

Historical synopsis of European cultural activity in the area

Vegetable and fruit growing

Potatoes and wheat were the first cash crops in the area. Experimental plantings of fruit started as early as 1838 and it was soon found that apples were well suited to the conditions. By 1840 shipments of fresh and dried apples were being exported to England. The timber industry flourished along side the fruit industry by providing timber for tramways, buildings and boxes.

Fur farming

Fur farming was seen to be an industry with a future for the area and there was a flurry of interest around 1925. A section of land (17,000 acres) near the junction of the Weld and Huon Rivers just west of the Wood Centre site was to be leased to Tasmanian Fur Traders Ltd. A free-range style fur farm was to be established on 30,000 acres of Crown land with a processing plant at Ranelagh. A representative went to Europe to select modern machinery but the project was abandoned before any significant progress was made.

Timber

Timber was procured for dwellings for the first human visitors from the early 1800s. One of the first industries to use timber was whaling in the early 1800s. Whalers (1815 — 1830) needed timber to fuel the blubber pots, build huts and make boat repairs.

Early farmer/settlers arriving around 1830 at Castle Forbes Bay and Franklin cleared land for self-sufficiency and farming. Initially trees were seen by farmers as an impediment to the true value of the land - the soil. The bush was set alight, cut, grubbed and burnt again. The remaining large trees were ringbarked, left to die, then burned. For some settlers, timber was a valuable resource rather than an impediment and if a settler had timber on his selection, he could gradually clear his land, and the timber would support him until his produce was grown in profitable quantities .
(*Tasmanian Tribune*, 31 July 1877)

Timber was used for palings posts rails, boards and planking and by 1850 substantial percentages of felled timber were being exported eg to Victoria during the Gold Rush for mine construction. Once interstate market demands could not be met by the small-scale pit sawyer and bullockies, new permanent saw mills were established by the river, and powered by water c1848. In 1874 first steam driven mill super mill was established. The smaller timber operators provided the fruit industry with smaller sized timber for fruit boxes. These smaller timber operators were the mainstays when the large companies failed due to over investment and takeovers etc. The portable sawmills carried the industry through the Depression until the end of the Second World War. The demand for smaller diameter logs and portability allowed them to move freely through the regrowth stands created by the big mills.

An example of the spot mills that existed in the district before and soon after the War is located just north of the site. This was operated by the Watson family until the early 1950s. Little evidence of the operation is visible. There are some sleepers from the tramway that can still be identified and the location of the bark hut in which the staff lived can still be distinguished.

The Second World War saw the arrival of new diesel and petrol power internal combustion engines that revolutionised society. The timber industry gained new type of power, motorised vehicles which made tramways obsolete. Chain saws and tracked vehicles likewise altered harvesting practices in the forest. There was a period of stability followed dominated by medium-sized sawmills, powered by diesel petrol and electricity and timber supplied by trucks and bulldozers.

There was a reintroduction of corporate players in a boom motivated by the demand for timber pulp. The introduction of the cardboard box in 1960 was disastrous for the small timber mills, as they were dependent on the fruit industry. Traditionally the domain of European softwoods this major diversification was actually pioneered by an experimental pulp and paper making plant at Port Huon which was erected on the site of the defunct Kermantie super mill. This is the legacy we have today.

Transport

Transport was difficult in heavily timbered areas of the Upper Huon. This limited timber to splitters and small-scale sawyers who first carried their product on their backs with the help of convict labour. Logs were floated down stream due to the lack of navigable waterways in the Upper Huon.

Early roadways were constructed to link farms to the river so that supplies could be landed and produce dispatched to the river. Tramways were also constructed to get produce from paddock to river jetty. These were easy to construct from local timbers and were powered by horses and bullocks. Tramways were also used to transport timber from forest to river. This revolutionised timber getting in the 1850s. Water and steam powered sawmills were established along the river

As the Huon Valley prospered in the 1880s and 1890s it was thought that a railway was needed. After six separate enquiries and about as many proposed routes not a single foot of train track was ever laid in the Huon Valley by the Government of Tasmania.

Prospecting

Small deposits of gold, silver, nickel and osmiridium were found in the Weld area west of the Wood centre site and the potential of a mining development was often cited as a reason for building a railway. However, a viable mining development has never materialised in this area due to the lack of any worthwhile deposits of minerals.

