TAKING WOOD

TO WATER

STORY AND PHOTOS BY OTTO PRAUSE

In 1860, Perth was crying out for timber to feed its growing building needs and to earn precious export income. Logs could be hauled from the jarrah forests of Darlington, but the roads were unspeakably bad. The river was the best bet, and it was nearer - but how could you coax logs from Darlington down to the Canning River?

AT first sight, the suburb of Cannington today seems to be a busy highway of shoulder-to-shoulder used car yards, plastic bunting and fast food outlets. But in the middle of the nineteenth century, it was simply a scattering of bush and farms, two boneshaking horse-and-cart hours from Perth.

In the 1850s and 60s Perth and Fremantle were growing fast and building materials of all kinds were at a premium. Benjamin Mason, a well-to-do businessman from Perth, recognised the demand for timber and organised the felling of trees along the Canning River. The method was brutally simple, the work pitilessly hard. After removing the crown, the trunk would be rolled over a pit dug next to it and sawn into suitably sized planks, then transported to Perth or Fremantle for sale.

Business boomed. Soon it was necessary to construct a boat landing site at River Road to make boat-loading easier. And so, with Mason's help, the whole of the Cannington district was cleared of trees and opened up for farming. His teams had to go further and further to find suitable trees to fell. Instead of digging a pit on the spot for each tree, they carted logs on bullock-drawn jinkers down to the landing. At journey's end, they were cut up in a number of saw pits which had been established there.

TO THE HILLS

Soon there weren't any trees suitable for pitsawing left to be cut in the Cannington area, so Ben Mason looked further afield. In 1864 he obtained a concession from the colonial government to cut timber on a one-square-mile lease in the nearby Darling Range. Soon trees were being felled in the hills and the logs transported by teams of bullocks nine miles (15 kilometres) to the landing on the Canning River, where they were cut on a newly installed steam-driven saw. A whole community sprang up around the mill at Mason's landing. There was a blacksmith, a baker, a wheelwright, and lots of workers' cottages. There was even a school, well before the Government provided one.

But there were problems too: the haul down from the hills was too expensive. A better way had to be found. The logs could be rolled to the river on a trolley, but this would mean a tramway and permanent rails.

Francis Bird, an architect recently arrived from England, was persuaded to join Ben Mason to build a timber railway line from Ben's concession in the hills east of Bickley to Mason's Landing on the river. A route was surveyed and construction began. It was slow going. First the track had to be built up where it traversed swampy ground, then it had to be levelled. Bridges had to be built across Yule Brook in present-day Beckenham and, further up in the hills, across Bickley and Munday Brooks where the reservoir now stands. Sleepers had to be laid and then wooden rails put down and secured with wooden dowels. When it was completed in 1872, the corduroy railway was hailed as a marvellous achievement and opened by Governor Weld.

The mill was now moved into the forest and named after its creator. Mason's Mill quickly grew into a sizable operation and at one time employed 50 sawyers and a dozen cooks. Up to 400 people lived in the community which formed around the mill and included shops, a school and a sports ground.

The business prospered. A large number of trees were cut, put through the mill and sent down to the landing. The tramway was extended into the forest beyond the mill to make it easier to cart logs to the mill. But there were some problems. There were frequent derailments and accidents on the tramway. The wooden rails twisted and buckled in the heat of summer and swelled and rotted in winter.

Horses were now used to haul the trolleys because they were more manageable than bullocks. On the steep sections of the track just downhill from the mill, the trolleys were slowed (so

The Mason and Bird Heritage Trail follows the route of the old timber tram line.◂

Trees as far as the eye can see. This is what Ben Mason saw when he rode his horse up into the hills looking for timber.◂

All that is left of the giant bullock-drawn timber jinkers which once carted logs to the landing on the Canning River.◂

The years and the termites have taken their toll on the bridge over Munday Brook, over which the timber railway once ran.▸

After removing the crown, trees would be rolled over a pit and sawn into planks.▲▲

The horses that hauled the trolleys loaded with timber were sometimes killed when the makeshift brakes failed.▲

they would not run over the horses) by jamming a long length of timber against the wheels. On many occasions these makeshift brakes failed and trolleys were derailed and horses killed. One such accident occurred near the Munday Creek Bridge and is remembered to this day by a hand-lettered sign nailed to a tree:

They have hauled their loads of lumber
Now they sleep in peaceful slumber...

