

James Oddie, Member of Ballarat Municipal Council (1824-1911)



Image: Medal - Jubilee of Larpent Anchoring in Corio Bay, 1899 AD
Source: Museum Victoria

James Oddie was born in Lancashire, England, in 1824. He was educated in Preston by a Congregational master and then at a Wesleyan Chapel school. He was apprenticed to a foundry at 15, and after becoming a journeyman moulder he worked for an engineering firm in Manchester. By 1845 he was working in London in a foundry, and on railway and shipbuilding projects. In 1847, at the age of 23, he married Rachael Riding. They sailed to Australia with their daughter in the *Larpent*, arriving in Geelong on 28 June 1849.

Oddie conducted a foundry in Geelong until August 1851, when the gold rush lured him to Buninyong. Within weeks he had moved to Golden Point, Ballarat. He had witnessed agitation for parliamentary reform and Chartist demonstrations in England, and was a member of the Moulders Club that had been involved in strikes. He readily took up as a diggers' representative in Ballarat, protesting against expensive miners' licences. He joined rushes to Mount Alexander and Bendigo, and after varied luck opened a store at Smythesdale. The following year he moved his store to Ballarat near the Eureka stockade, and witnessed protests and the 'massacre of innocent diggers'. He later erected a statue of Peter Lalor in Ballarat.

Oddie and his brother Thomas set up as auctioneers in Ballarat, and handled significant properties in the Western District. He also set up a money-lending business, later constituted as a deposit bank. In 1885 he sold the business for 10,000 pounds, making him one of Ballarat's wealthiest citizens. The depression of the 1890s, however, left his financial position seriously compromised, and his philanthropic activities were curtailed.

Oddie also pursued public positions. In 1856-58 he was the first chair of the Ballarat Municipal Council. He argued for an improved water supply and the establishment of the Botanical Gardens in Ballarat. In January 1859 he failed to be re-elected by one vote, and withdrew from public life - although he later took an important part in municipal affairs. He was a member of the Benevolent Asylum Board from 1860 to 1891, vice-president of the Alfred Hospital in 1869 and founder and patron of the Art Gallery in 1884.

Oddie was a passionate advocate of science and technological education. He was a trustee of the School of Mines and vice-president of its council in 1881, and founded an associateship course. He built and equipped the Mount Pleasant Observatory, and studied developments in gas, electricity and telephone communications. He was also a devout Christian and Wesleyan Methodist, helped to finance the Lydiard Street Church and was actively involved in church affairs.

Oddie was predeceased by his first wife and their only daughter. In 1884 his second wife Mary also died. Oddie died on 3 March 1911 without direct descendants.

References:

Australian Dictionary of Biography website <http://adbonline.anu.edu.au/adbonline.htm>

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