What’s in a Name?

by Lesley Brooker

During his exploration trip of October-November 1836, through what is now the Western Australian wheatbelt, John Septimus Roe, the Swan River Colony’s first Surveyor General, named at least forty landmarks along his route. These were sent, together with sketch maps of his journey, to the famous geographer and cartographer, John Arrowsmith of London, who included them in his revised map of “The Colony of Western Australia” published in 1839 (Figure 1).

Most of Roe’s placenames can be traced to prominent Swan River settlers (e.g. Mount Brockman), English politicians (Althorp Peaks), localities from Roe’s family background (Newbury Vale), or simply a description of the site (Springwell Valley). However, the origin of the name Mount Stevens (Figure 2), is more complex.

Roe first sighted Mount Stevens on 26 October 1836 while taking bearings from the summit of Mount Grey. A granite outcrop comprising twin monoliths, it lies nine kilometres north of present-day Kununoppin, on the Mukinbudin Road. The first pastoral lease at Mount Stevens, named Yarragin, was taken out in 1867 by Henry Twine of Newcastle (Toodyay), who at that time was employing Charles Adams as a shepherd. By the end of 1868, Charles Adams had married Jane Glass, and her sister Janet had married James Ward, so, early in 1869, the Yarragin leases were transferred to Adams and Ward, and they with their wives and brother-in-law Alex Glass became the first settlers in the area. Gradually, the name Mount Stevens was dropped (except from official maps) and the hill became known as Yarragin Hill.

For a number of years I have wondered who Mount Stevens was named after. One candidate is the Permanent Undersecretary for the Colonies 1836 - 1847, James Stephens. Recently, however, I was reading Roe’s early correspondence written to his father when he was a schoolboy, in which the name L.P. Stevens was mentioned.

John Septimus was the son the Reverend James Roe, the rector of Newbury parish in Berkshire, England. At just ten years of age, in 1807, he was sent to Christ’s Hospital School in London to complete his education. Christ’s Hospital School was established in 1552, initially to cater for the poor, and later, mostly for children of the clergy. It was (and still is) one of the famous bluecoat schools, where the boys wear a Tudor uniform consisting of a long blue coat with leather belt, knee-breeches, yellow socks, and bands at the neck (Figure 3). There, John Septimus learnt to subsist on a meagre diet, to withstand regular “thumpings” and to do as he was told. Naturally, he was often very homesick and lonely, but nevertheless did well academically. One section of Christ’s Hospital School, the Royal Mathematical School, was devoted to training suitable students for a career in the
Royal Navy. Early in 1809, it was proposed that John Septimus should enter the Mathematical School, which apparently horrified the eleven year old, who had other ideas. However, the Reverend Roe had high expectations of his seventh son and told him in no uncertain terms what was expected of him. John Septimus replied to his father as follows:

London
March 23rd 1809
Honoured Parents,

I received your letter on the 13th and the [indecipherable] which you sent me. Mr. Stephens received your letter a day or two ago. I should be very unhappy to disobey my parents as I know it is my duty to obey them. Mr. Stephens spoke to Mr. Gwynne, the Master of the Mathematical School, on the subject yesterday and he said he should be very glad to have such a youth in his school, especially one on the first form in the Grammar School. Therefore I embrace the kind offer of Admiral Keats with joy, hoping at the same time that in all the actions that I undertake I may prosper. Mr. Stephens told me to write to you and say that he expected a letter from you to know if it was your wish that I should go into the Mathematical School or not, and the sooner you knew that I embraced it the better. I must now conclude in haste with my most affectionate love and wishes to all at home and at Newbury.

And believe me to be your most affectionate son,

John Septimus Roe.

P.S. I send wishes to Sophia and wish brother Charles many happy returns of his birthday.

At the bottom of the letter was a postscript, written by Roe’s form master:

Dear Sir,

It is scarcely necessary for me to add anything to what your son has said as your object is gained. In conversing with him on the subject I found his dislike was not the Service itself but going into the King’s Ward, where there have been some unpleasant circumstances happening lately, which I am not surprised should disgust a boy seemingly free from vice himself. Mr. Gwynne, however, on my mentioning the business has kindly promised (as soon as we hear from you, giving your sanction) to have him admitted on Stone’s Foundation, an establishment attached to the Mathematical School, where he may continue till he be forward enough to enter the King’s Ward with some degree of consequence, if he takes pains. With kind compliments to Mrs. Roe,

