

The Kelly Basin township of Pillinger

Kelly Basin had been the site of a convict timber station as early as 1824, and for much of the rest of the century was used intermittently as a pinning area. During the brief life of Sarah Island as a probation station between 1846-7, at least one party of convict pass holders operated in the Kelly Basin region.

At the turn of the century, however, Kelly Basin became the site of the bustling township of Pillinger. Yet in the space of just a few years, Pillinger blossomed and faded into virtual obscurity. Today, the ruins of the township lie beneath the towering blackwood trees — the first stages in the reclamation of the land by rainforest.

A town born of rivalry

In the final years of last century west coast mining was dominated by two companies headed by direct and dynamic Irishmen: James Crotty and Bowes Kelly. Before merging in 1903, a 'war' between the two companies resulted in rival mines, railways and ports. Kelly's Mt Lyell Mining and Railway Co Ltd officially opened its railway and smelters in

March 1897, linking its smelters and its port with the Abt railway which ran from Queenstown to the port of Teepookana and, later, Strahan. Crotty's North Mt Lyell Copper Company opened its railway late in 1897. It followed an easy grade, linking the towns of Linda, Gormanston, Crotty, Darwin and the Kelly Basin port township of Pillinger.

Pillinger

In 1898, the Government surveyed the town of Macquarie (later to be known as Pillinger, after the Minister for Lands and Works, Alfred Pillinger), on the western shore of the Basin. The town was subdivided into 108 lots — each except one were 56 square metres in size. These were sold through an auction held in Strahan in 1898, with lots selling for an average price of £46. At the time, these prices were the highest paid for any town allotments on the west coast.

Two separate towns sprang up on opposite shores of the Basin. The two were connected by a ferry service, as no road linked the east and west. Railyards, sheds and a

railway station were situated on the western side of the Basin. The main settlement, known as West Pillinger, was clustered around the railway station. A police station, post office and school were located in the centre of town. Two wharves, each 122 metres (400 feet) in length were located on the western shore. A dam was constructed on the Nora River, some six kilometres from the Basin, which provided water for the town.

The North Mt Lyell Company's works were situated on the eastern side of the Basin. Workmans' huts, a dining hall, band and billiard hall, Company run store and some Company officers' residences were situated in this area. The longest of the three wharves — 244 metre (800 feet) — built in the Basin was located on the eastern shore.

A brickmaking plant and a sawmill provided materials for the building of smelters at Crotty. Until these smelters had been completed, an ore-crushing plant was established at Kelly Basin to allow limited

processing of copper ore prior to shipping.

In the brief period between 1898 and 1903, Pillinger thrived. Its population peaked at about 600 in 1902. At this time there were 80 dwellings, 25 businesses, three hotels, a Catholic church, coffee palace and shipping agent's office. The licensee of the Shamrock Hotel, Mr Percy Waxman, built a hall which provided a venue for various events such as church services, balls and performances by the Blind Musicians Company.

A library was well patronised, athletics meetings were held and a slipway was built by the Kelly Basin Aquatic Club. In 1901, the Pillinger Cricket Club was formed. A State School was built, with enrolments numbering 65 at the start of the 1902 school year.

A large number of Strahan piners and their families — Doherty, Abel, Timbs, Grining, Fisher and Jones — made Pillinger their home, spurred on by the large contracts being let for railway sleepers, mining timbers and sawmill timber. Pillinger also offered the opportunity to live in relative comfort closer to their place of work, even if only for a brief period. After the demise of the town in 1903, the pining families settled in Strahan.

The decline of Pillinger

The failure of the smelters at Crotty played a significant role in the demise of Pillinger.

As early as October 1901, rumours were circulating that the Crotty smelters were unable to raise sufficient heat to carry out the process of smelting copper. Despite the considerable expense of their construction, the smelters were opened and closed several times — once after the chimney toppled over when struck by lightning. These setbacks, in conjunction with poor management practices, led to the increasing realisation that a merger with the rival Mt Lyell Mining and Railway Co Ltd was inevitable.

With the amalgamation of the two mining companies in 1903, the decision was made to use Strahan as the port for the new combined company, making the port facilities at Kelly Basin virtually redundant. Many residents left the ailing township. Between 1903 and 1920, the number of voters enrolled on the electoral roll plummeted from 188 to 22.

Trains continued to operate until 1925, mainly transporting firewood and mining timber to the mines. The following year, the track was removed from the stretch of line between Kelly Basin and Darwin. Following the cessation of rail services, only one shop and one hotel stayed open. Only two families remained. The last of these — the Crossans — left in 1943.

Pillinger today

Today, interpretive panels at the site of East Pillinger

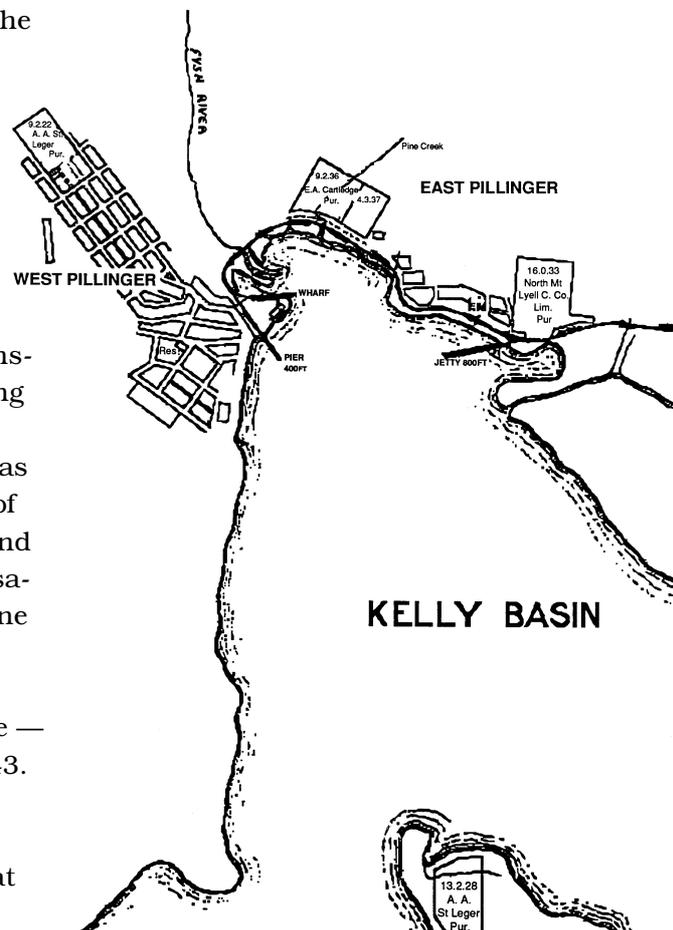
provide a fascinating insight into the town's history. A 3-4 hour return walk to Kelly Basin from the Bird River Bridge follows the old rail formation. Remnants at the site include the old brick kilns, boilers and a rail carriage.

Further reading

Bannear, D. (1991). *King River to Kelly Basin Archaeological Survey*. Occasional Paper no. 29, Department of Parks, Wildlife and Heritage and Forestry Commission, Tasmania.

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Rae, L. (1983). *A History of Railways and Tramways on Tasmania's West Coast*. Mercury Walch, Tasmania.



Kelly Basin township. Adapted from Bannear (1991)