There were also problems on the water. The river at Cannington is quite narrow in places and tended to become obstructed by tree trunks and branches washed down every winter. It had to be periodically cleared. The biggest problems were the mudflats in the shallow sections of river near what is now Riverton and Shelley. Attempts were made to clear, widen and deepen the channel through these shallows. Gangs of convicts drove stakes into the riverbed to construct a sort of dam of branches, twigs and reeds. Mud was scooped out of the channel by shovel or bucket and deposited beyond this 'dam', to provide enough deep water for the barges that transported 'Swan River mahogany' to Fremantle for export.

DECLINE AND FALL

The mid-1870s were the best years of the operation. Timber production from Mason's Mill was at its peak. The mill town was a well-established, self-sufficient little community, while a small township had also grown at the landing. Francis Bird had built a house called Woodloes just upriver from the landing.

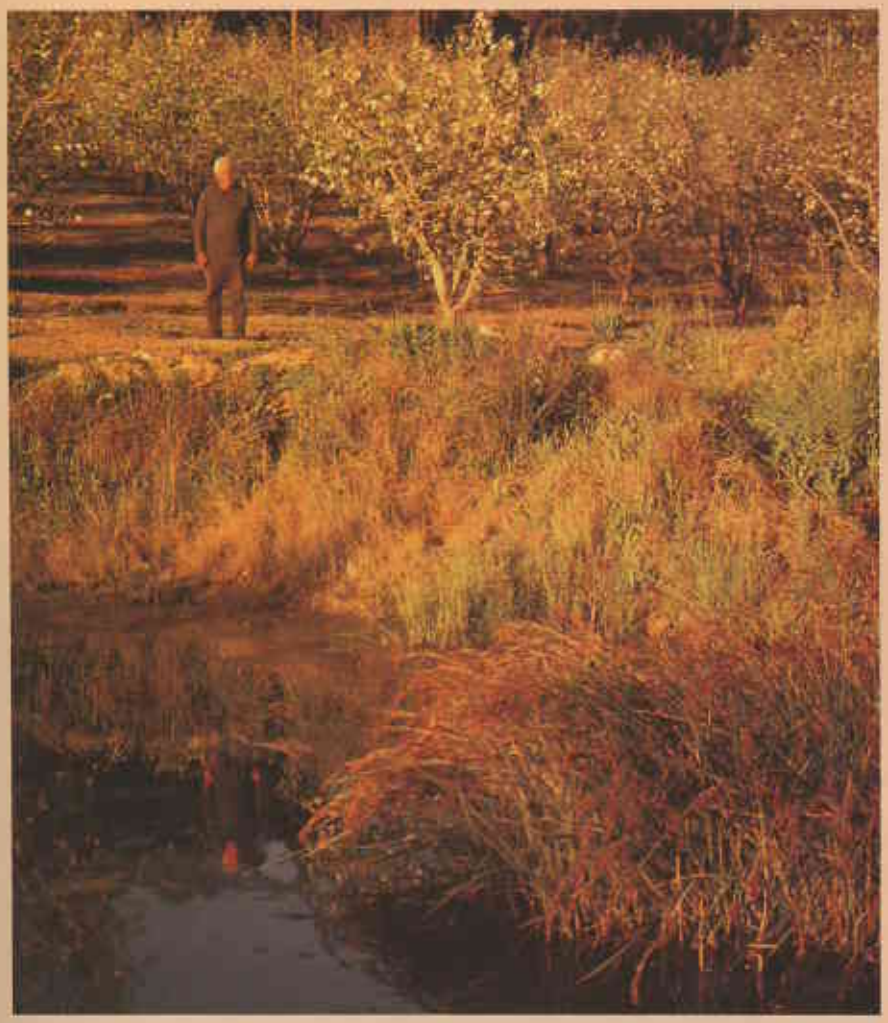
Ben Mason was everywhere, overseeing and running his timber empire. But if a snagged and silted river and derailments on the line plagued him daily, they were nothing compared to the real threat which was soon to face him. The Government was pushing its own railway through to Midland, and when it was finished it reduced the cost of transporting timber from the Darling Range to such an extent that the Mason and Bird operation could not compete. Their timber empire slowly began to crumble. Francis Bird left the company in 1877 and resumed his architectural pursuits. Five years later the operation was offered for sale at auction, only to find that there were no bidders.

