

# Provisioning the mills: A note on sustainability

Gil Hardwick

*Centre for Regional Development and Research, Edith Cowan University, Bunbury, Western Australia*

Peer reviewed contribution

Keywords: superstition, fear, administration, investment, rationality, imperialism.

**ABSTRACT:** For thousands of years the forests of the lower South West of Western Australia stood in pristine, impenetrable grandeur, like ancient forests everywhere the haunt of runaways and outlaws. Defeat of this grandeur and with it the promise of civilization came about not through the exercise of might but by the trampling of myriad hooves, leaving a carcass bereft of its life support to be flayed and dismembered. As time went by, eventually the rational, enterprising mind overcame the broad back and sharp wit of the pioneer to fulfill that promise of civilisation, bringing with it a new focus on organisation in development of natural resources to support the endeavour.

## 1 THE FOREST ITSELF

There may be some who take umbrage at what I have to say. For that I make no apology. My intention once again is not to like or dislike any given situation but to know and understand it, and in achieving that blessed state to appreciate the essential reality of the matter at hand. A large part of that reality today, over 170 years after the first European settlers arrived and 100 years since the forest was logged, is the sheer number of visitors arriving in the beautiful South West of Western Australia to enjoy the pristine splendour of its forests, and in consequence to clamour for their preservation. The none-too-subtle irony in this reality lies in the fact that were the forest still here in truth, none of these visitors could possibly have been accommodated.

The Indigenous peoples of this district had never themselves developed a forest economy, but depended on the coastal wetlands for their livelihood. Groups to the north around Geographe Bay were Wardandi, or sea people. Those to the east were Bibbelmun, off the Scott River coastal plain (Collard, 1994).

The intervening forest itself was a dark, brooding, impenetrable place, like ancient forests everywhere the haunt of runaways and outlaws. The mythological themes and legends we have handed down to us from that Dreaming time are of kidnapping, rape and murder (Bussell, 1937). In short, as one of the contemporary elders made it clear to me several years ago as I laboured in vain to establish traditional place names in the area, the forest dwellers “were terrible people” (Webb, 1997).

Placement of a settlement here in Augusta in February of 1830 had neither anything to do with the forest, but again with the sea. At that time this place was strategically important to the developing Antipodean sea roads of the then burgeoning British Empire, and the area had to be cleared of the various privateers sealing along the coast; in their spare time pirating, kidnapping and generally running amok (Hardwick, 2003, p. 21).

Legitimate settler families accompanying the new Resident Magistrate's establishment found it impossible going trying to clear the hinterland of trees by hand in order to establish themselves on their own account, and amid plaintive representation to the colonial authorities the Bussell brothers in particular quickly cleared off to make a new settlement for themselves on the Vasse River to the north, on the coastal plain backing Geographe Bay (Jennings, 1983).

So, the question needs to be addressed on what happened in the intervening period causing that unhappy situation to change so radically, that after so many thousands of years the impenetrable forest was obliged to yield its forbidding presence and relinquish its secrets, and accept the new regime leading to its demise?

Further difficulty that these first European settlers faced proved to be far more sinister. Very quickly their cattle and horses lost condition on the new grazing; failing to thrive, hair falling out, and crippled, exhibiting a condition that became notorious in Western Australian agriculture as "coastal disease". The condition was eventually diagnosed as a copper, cobalt and selenium deficiency of the sandy coastal plain. Stray weaners on the other hand, wandering at will up into the forest along the Darling and Whicher escarpments and back again, began to thrive. Taking their cue, the settlers soon started running whole mobs up into the forest country to summer over and regain lost condition. This pattern of seasonal transhumance moving mobs of cattle and horses between the coast and the forest thus commenced, which formed the bread and butter of the district lasting for over 150 years. That changed the face of the landscape. The forest was never defeated through the exercise of might. It was ever so slowly nibbled out from underneath, its supporting undergrowth trampled by myriad hooves, and its streams and waterholes muddied and laid waste. By the time the big timber mills were established, slowly at first then in a rush to equal the Ballarat goldfields, the forest had already been laid bare; only the *coup de grace* to be delivered and the carcass flayed and dismembered.

## 2 PROCESSES OF DEFEAT

A number of essential elements come together in this measured, unhurried process of defeating the forest that I would like to share with you. It needs to be understood that there was no deliberate intent to destroy; these were profoundly religious people. Theirs was rather a more intensely spiritual determination to overcome fear and superstition in the bringing of civilization to this wilderness, here in the farthest corner of the known world.

The administrative task at hand was to clear the coastline of the privateering sealers and rough-necks working these grounds ahead of formal authority to settle, and the salaries available to the various magistrates in defeating them was as often spent on the fostering of hungry children, and supplementing the already short rations through their privileged access to Government supplies.

