

The text of an article by Lesley Brooks published in the March 2019 edition of Outlook.  
Some minor errors from the original article have been corrected.

## Parish People

### *This month we meet James Fitzjames RN (1813 – 1848 )*

James was the adopted child of the Revd. Robert and Louisa Coningham and brother to William, who later became MP for Brighton.

The family moved to Rosehill in 1820, a sizable house which once stood off Gallows Hill Lane.

*Today you can see a part of what's left of Rosehill's garden wall on the left as you ascend into Upper Highway.*

Revd. Robert Coningham was a gentleman of private means, and only when invited by the then vicar Revd. William Lewis would he occasionally take a service at St Lawrence.

Louisa (nee Capper) was an educated and published pioneering writer. Her works gave a profound contribution to the history of literature and marked a departure into a new populous genre in the early Victorian writers.

*From research by William Battersby it is now believed that James's natural father was Sir James Gambier (1772-1844) who at the time of James's conception was the Consul –General to Brazil 1808-1814, and a married man with many children. James's natural mother was a lady from Rio, thought to be a member of the Portuguese royal family but this is not known for certain.*

*James's grandfather was Vice Admiral James Gambier (1725-1789)*

*The embarrassment of the situation (both to the Gambier family and the Nation) led to James being fostered out to the Coningham family, who were well known to the Gambiers as an educated and trusted family appropriate for the upbringing of James.*

*It is thought also that this Gambier connection prompted James's rapid future promotion within the Navy.*

James was seven when his family moved to Rosehill giving James a good education which prepared him for his planned future career in the Royal Navy from the age of twelve.

On Entering the Royal Navy in July 1825 James became 'volunteer of the second class' on the frigate HMS Pyramus. The then captain of Pyramus was Robert Gambier, James's second cousin. Robert was one of many in the Gambier dynasty serving in the Royal Navy from midshipmen to Admirals.

In September 1828 James was promoted to 'volunteer of the first class' by incoming Captain George Sartorius.

Occasionally when on leave he would return to Rosehill to see his adopted family and to Brighton where William had become an MP and famed art collector.

James's career took him to Central America, The United States, Portugal, and the Mediterranean. His biography describes adventures and scrapes in his duty. He was nearly kidnapped in a besieged town

for carrying East India office mail overland through Iraq and Syria due to his ship HMS Euphrates unable to sail due to a broken engine. He was nearly killed in Zhenjiang's opium war 1839-40.

Before the Euphrates Expedition, while in Liverpool dock, James distinguished himself by diving into the Mersey fully clothed to save a drowning man. Liverpool gave him a silver cup and the freedom of the city for this brave feat.

James's final adventure commenced when he was appointed Sir John Franklin's Commander on HMS Erebus in 1845. He was responsible for recruiting his crew and for leading the ship into the expedition. He had never travelled to Polar waters before and with only the far older and more experienced pairing of Sir John Franklin and Francis Crozier his seniors, this should have been a highly prestigious, career defining appointment.

After the mysterious death of Sir John Franklin, James was appointed Captain of HMS Erebus and co-leader of the entire expedition alongside Crozier.

Unfortunately, none of the members of the Northwest Passage expedition appear to have survived beyond 1848. After the ships became trapped in ice, in an exceptional year when the ice failed to melt in the summer, all crew members died at some point over the following two years.

Lesley Brooks: Abbots Langley Local History Society

Source, William Battersby – "James Fitzjames : The Mystery Man of the Franklin Expedition"