Ben Mason lived for another 11 years. He died in 1893 at the age of 65 and is buried at East Perth cemetery with other notable people of his era. He was one of a select group who have left their mark on the State's history.

If you drive south on Canning Road between Kalamunda and Pickering Brook you will come across a gravel track on your right called 'Masonmill Road'. It does a little loop, then rejoins Canning Road. At the bottom of that loop is where Ben's mill used to be. All that is left today is a small dam at the bottom corner of an orchard. This used to provide the water supply for the whole community. Apple trees bloom where the mill buildings used to be. A new stand of jarrah has grown where only a few years ago you could still see the foundations of the mill workers' cottages.

RELICS AND REMNANTS

So what is left today of Ben Mason's empire? There is the 'Convict Fence' on the Canning River. It has stood now for over 100 years and it will probably stand for another 100. The State's most notorious outlaw, Moondyne Joe, was employed on it. Yet few people realize who put it there, and at what cost in human suffering.



Ray Owens is 85 years old. He was born and raised on an orchard planted by his father, on land originally taken up and cleared by the Mason and Bird company. It is just upstream from where the mill used to be. It was cleared by Ben's timber collectors and for some time used as the mill's sports ground. One of the tram lines went right through where Ray's packing shed stands now. Ray knows the surrounding bush well. He can show you stumps and saw pits dating back to Ben Mason's time and he claims, with a chuckle, that Ben did not stick to his allocated one square mile too accurately either. Ray is probably one of the last men to remember what Mason's Mill used to look like. He was just a young lad and the mill was a derelict shed even then. All the valuables had been stripped and gradually the buildings too disappeared.

The Canning River is now unfit for navigation upstream of Kent Street Weir, and you cannot sail your boat to Mason's Landing any more. The river is neglected there and full of snags.

There is a memorial and plaque at the reserve of Mason's Landing at the end of River Road. It is a brave attempt to honour a man who did much to promote the timber industry and put Cannington on the map. It also is a little sad, with the inevitable graffiti-covered toilet block and buckled barbie full of flattened tinnies and broken stubbies. Just up the road is Woodloes. It is a museum now, and outside you can see one of the few remaining examples of a timber jinker. One wheel has collapsed; the other one, a huge affair some two metres high, will not last much longer unless some action is taken to preserve it.

Then there is Bickley Road. When you first look it up on the map, you wonder why it cuts across the chequerboard of suburban streets the way it does, until you realize it runs where the tramline used to be. Up past Bickley Reservoir there is a bridge - the only one of Ben's timber bridges left standing, and perhaps the oldest bridge left in the State. Until recently there wasn't much left of it; the years and the termites had taken their toll. Then, at the urging of the local historical group, money was made available to restore it to what must have been its original state, complete with timber rails. Nearby is the sign commemorating the dead horses.

A new jarrah forest has sprung up to heal the scars left in the bush by Ben's sawyers. It takes a knowledgeable eye to notice the depression next to a stump and realize that this was the sawpit above which the trunks were sliced up. Sure enough, remnants of a crown are still visible at the far end, just where it was docked 100 years ago.

At the mill site itself there is nothing left except memories and a lonely grave. Up on the hillside, overlooking the site where the mill used to be, is the grave of little Francis Weston who was born on the 17th of January 1876 to his wheelwright father and died there two days later. Look it up next time you go driving in the hills. Ben would be pleased to know that someone has remembered.

Otto Prause is a freelance writer and photographer and a long-time resident of Cannington.

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A very different landscape replaces what was once a thriving timber industry. Rediscover Cannington in the 1850s. See page 42.

Seaweed! Delicate and beautiful, or slimy and smelly? Decide for yourself on page 20.

LANDSCOPE

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FEATURES

REGULARS

COVER

*Back in the early 1970s, Western Australia proclaimed the numbat (*Myrmecobius fasciatus*) as its State emblem which may have saved its life. With the help of scientists and new techniques, these delightful creatures are now fighting back against extinction. See page 15.*

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