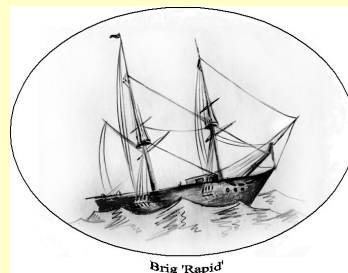


Rapid Bay Historic Site

This area played an important role in the founding of the Colony of South Australia

More recently it has been a mining town and the associated jetty has become an important dive site to view the iconic Leafy Sea Dragon.

To find out more about the history of this area see
“Rapid Bay before We Forget”
by Des Lord.



2024 compiled by Margaret Morgan and Sue Speck

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Rapid Bay features in the creation myths of the Kurna and Ramindjeri peoples most notably as the burial site of the nephew of the Kurna creator ancestor known as Tjilbruke. A marker can be found here as part of the Tjilbruke trail.

The Southern Kurna Place Names Project suggests that

Yarta-kurlangga was the Kurna name of a small area centred on the well-favoured campsites at Rapid Bay, around the mouth of what we know today as the Yattagolinga River.

Yarta means 'earth, land, country'. Here kurla (a word with a range of recorded meanings) probably means 'separate' and/or 'last'. The name therefore means 'place of the separate or last land'. This may refer to the remote and rather separate position of Rapid Bay away from the bigger population centres and frequently-used travel routes, and perhaps to a tendency of the resident groups here to be more socially isolated than others.

The name was obtained onsite by Colonel Light's survey team in 1836, from people of the 'Cape Jervis tribe' (i.e. the tribe of Fleurieu Peninsula) whose members included a woman known to us only as 'Doughboy'. She was the 'wife' of Kangaroo Island sealer Cooper when Light hired both of them for his first survey voyage up the east coast of St Vincent's Gulf. While the identity of this 'tribe' was complex, having close associations with the Ramindjeri-speaking people of Encounter Bay, almost all the language records obtained from them were in Kurna language

<https://digital.library.adelaide.edu.au/dspace/bitstream/2440/113969/1/Yartaku.pdf>

A Tjilbruke trail marker can be found here and a cairn near the camping ground commemorates Light's visit.



Yanky Point

The Coast as seen from 3rd at Yanky-tilly

2nd Valley

Rapid Bay

*N. Whigh Bluff
bearing S. W.*

*Hold-fast
Bay*

extract from Light's map east coast gulf St Vincent, State Library SA



William Light was born in Malaya on 27 April, 1786. He served in the British navy and army. On 4 February, 1836 Light was appointed Surveyor-General for the expedition to set up the colony of South Australia, and was given the responsibility for choosing the site of the capital.

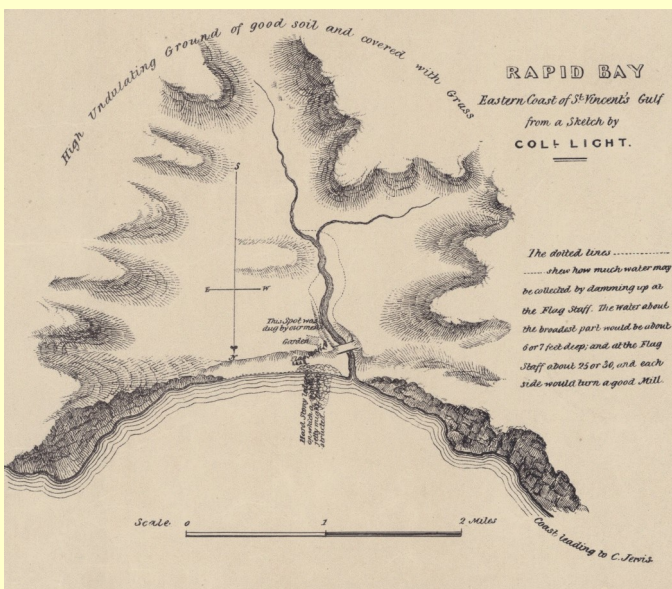
The *Rapid*, under the command of Col Light, arrived at Kangaroo Island on 30 August. Two weeks later he crossed to the mainland and landed at Rapid Bay (which he named after his ship) and recorded the event in his journal:

At two, I went on shore, and was enchanted with the appearance of the whole. A fine stream of fresh water ran through the middle of the valley into the sea, and the soil was rich beyond expectation; my hopes were now raised to a pitch I cannot describe. I walked up one of the hills, and was delighted to find that as far as I could see, all around, there was an appearance of fertility, and a total absence of those wastes and barren spots, which the accounts I received in England had led me to expect.