I remain dear Sir,

your obedient servant,

L.P. Stephens. 6
I was struck by the name of this form master, L.P. Stephens or Stevens (Roe used both versions of the spelling in his letters). Normally, I wouldn’t have thought that a childhood teacher would have been remembered by naming a landmark after him. But, L.P. Stephens was something special. It turns out that Rev. Lancelot Pepys Stephens had been the “Mr. Chips” of Christ’s Hospital School for twenty years between 1796 and 1817. According to R.B. Johnson (1896) “What a golden age it was, when the Rev. Mr. Steevens, one of the under-grammar masters, took his place, on some occasion, for a short time! Steevens was short and fat, with a handsome cordial face. You loved him as you looked at him; and seemed as if you should love him the more the fatter he became.” In another description Reverend William Trollope wrote “... his mildness of manners and gentleness of discipline will not be forgotten by the objects under his care, his openness of disposition, benevolence of spirit and warmth of friendship have endeared him to the hearts of all who know him”. This was the man who, when the young John Septimus had expressed misgivings about staying at Christ’s Hospital School, had gently steered him toward the Mathematical School and a career in the Royal Navy.

Indeed, Stephens was probably full of adventure stories of Australia and the Southern Oceans, as his own father-in-law was William Wales who had sailed as astronomer on Captain James Cook’s second voyage to the South Pacific on HMS Resolution in 1772-5, replacing Wales' brother-in-law, Charles Green, who had died during the return leg of Cook's first voyage. Prior to that, in 1765, William Wales had been employed by the Astronomer Royal, Nevil Maskelyne, as a computer, calculating ephemerides, that could be used to establish the longitude of a ship, for Maskelyne's Nautical Almanac. On his return from the South Seas, in about 1776, Wales preceded Stephens as a master at Christ’s Hospital School, and in 1812, L.P. Stephens married William Wales’ daughter, Mary Judith, at a time when Roe was still at the school but by now looking forward to going to sea. Wales was also the author of “The Method of Finding the Longitude, by Timekeepers....” published in 1794, which undoubtedly was used by John Septimus as he studied for his final examinations in mathematics and navigation at the Royal Mathematical School. In those days, the longitude of a new position was calculated from the difference in time at the new location compared to that at a reference location, such as Greenwich, England. At the equator, for example, a time difference of one hour would equate to a longitudinal difference of 15º.

Of course, Roe went on to join the Royal Navy, spending fifteen years at sea in total. In February 1817, he was appointed master’s mate to the New South Wales Surveying Service under the command of Captain Phillip Parker King, who was himself under urgent orders to complete the survey work begun by Matthew Flinders in mapping the coastline of Australia. Roe sailed with
King on three voyages, completing survey of the coast of Western Australia in the *Bathurst* in 1821-22. In 1829, Roe was offered the post of Surveyor General of the new colony to be established at Swan River, where he would be responsible for all of the early survey work, land allocation and exploration.

Thus, on his 1836 expedition to the interior of Western Australia, as a highly experienced navigator, Roe naturally sought to calculate longitudes using time comparison. The time of day at a new location could easily be obtained from the angle of the sun at noon, while the time of day at the reference location was obtained from two naval chronometers that Roe carried with him. From his record, in pencil, in his field notebooks, we learn that, on 17 October 1836, the time of sunrise was at “4.50 am by 2144”. Apparently, Robert Molyneux of 44 Devonshire Street, London had produced a model No. 2144 chronometer which, incidentally, was tested under extremes of temperature at Greenwich Observatory in 1840.\(^{11}\) The end pages of Roe’s notebook suggest that both of his chronometers, 2144 and 2145, were running slow, the former by 3.665 seconds daily and the latter by 50.635 seconds daily. In fact, by the end of the expedition, the chronometers had become so unreliable, through constant jolting on horseback, that Roe was forced to re-calculate his longitudes by dead reckoning; i.e. by estimating how far he had travelled east or west.\(^{12}\)

Lancelot Pepys Stephens died in 1834, news of which probably did not reach Roe until about the time of the 1836 expedition, and so it is perhaps not such a surprise after all that, as Roe stood on Mount Grey, taking bearings and consulting his chronometers, he might have been reminded of his kindly under-grammar master, and named Mount Stevens for him.
Acknowledgements
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Bibliography

Figure 2. Mount Stevens (Yarragin Hill) viewed from the west. Photo: 17 July 2007.
Figure 3. The 2002 school captain of a Bluecoat School standing beside the statue of a Bluecoat Boy. *Photo:* Wikimedia Commons, 7 November 2010.