Sawmill sites of significance in the area

There are remains of two sawmills and a connecting tramway, built in the 1930s, about 8 kilometres east of the wood centre site, that have been rated low to medium significance by Parry Kostaglou in his *Historic timber getting in the Southern Forests — Statements of site significance and management recommendations 1996*. These mills are the McMullens Leithbridge Sawmill, the McMullens Bermuda Road Mill and the McMullens Leithbridge Tramway. Kostaglou recommends that these remains should be protected, however, they are not listed on the National Heritage Register.

The other historic sawmills within a 5 km radius of the wood centre site do not fall within any study available for these guidelines and are probably small spot mills of a similar nature described above. Known mill locations are shown in Figure xx.

Excerpt from *Historic timber getting in the Southern Forests — Statements of site significance and management recommendations 1996* Parry Kostaglou 1996

McMullen s Leithbridge Sawmill

HISTORY

Messrs J. H. and M. McMullen established what was probably Franklin s largest sawmill alongside New Road in c.1932, when boiler records first site him as a mill owner here. In 1936, the Huon Times Centenary supplement made reference to this mill and its local significance when it said

There have never been any very big mills at Franklin. The forest was taken by splitters and sawyers, followed by settlers. The largest owned by Messrs J. & M. McMullen, is in operation at the present time.

Machinery records indicate that the mill was last inspected in 1953, suggesting that it had closed down by the following year. The operation was then moved three kilometres north west and a new mill built. This is described subsequently as McMullen s Bermuda road mill.

DESCRIPTION

The McMullen sawmill occupies a large clearing at the very end of New Road, which was extended to this point by the sawmiller. A timber tramline described subsequently leads westward into the forest from the mill skids. The following features were identified at this mill site:

SAW MILL SHED

Measuring 16 X 7 metres, the remains of the sawmill shed and saw benches occupy a large cutting in the south eastern corner of the site. The log built saw benches for a breaking down frame and breast/docking saws remain *in situ* as does the central saw pit beneath the breaking down frame.

TRAMWAY

The 3 kilometre long timber tramway built by Mr McMullen terminates immediately south of the roadway terminus, beside the mill skids described below. The tramway terminus is still evidenced by regularly spaced timber sleeper and one length of spar rail. The other side of the tramway retains earthen impressions of these of these features, since insect activity has rotted out the actual timbers.

MILL SKIDS

The 6 X 7 metre long skidway located between the tramline terminus and the mill shed was used to roll logs off the tram and onto the main saws in the mill shed. It is still evidence by two 6 metre long bed logs embedded in the ground here.

HUT 1

Living quarters for the mill staff were located in clearings to the north and west of the sawmill precinct. The first structure stands 30 metres west of the roadway terminus, and measures 8 X 3.5 X 3 metres in height. It retains its floor joists, southern wall and fireplace, although the rest of the fabric is falling away to form a large scatter of boards and palings.

HUT 2

A second hut site was located bedside the roadway some metres north of its terminus. This structure resides in a shallow cutting dug by its builders to keep the building level. Measuring 5 X 3.5 metres in width, the flooring and southern wall panel remains in evidence.

McMullens Leithbridge Tramway

HISTORY

A tramway was constructed by Mr McMullen from newly established mill at the end of New Road to the forests on the southern slopes of Leithbridge Hill. This was probably begun in c.1932 and gradual extensions were made into the early 1940s.

DESCRIPTION

Measuring just under three kilometres in length, the Leithbridge tramway until recently ran a westerly course from the McMullen sawmill to a point some 350 metres south east of the Bermuda Road. The tramway boasted the most extensive in addition to the best preserved set of historic timber haulage machinery seen in Tasmania. Unfortunately recent logging activities have destroyed the most significant sections of the line, and only the eastern-most 1.5 kilometres of the line remains *in situ*.

The remains of this line have been degraded by natural forces, but intact sections of timber tramline and incidental bridging survive none the less. Historically, a locomotive type engine was employed on this tramway, and no decking was therefore required. A number of related features survive alongside the tramline which are described below or subsequently as sites in their own right.

References

Historic timber getting in the Southern Forests — Statements of site significance and management recommendations. Parry Kostaglou Forestry Tasmania, Tasmanian Forest Research Council, Inc. 1996

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The History of the Huon, Channel, Bruny Is. Region R. Ely Centre for Tasmanian Historical Studies, University of Tasmania

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A History of Trains and Trams in Tasmania Thomas CT Cooley

MAP showing:

McMullens Leithbridge Sawmill — low/medium significance recommendation — to protect — private property

McMullens Bermuda Sawmill - low/medium significance: recommendation — to protect, State forest

McMullens Leithbridge Tramway