It was not until the provisions of the Treaty of Ghent were finally implemented, permitting the Nantucket and New Bedford whaling fleet to fish these grounds, that a sufficient volume of authorised shipping began to frequent the coast for a market to become available for shore-based provisioning enterprise to develop sufficient profitability to attract further private investment (Hardwick, 2003, Ch. 4). The ensuing pattern of landuse set up to provision this emergent shipping and coastal trade and distribution of farming families across the landscape in consequence, given the difficulty with the intensive raising of livestock, meant that by 1850 the Legislative Council had moved to formalise these arrangements (Tyman, 1976). With the coming of age of the second generation of settlers, their acknowledged way of life resulted in most families owning at least ten acres of land freehold on the coast, plus thousands of acres of crown land at pastoral leasehold entitlement in the hills and forests out the back years (Staples, 1996).

The freehold land secured their home farm on which the women and children usually ran a dairy with butter and cheese making, a few pigs and chickens, and grew such summer crops as wheat and potatoes. The men for their part spent their time in the vast unfenced forest and breakaway country backing the coastal strip where they ran their cattle to and fro depending on where there might be feed available from time to time. These cattle ran in free-range mobs of 60-80 animals, regardless

of the formal leasehold arrangements with the Government, led usually by an old cow or occasionally a steer wearing a bell made from an old saw blade tuned to a different pitch identifying whose cattle they were. In this way, men riding through the forest could tell from as far away as five miles and more where each mob was grazing and who owned them (Higgins, 2000; Blond, 2004).

Throughout this entire period of settlement, while the forest itself no longer loomed forbidding above the puny efforts of man, it was regarded nevertheless as an obstacle to progress. As in the old, pre-European times, with all this riding around chasing cattle it remained a refuge for rebellious youth and their heroes living beyond the Pale. Songs and stories of the flight of the Irish Fenian John Boyle O'Reilly, and the later dramatic escape of the *Catalpa*, were spread around the cattle camps where they became established in local folklore as the embarrassed authorities ordered a jail term for anyone heard singing such songs in public (Keenan, 1994).

The district prospered. Coastal trade to supply the growing colony with food and raw materials continued to expand. Trade developed in horses and provisions for the newly extended military underpinning the formal British presence in India, and extra cattle and horses again were bred for the ever-encroaching lines of settlement into the tribal areas of the arid and remote North West (Hepingstone, 1978; Hardwick, 2003, Ch. 11).

### 3 THE ONSET OF MILLING

The grinding, creaking wheels of colonial administration, ever so slow to respond at the best of times, for its part in the proceedings found itself bereft both of the civil infrastructure and the staff adequate to the task of bringing all this excitement to heel. With no money and chronically short on manpower, the hard decision was made to import convicts into the colony ostensibly to carry out construction of buildings, roads, bridges, and other public works capable of servicing the growing population and in that way stimulating a local economy already dependent on export (Kimberley, 1897).

While all this was going on, of course, the eastern states goldfields were generating vast wealth of their own capable of financing that very same expansion of infrastructure development found so wanting here in the west. The juxtaposition of these various circumstances meant that suddenly, in short order, Western Australia found itself in a position to meet the demand for timber and the labour to supply that demand. Following a trial shipment of Jarrah to South Australia proving the commercial viability of local timber milling, in 1855 Henry Yelverton won a contract worth £7,000 (\$1.3 million at today's dollar values) enabling him to relocate his operation from the Swan River to the Geographe Bay hinterland at Quindalup, where apart from the extensive timber reserves available his way into the forest itself had already been made by the years of cattle grazing in the under storey (Kinsella, 1990).

Within two years Yelverton had deployed the assignment of convict labour permitted him by the Government in laying miles of wooden railway lines south into the forest, using bullock teams in place of engines to haul the logs out. Hot on his heels another timber milling syndicate was soon formed with access to capital from the Ballarat goldfields, which won further concessions at Yoganup, ten kilometres east of the Vasse River settlement. There another railway line was laid and a steam engine imported from the eastern states to haul the logs out of the forest to a sawmill and jetty on Geographe Bay, at Lockeville to the north (Jennings, 1983).

Those to benefit directly from this fabulous wealth were the original settlers by this time well in control of the landscape. The enormous number of convict timber workers flooding into the district had to be fed, and a huge market for milk, cheese and butter, bread, beef, pork and poultry, potatoes and fresh vegetables in particular was quickly established (Watson, 1968). There was also a growing demand for draught horses and working bullocks used to drag logs from where they had been fallen to railway landings constructed in the forest, there to be loaded onto flat bed wagons and hauled to the various mills (Doyle, 1977). This created further demand for hay and chaff to feed the animals, and as patches of forest were cleared the land was gradually opened up to more farming,

and new opportunities for young families looking for a farm where they could become established on their own account.

#### 4 KARRIDALE OPERATIONS

Augusta in the extreme south had by this time become almost forgotten. Following withdrawal of the official residency to the Vasse in 1839 only a skeleton staff remained primarily to carry out remnant customs duties with respect to the American whalers periodically frequenting these waters, and to oversee the mounting coastal trade with South Australia, the Swan River, Southeast Asia, and the remote North West. A second wave of settlement took place here during expansion of the cattle industry, where like the remaining colonists elsewhere, home farms were established from which their mobs were run up onto the Blackwood and Margaret Rivers.

