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Brockman Sawpit



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BROCKMAN SAWPIT

The pioneer settlers of the Pemberton district were the Brockman family, who reached the area in 1861. Their homestead, which still stands, was established near the Warren River some five kilometres north-west of the sawpit.

Convicts employed by the Brockmans were the first to utilise the magnificent jarrah and karri forests found growing in the area. These men and the "ticket of leave" tradesmen who followed them were the fore-runners of the present timber industry which has been the backbone of the Pemberton district since the State Sawmills opened in 1913.

This sawpit is the best preserved of many which still remain in the forest nearby. It was probably dug by convicts in about 1865 to cut timber for the Brockman homestead. Other pits are located nearer the river approximately a kilometre south of the bridge.

The jarrah logs and sawn flitches mounted on this site were found in and around the pit when it was discovered by forest workmen early in 1972. They are remarkably well preserved, individual axe and saw marks being plainly visible on most pieces. The saw mounted in the log is an original implement, obtained from elsewhere.

Pitsawing was the standard method of sawing timber in the early days of settlement of Australia. Powered sawmills did not appear until about 1850, but it is unlikely that sawmill timber became available to the pioneer Pemberton settlers until many years later.

The sawyers selected their tree, felled it (sometimes across a previously prepared pit) using an axe or crosscut saw, and then cut it into log lengths. Sometimes if the site was suitable, a pit was dug under the log at this point. Usually the log was snigged by horses, bullocks or sheer manpower to a pit nearby and put on wooden bearers spanning the pit.

One sawyer worked on top of the log, his functions being to raise the saw after the downward stroke and place it onto a chalk line marking the proposed cut. The other man (or sometimes two men) stood beneath the log and supplied the cutting power. The work was arduous and, particularly for the bottom man, rather uncomfortable. He often worked up to his knees in water and was continually showered with sawdust.

Some bottom sawyers would work through the day with a bag over their heads for protection from the sawdust.

Mr. A. Rule in his book "Forests of Australia", gives this account of pitsawing in the early days of settlement in Australia:

"Sawing thus laboriously, inch by inch, through massive logs was certainly no child's play and sawteeth needed frequent sharpening. A tale is told of one simple sawyer who sacrificed his shirt to protect his newly sharpened saw from the dulling effect of wind on the saw teeth. To settlers and others these sawyers were a race apart and they had their own songs reminiscent of sea shanties telling of the hardships of their calling and their victimisation by soulless timber buyers. In 1822 the official price of sawn timber cut by convict labour is stated in a government order as 7/6 per 100 feet. The same order goes on to say 'Any ticket-of-leave man who shall exact a higher payment shall forfeit his ticket of leave Anyone refusing to work at such payment shall be placed in the penitentiary'."

Another account in the Australian Forestry Journal of 1926 reports that pitsawyers in the Darling Ranges close to Perth in the early days of the colony were paid four shillings and sixpence for a ten-hour day at the pit. Timber was sold at the following rates: 5" x 1" to 5" x 3" at 7 shillings per 100 lineal foot and all timber above these sizes at 40 shillings per load (50 cubic feet) at the pitside. When a demand for railway sleepers arose, one early contractor was able to supply, by pitsawing, 1500 sleepers (7' x 8" x 4") per week at a price of one shilling and eightpence halfpenny per sleeper delivered to the job.

A slightly different view of the life of the pitsawyers came in 1916 from D. E. Hutchins, an Englishman who visited Australia at that time to study forestry in this country. In his report, Hutchins said that "it was unfortunate that pitsawing has been almost abandoned for the present in Australia.....the work is so invigorating and healthy that many men who cannot stand a sedentary town life could earn a healthy living by it".

One wonders how many invigorating hours Mr. Hutchins had spent in a pit, pulling a seven foot saw through a four foot diameter jarrah log.

Probably some of the greatest pitsawing achievements were performed by convicts in Tasmania in their production of ships keels, planks and beams from bluegum. Some beams were recorded as measuring in excess of 160 feet long and 18 inches by 6 inches in section (free of heartwood and sapwood).

Pitsawing will never be seen in action in the jarrah and karri forests again. Like the crosscut saw, the bullock and the steam locomotive, they are a thing of the past. But they played a vital role in the early development of the country.

The reconstruction of this site is dedicated to the pitsawyer, bond or free, who was the pioneer of the timber industry of the Pemberton district.