

The piners of Macquarie Harbour

Huon pine has played a central role in the history of the Macquarie Harbour region. Indeed, it was a search for sources of the highly-prized timber that prompted the voyage that led to the settler's discovery of the harbour. In 1819, during a reconnaissance of the suitability of Macquarie Harbour as a penal settlement, Thomas Florence and James Kelly brought back a load of pine that fetched £200 for the Government.

Convict piners

Exploitation of Huon pine (or Macquarie pine, as it was also known) was one of the major factors which led to the decision to establish a penal settlement at Macquarie Harbour. During the life of the settlement, convicts cut pine from the lower Gordon River and along the shores of the harbour, much of it being exported or used in the settlement's own shipyards. Just prior to the closure of the penal colony, the Commandant, Captain J. Briggs, commented:

'there is no doubt still a great quantity of Huon pine uncut,

but the difficulty of access to the swamps in which it only grows, and the number of persons it requires after cutting it down, in transporting it to the water, and from the price it has hitherto brought in the Hobart Town market, I fear no individuals could undertake to export it with any chance of remuneration to themselves.'

Despite Briggs' report, pining was to continue for another 150 years.

During the second phase of the Sarah Island penal settlement, from 1846-7, convict pass holders cut pine from the timber reserves around the Harbour. However, they were unable to make wages for themselves nor meet the weekly Government quota, resulting in a loss of £2591.11s to the State. One person who did profit from this collapse was George Watson, who received £829.13.4 compensation for the loss of his shipping contract. Watson later pressed the Government, unsuccessfully, for exclusive rights to cut timber both at Macquarie Harbour and Port Davey.

A century and a half of pining

Following the closure of the settlement in 1847, pining operations continued on a small scale. From the 1850s to 1880s, Captains Lloyd and Heather and their families lived on Sarah Island, managing pining operations. However, a moratorium was placed on the cutting of Huon pine and blackwood from 1882-7 due to concerns that the colony was depleting its reserves of these timbers. In 1887, investigations by the Conservator of Forests led to the recommendation that pining continue under stringent regulations.

In about 1887 the Doherty brothers and their families — the founding fathers of Macquarie Harbour's pining dynasty — established a camp at Picanniny Point and became the first to extract pine from the King River. With the mining boom of the turn of the century and the establishment of railheads and substantial townships at Kelly Basin and Teepookana, the demand for timber grew. Sawmills were opened in Strahan. Piners

worked the Gordon River, pushing further upstream as they exhausted the timber resources of the lower reaches.

In 1911, surveyor Hartwell Conder had a wooden tramway built which traversed seven kilometres of rugged terrain, crossing 29 bridges, to a cliff top high above the King River. Logs were cut from the rich timber reserves here, sent down a chute to the river and floated to the mouth of the King. A boom gate across the mouth collected the logs which were then pulled ashore to be processed at Condor's Sawmill at Picaninny Point.

In about 1913, the Grining brothers constructed a pining tramway from near Coal Head to the upper reaches of the Braddon River. The timber reserves at the mouth of the Braddon River were worked by Victor Neilsen, while James Crossan, and later his son, Ted, cut timber from the Fysh and Bird rivers and Pine Creek. Smith and Edgerton worked the upper reaches of Pine Cove Creek from the late 1920s, using horses and, less successfully, tractors, to haul the logs eight kilometres over the rugged terrain.

Piners gained an intimate knowledge of the area. Pioneers such as Barnes Abel and Charlie Doherty pushed upstream to name the spectacular Deception Gorge (now known as the Great Ravine)

and the First Splits on the Gordon River, as well as the stands of Huon pine on the upper reaches of the Denison River (now known as the Truchanas Huon Pine Reserve).

Pining boomed in the mid 1920s, buoyed by economic prosperity and expansion. However, the depression years brought hardship for the pining community. The largest of the sawmilling operations at Strahan went broke. The depletion of timber resulted in the need to utilise poorer-grade timber. Huon pine oil was extracted from sawdust and sold to German pharmaceutical companies from 1930 until the outbreak of the WWII. The war itself also resulted in many piners leaving the area.

Post-war technology — crawler tractors, trucks, chainsaws — allowed the Gordon and distant shores to be worked. On occasions,

helicopters were used to fly piners into remote areas. By 1960 only two sawmills that adopted the new and more efficient technology available operated in Strahan — as is the case today.

In the early 1980s, a major shift in community attitudes led to the protection of many stands of Huon pine within the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area. Today, the Teepookana Plateau, under the management of Forestry Tasmania, provides the bulk of the wood used in Strahan's two existing mills.

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.

Kerr, J. & McDermott, H. (1999), *The Huon Pine Story*, Mainsail Books.