William Eldridge, previously manager of the WA Timber Company on Geographe Bay, had taken over the local timber concessions on his own account but his run of bad luck delayed development of milling in the area by another generation. The loss in 1875 of a whole shipment of sawn timber and beef on credit in a sudden squall in Flinders Bay meant that Eldridge was unable to clear his mounting debts until Maurice Coleman Davies arrived from South Australia in 1878, with the capital to take over his operations and make them profitable. In the event, with ongoing delays with the Government from whom he had already won verbal agreement respecting his claims to the timber reserves, it was not until 1882 that Davies was finally able to establish himself in the district. In that year he received a license granting him 46,000 acres [18,616 ha] in the district for 42 years, at £150 a year (Hambling, 1969).

The Davies case is interesting in that it illustrates so well the point I wish to make on how the extractive timber industry was enabled in this district, and the purpose in doing so. Whereas the process of establishing the administrative toehold on this far-flung shore, then that of colonising the hinterland as gradual, pioneering innovation and capacity building rippled back and forth from one unplanned, unforeseen opportunity to the next defies the common wisdom of hindsight, in Karridale we are able to witness more directly how the factors of production all came together in the one operation.

In 1882 the M.C. Davies Company constructed a jetty 1,800 feet long (550 m.) at Hamelin Bay to service their new Karridale mill, which had rails along its entire length, a storehouse in the middle, two large steam cranes and a number of smaller stationery cranes for loading timber and supplies, and telephone wires connecting the store to the main office on shore. The following year a further mill was established inland at Kudardup employing 30 to 40 men, from which timber was exported over summer from the Hamelin Bay jetty and in winter from the more sheltered Flinders Bay to the south (Fall, 1972).

As the business expanded, by 1891 Davies found it necessary to construct a much larger mill at Boranup, three miles north. A sizeable population had already established itself there to farm and supply provisions to the general store and stables in the growing mill town at Karridale, including fresh vegetables, potatoes, poultry and pork (Watson, 1968). Throughout this period supply of bread, beef and working bullocks was being sourced from further afield, including especially the Margaret River district further north again (Hardwick, 2003, Ch. 7).

In 1893 Davies traveled to London seeking further capital to aid the expansion of his business and following his return, in 1894, he restructured the company to incorporate his six sons into the business. It was renamed the M.C. Davies Timber Company Limited, carrying a capital value of £6,000 (about \$1.2 million). Following this restructuring further portable mills were opened at Slabbyford and Boodjidup, with some 40 miles of narrow gauge railway, 20 miles of Government gauge railway, rolling stock with two engines operating, with two further engines brought out from England in 1898 and 1899.

It was soon realised that in order to rationalise deployment of resources and to meet its civic obligations while at once keeping pace with expansion of the global timber trade, the operation would have to be refloated on the London stock exchange. The company was thus in 1897 renamed the

M.C. Davies Karri and Jarrah Company Limited with a capital value of £250,000 (about \$48 million). The chairman of the new company was Sir Sydney Shippard KCMG, with Davies himself retaining day-to-day control of the operation as managing director. The local directors in Western Australia included the Speaker of the WA Legislative Assembly Sir James Lee Steere KCMG, and Robert L.J. Davies of Karridale (Hambling, 1969).

To give an idea of the ultimate extent of the industry, with the passing of the nineteenth century many of these smaller timber companies merged into a single business conglomerate under the name of Millar Brothers, by 1910 controlling some sixty percent of the southwest timber business. In that year the company paid freight charges to the State Government Railways, in today's terms to the order of \$AUD 8 million, paid \$63 million in wages to 2,364 men, operated 278 miles (450 Km) of railway line on its own account, and worked draught horses consuming 3,300 tons of chaff, 93,000 bushels of oats and 96,000 bushels of bran (Brittain, 1986).

Once the First World War was underway, however, the whole enterprise spun off into imperial prerogative. Nothing came of this breathtaking civilizing endeavour as far as the district was concerned, with the forest, and all the money and with it all the workers and engineers and administrative staff gone. With all the new roads and bridges going nowhere, and the cleared land with its improved pastures to feed nobody in particular, over the years a long succession of grand schemes and economic depression scarred those diehard pioneers who remained.

## 5 ON REFLECTION

I have said nothing about Sir John Forrest and his influence on the Davies operations in negotiating public works in return for continued access to the timber concessions. Nor have I mentioned the Victorian Romantic enterprise, deeming itself to have defeated nature and brought civilization to the farthest corners of the earth. Nor indeed have I spoken of those who died in the process; the whole Aboriginal tribes, and the sheer numbers of children, and seamen and workmen, and women in labour, buried in the cemeteries hereabouts. I would engage the week of your time here exploring such topics. Rather, I have sought to restate basic facts documenting the demise of the forests of the South West of Western Australia, and in doing so to articulate, as cleverly as I can, the shift in our civilised consciousness of those forests from the fearfully, dauntingly superstitious along the long hard road toward achieving the rational. In that I am reminded of a diversion played out by young men during the later Group Settlement years, to see who could ringbark a Karri tree six foot in diameter by hand, the start cut unseen, and have that same cut well over five metres long meet up around the other side.

So here we all are assembled from all over the world, 170 years down the track, to see how well that ringbark cut meets up. I have to say, regretfully, irrationally, that it does not.

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