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THE BROAD AXE AND THE ADZE

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The broad axe

The broad axe is a large axe which weighs from 3.5 to 4.5 kg, having a broad blade, bevelled only on one side, and can be fitted with either a left or right hand handle depending on the individual user.

It has been used for the hewing of railway sleepers, beams and bridge timbers in the forest and often on a construction site.

A considerable amount of experience and skill is required to turn out a good article at an economical rate. Seven railway sleepers a working day would be a good average production rate in the past era when the broad axe was used extensively for producing sleepers from the Western Australian forests.

Methods employed by sleeper cutters were as follows:

1. Select a suitable free splitting jarrah and fell it.
2. Cut off logs at the desired length, usually 2.1 m.
3. Split flitches from a log conforming as close as possible to the size of the section, usually 230 by 110 mm or 250 by 125 mm.

4. Place the flitch or billet on two short skids to lift the timber up from the ground.
5. Mark with a chalk line the width of the sleeper to be hewn along the full length of the billet.
6. Score into this line at regular intervals with a narrow axe and split off large sections of surplus wood.
7. Square the edges of the sleepers by striking along the chalk line mark with the broad axe working up one side and down the other.
8. Turn the partly hewn sleeper on edge and mark out the thickness of the sleeper with the chalk line. Repeat the method of scoring surplus wood and squaring the surface of the sleeper but only square a part of the way down. This is to prevent any possibility of wood breaking away along the bottom edge.
9. Turn the piece of timber upside down and repeat the action of chalk lining and squaring.

The sleeper should now be finished, and can be rolled aside while another billet is placed on the skids for processing.



Splitting "billets" from jarrah log and squaring them to make sleepers.

The broad axe was considered an individual tool of the timber industry. A good axe was much prized by its owner and always honed to a razor-like edge.

Different weights were preferred by different individuals and various methods of setting and grinding the blade's edge were practiced and so gave a particular blade certain characteristics.

The adze

The adze is still used today as a hand tool for cutting out mortises in large sectioned timber, either in round or square form.

This tool is a very useful addition in the requirements of bridge building, supplementing the broad axe if it is being used.

In the construction of round timber framing for farm sheds or rustic structures it can be one of the main implements, especially so if in the hands of an expert.

The small driving face on the back of the head can be used for the driving of large nails and ewbank spikes generally used in round pole construction as a fixing agent.

The tool is constructed from high grade steel and always worked with a razor-like edge. The handle is in no way off-set and so can be used by either a left or right handed worker. Like the broad axe the adze could become a one-man tool having a certain "feel" and "life" appreciated by the expert.