After 10 days at Rapid Bay, the party continued to Yankalilla, where Light spent five days surveying the countryside. On their return the party was divided in two leaving a group at Rapid Bay.

Light then sailed north, named Holdfast Bay, found the good harbour of Port Adelaide, and looked at Port Lincoln. On 31 December 1936 Light made a final decision on the site of Adelaide, which was established according to his plan.

Light died of tuberculosis on 6 October 1839, aged fifty four years. His friends Finniss and Woodforde were with him at the end.



Timeline Rapid Bay

1836 -1837

September 8: Col Light anchored the *Rapid* at Rapid Bay came ashore.

September 10: a garden was established at Rapid Bay for the supply of fresh vegetables.

September 15: eight aborigines from Encounter Bay were brought to Rapid Bay. They were engaged to look after the garden after the departure of the *Rapid*.

September 17 the *Rapid* set sail from Rapid Bay. Four men, including Dr. Woodforde set out to walk to Yankalilla. Col Light sailed in a small boat to Second Valley where he joined the men in their walk to Yankalilla.

October 11: Col Light returned to Rapid Bay.

November 2: Col Light divided the survey party in two, with the larger part under Kingston to go on the *Rapid* to Holdfast Bay, and the rest, under the command of Finniss, to remain at Rapid Bay.

November 7: Col Light left Rapid Bay on board the *Africaine* and went to Holdfast Bay.

December 27: the party at Rapid Bay saw the *Buffalo* on its way to Holdfast Bay.

January 22, 1837: Finniss and his party left to go to Holdfast Bay, thus ending this first European settlement at Rapid Bay.



John Woodforde was born 27 November in Somerset England. As a young man he spent time travelling in the Middle East, where he met Col Light. Woodforde was ship's surgeon on the *Rapid*, and once in the colony was appointed Survey Surgeon. He remained at Rapid Bay with Finniss's party, when the survey team was divided in two, and tended the men there, and also delivered two babies. While there he kept a diary, which gives a fascinating insight into those months at Rapid Bay.

He lived out his life at Adelaide and as well as running a private practice, held many important positions. He was a member of the first Medical Board established in 1844, a medical officer at Adelaide Hospital, served on the Central Vaccine Board, and was Coroner for Adelaide.

He died on 11 April 1866.

Life at Rapid Bay, 11 October 1836 to 22 January 1837 **Excerpts from the diary of Dr. John Woodforde.**

Dec 25: *Christmas Day reminds us of old England and our friends warming their knees by a rousing fire, with all other Christmas comforts. Here we are broiling under a sun nearly vertical and half of us nearly blind with ophthalmia which I hear from the sealers who visit this coast always prevails during the summer months. It is very distressing and of the purulent kind. The small flies, which when living in the tents were maddening, are I am happy to say, much less troublesome in the huts, but the large disgusting blow-fly is very active, actually depositing living maggots on the plate you are eating off and making no distinction between fresh meat and the salt ship provisions. One of our sheep, the first, was killed last night after sunset and my ration which was served out at 6 this morning altho' carefully wrapped in a towel was actually crawling by 10 and it has taken me nearly an hour to wash it... Our dinner today (that is, Jacob's and mine) will consist of the above-named piece of mutton, some parrots and pigeons, killed, plucked and cleaned by me and a plum pudding made by Jacob, and all I have to say is that I sincerely hope that my dear friends at home are spending a merrier Christmas than we are here. If not, I pity them.*

Dec 27: *This afternoon we heard guns firing in the offing and on looking out we descried a large ship about ten miles off sailing up the gulf in the direction of Holdfast Bay. We are all of the opinion that it is the Buffalo.*

Dec 28. *Our conjectures with regard to the ship were strengthened this morning by hearing distant guns, as of a salute given and returned in the direction of the settlement and we have come to the conclusion that the Governor is safely arrived and that his salute was returned by the land battery brought by the Tam O'Shanter.*

