

His ancestor was with Sir Stamford Raffles when he founded S'pore. But for a long time for him...

# He was just the man in a painting



◆ Mr Atkins (above) with a portrait of his great great great granddad. Below: The epergne at the National Museum.

By Liew Hanqing

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HE remembers this intricate piece of silverware holding tangerines, dates and fudge as the centrepiece of his family dining table in the UK every Christmas.

Now, it's the centrepiece of a display at the National Museum of Singapore.

This epergne (table centrepiece) used to belong to Major-General William

Farquhar, the first British resident and commandant of Singapore.

And his great great great grandson, Mr William Guy Farquhar Atkins, remembers it fondly.

"We only saw the epergne at Christmas. At all other times of the year, it was kept in a wooden chest in a vault because it was so valuable," said Mr Atkins, 40, managing director of Jo Bird & Company, which designs and manufactures storage cabinets for fire

safety and emergency use.

It was put up for sale with Sotheby's in London by his father and acquired by the museum in a private sale in 1993.

The museum exhibited it the next year during the 175th Anniversary celebrations of Singapore's founding.

His ancestor may be well-known to students of Singapore history, but Mr Atkins said that for most of his childhood, Maj-Gen Farquhar was just "the man in a painting on the wall".

"I didn't know much about him, and my father didn't really talk a great deal about our family history either," he said.

Then, on a stopover here en route to Australia in 1988, Mr Atkins visited the wax museum on Sentosa.

## ALARM

"I saw the exhibit where the figures were signing a treaty, and I realised that one of the people at the table was the same person in the portrait on the wall at home," he said.

Excited, Mr Atkins took a photograph of the display.

"I actually set off an alarm because flash photography wasn't allowed. Thank goodness I wasn't reprimanded," he recalled, laughing.

Mr Atkins, who is here for the official re-opening of the National Museum today, said he has visited Singapore more than 10 times. He hopes to learn something new about his family history each time he visits.

"Every time I visit Singapore, I try to

do something I haven't done before," said Mr Atkins, who lives in the UK with his wife and two daughters.

On a trip here six years ago, he visited the National Museum and was shown the William Farquhar natural history drawings, a \$3 million collection donated to the museum by Mr Goh Geok Khim, chairman and managing director of G K Goh Holdings.

Mrs Tamilselvi Siva, the curator who showed him the collection, said: "Compared to (founder of modern Singapore, Sir Stamford) Raffles, Farquhar was relatively unknown in our history books. It's up to the museum to point out Farquhar's historical importance to our visitors."

This time, Mr Atkins visited Pulau Ubin for the first time.

"The island is still full of these swampy areas. I'd like to think that what I saw was similar to what Farquhar saw when he first came to Singapore a long time ago," he said.

And the next step?

To re-trace Maj-Gen Farquhar's footsteps in Malacca, Mr Atkins said.



## THE FIRST RESIDENT:

MAJOR-General William Farquhar was with Sir Stamford Raffles when he founded Singapore in 1819.

He was left to manage the colony for four years after Raffles left.

He was the first British resident and commandant of Malacca too.

Maj-Gen Farquhar died in Perth, Scotland, in 1839 at the age of 65.

The William Farquhar collection of

natural history drawings, on display at the National Museum, consists of 477 drawings of animals, birds, fishes, reptiles, insects and plants. They were commissioned by Maj-Gen Farquhar when he was based in Malacca.

The \$3 million collection was acquired by Mr Goh Geok Khim at an auction in 1995 and later donated to the museum.