building. In 1875, a large two story stone wool shed was built near the beach as a shearing shed, and to store the Dempsters' wool. The lower floor was for shearing and stowing bales of wool, heavy gear, and bundles of skins. The upper floor housed a store, with some food and tools available for purchase by labourers and travellers. A rail track went from the wool shed to a wooden jetty, still visible today near the present-day port, to transport goods to and from visiting ships.

## YOU'RE JUST LIKE EVERYONE ELSE

**Think about how it would be to live in the late 1800's. What type of transport would you be using? What would your living conditions be like? Where would you be obtaining your food or everyday essentials? Write a list of 10 things you would need and how would you obtain them.**

### A Visible Legacy

There are many streets and land- marks around Esperance named after the Dempster Family. James, Andrew, and William Street are each named after the brothers, and Emily Street is named after Emily Dempster. The Esplanade was originally called Edward Street after Charles Edward Dempster, until it was renamed in 1898.



### Captain Charles Pratt

The Dempster brothers' maternal grandfather, had arrived in Fremantle on the same ship as James Maclean Dempster. Charles had brought materials with him to build a house, including an old gothic style church window. This house was



built in 1845, in Guildford, and was demolished in 1867, after Charles' death. Andrew Dempster took some of the materials from that house, including the church window, to Esperance, to use in the homestead. The window is still present in the homestead today.

**Emily Dempster** led a busy life in Esperance. She was responsible for educating her 10 children, as well as running the homestead, and helping with the station, particularly during busy times such as shearing. Along with the women employed to help her, and the children's 'Granny Clay', Emily would have baked the family's bread by hand, made all the meals, overseen the vegetable gardens, and sewn the family's clothing. When the children were older, they were often sent to Perth or Adelaide to continue their education.

In 1888, Emily became very sick. With no doctor available in Esperance, and no ships expected for many weeks, Andrew took Emily overland to Northam travelling by horse and buggy. Most of the children stayed with Granny Clay at the homestead. The journey took 21 days, through heavy rain and boggy tracks. When they arrived,

a doctor was summoned, and he operated on Emily. Despite this, she died soon afterwards. She was only 48 years old.

After Emily's death, Andrew stayed at Esperance for another year, unsure of what to do. He then moved to a farm near Northam that the family owned, which he renamed Muresk. Andrew's two oldest sons, James and William (Willie), were left to run the station until a new manager could be found. In 1890, Henry and Emma Bostock moved in as the new managers.



### **In 1892, gold was discovered**

near present-day Coolgardie. This sparked a huge rush, with people travelling to the gold fields. As Esperance was the closest port to the gold fields, miners arrived in their hundreds by boat, and often slept on the seaweed on the beach, because there was not enough accommodation for them in town. This very quickly transformed the area, which at



that stage was not even officially a town. Soon, hotels and stores sprang up to cater for the miners. On the 15th of December 1893, Esperance was gazetted as a town. By 1895, there were nearly fifty stores or other businesses in town, including two newspapers, and the town's population was over one thousand.

The gold rush meant that the Dempsters lost a lot of their shepherds. When wool prices dropped, and some of their leases were taken back, the station became less profitable. After some of the Dempster brothers died, their partnership was dissolved. By the 1930s, Dempster Homestead was abandoned, and the Roads Board, which at the time ran the civic affairs of the district, took it over due to non-

payment of rates.

In 1938, the 8 acre property on Dempster Street, along with the homestead building, was sold to Mr Stevens from Kalgoorlie for £132, around \$11,500 in today's money. Stevens did some basic renovations on the property, turning the homestead into 10 'flats'. He rented out rooms to holiday makers from Kalgoorlie, who called the property 'Stevens' Flats'.

By the 1960s, the homestead had once again fallen into disrepair. In 1966, politician David Wordsworth and his wife Marie-Louise purchased the homestead. They renovated the building extensively, saving it from deteriorating further. The building is now owned by local farmers Tom and Victoria Brown.

## Activities and Research

1. Captain James McLean Dempster arrived at the Swan River Colony in 1830. What year was the Swan River Colony established? Can you find out what the population of the colony was in 1830?
2. The Dempster Family had limited options for travelling to Esperance. They could come by ship or using horses. During the gold rush, many people travelled by bicycle or on foot, or even using camels. What are the pros and cons of these methods of travel? Which would you use if you lived in those times?
3. In 1863, an excerpt from the Dempsters' journal was published in the *Perth Gazette*. Can you find this article on Trove? Using this article, can you trace the Dempsters' route on a map of the South Coast of Western Australia?
4. In the 1890s, the Gold Rush brought a rapid influx of new people and businesses to the Esperance area. Esperance was gazetted as a town in December 1893. What services and businesses would a new town like Esperance need? If you were in charge of town planning, how would you lay out the town, and what else might you need to consider?
5. When were some of the early settlements and towns in Western Australia established? Find an old map, and mark in some of these settlements.
6. Imagine that you lived at Dempster Homestead in the days before Esperance was a town. How do you think you would spend your time? Write a journal entry from the perspective of one of the people who lived at the Homestead. Aside from your daily activities, what do you think you would worry about, hope for, or enjoy each day?

Watch this episode of the Esperance Historic Homesteads documentary series online at: <https://youtu.be/jfglt48AJOs> or scan the QR code →



Produced by Karli Florisson 2023

### References

*The Dempsters*, By Rika Erickson, University of Western Australia Press, 1978  
*Esperance, Yesterday and Today*, By John Rintoul, 4th Edition, Scott Four Colour Print, 1986  
 Photographs courtesy of Esperance Museum and The State Library of Western Australia



This resource was made possible by:



HERITAGE  
COUNCIL