Dec 29: *We killed a sheep last night which turned out better than the first. We had the leg roasted today and a better dinner I have not made since I left England. Our garden produced us an excellent salad which with a dish of tolerable potatoes made us one of those feasts which come 'few and far between'.*

Jan 22: *We embarked by 1pm and at 6pm tripped our anchor and made sail for Holdfast Bay.*

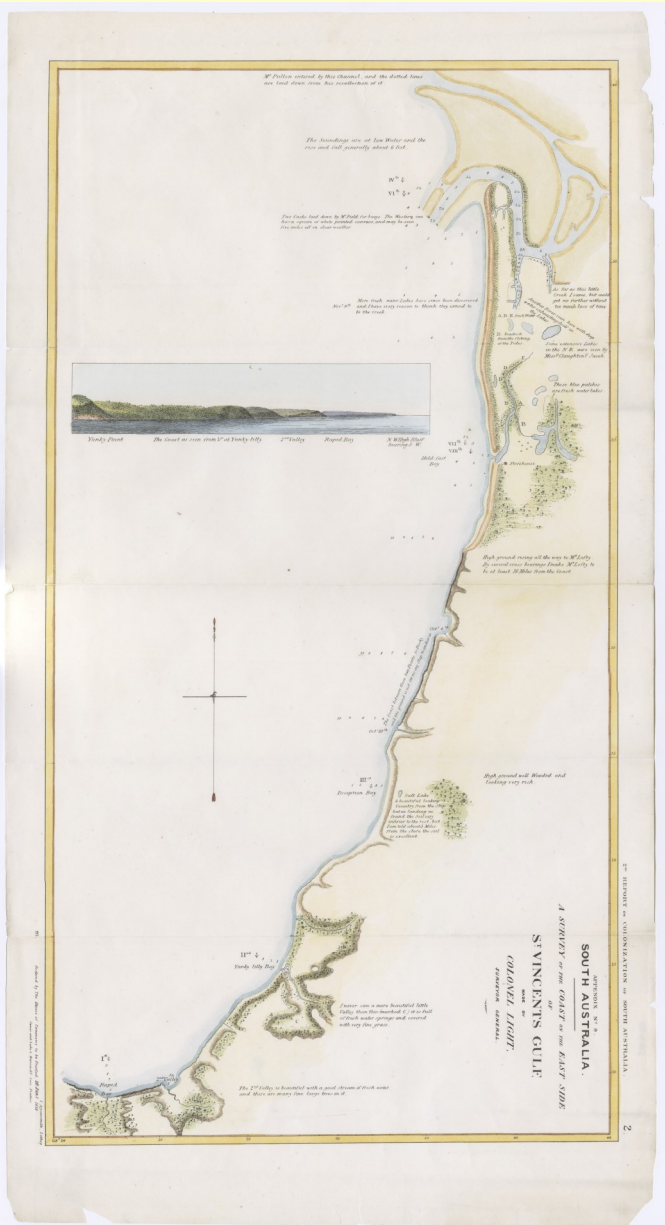


Boyle Travers *Finniss* was born at sea off the Cape of Good Hope on 18 August 1807. After time in the army, he decided to join the expedition to South Australia and was appointed Deputy Surveyor-General under Col Light.

Finniss sailed with his wife on the *Cygnets* and arrived at Kangaroo Island on 11 September 1836. In October those on the *Cygnets* were transferred to Rapid Bay, and Finniss continued to survey the land in this area until he and his team removed to Holdfast Bay in January 1837. While at Rapid Bay, Finniss's daughter, Fanny Lipson, was born, the first white girl born on the mainland. The baby was delivered by Dr Woodforde.

After the survey team were transferred to Adelaide, Finniss assisted Light with the survey work around Adelaide. In 1828 when Light was suspended from his duties, Finniss resigned in support of Light, and joined him in setting up a private surveying company called Light, Finniss and Co.

Finniss subsequently held many administrative positions in the colony, including Commissioner of Police, Registrar-General and Treasurer, Colonial Secretary, and he was the first Premier of South Australia. He died on 24 December 1893, and was buried in West Terrace cemetery, Adelaide



Light's map east side of Spencer Gulf, Boyle Travers Finniss, Rapid Bay sketch by William Light, State Library SA.



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