

A Short History of the Timber Industry in the Wielangta State Forest

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*Saving the past
for the future*

Forestry
COMMISSION
— Tasmania —

Acknowledgments

This short history has been compiled mostly from tape recordings of interviews with four men who either lived or worked in and around the Wielangta State forest area during its heyday. Our thanks to Doug Cusick, Eric Blythe, Jack Arnol and Eric Hayes.

Victor Clark kindly provided information about the Wielangta town plan and David Beck provided technical information about boilers, engines and locos.

The authors gratefully acknowledge the help of these men - and would like to pay tribute not only to them but, particularly, to the women and children who shared their harsh existence.

Introduction

'... we were so poor that Dad used to wear the old grey flannel shirts and after the worst of them wore out Mum used to cut them down and make herself a vest [or] make ... us something warm. We didn't have a lot of shoes to wear - they were banded down. When Daphne grew out of her shoes they would be given to my sister Iris and if there was any wear [left] in them I [would get them]. ... [it was] the

same with clothes. Dad worked out at the mills as foreman in the bush because [there were] five little kids under six ... left at home all day. Daphne used to care for us, cook the meals and stand on a box to do our washing ... then Mum would go away to hospital to bring another baby home ... we'd be left alone in those days. ... we survived in the bush by hand-me-downs and hard work.'

Make no mistake - timber-getting in Tasmania's forests is sheer hard work. It was more so in the earlier years of this century. Due to its very nature, harvesting timber for sawmills built close to the source of supply was ephemeral. The timber eventually was cut over and the mill had to find another source nearby, move its operations or close down. Devastating bushfires also took their toll. The forests eventually grew again and quickly covered many traces of mills, tramways and other associated activities.

This history was initiated by the staff of the Forestry Commission's Triabunna District who felt that the Wielangta State forest had a story worth telling. Additional information has been provided from a state-wide survey of the historic timber industry (on State forest) by the Commission.

Early history

Although most of the physical changes evident in the Wielangta State forest relate to timber-getting this century, the first people to settle here were Aborigines belonging to the Portmairremener and Oyster Bay tribes thousands of years ago. These people lived mainly on the coast, but also travelled and camped in the inland forests. There is evidence that they lived in sandstone overhangs near the upper reaches of the Sandspit River.

The name of this forest - Wielangta - was an Aboriginal term meaning tall timber. Thousands of years later, it is still an apt name for this forest. The original pronunciation was probably more like 'wulungta', the original spelling.

The first white settlers in this area were early nineteenth century bay whalers. These hardy people established temporary settlements in sheltered areas along the coast from which they launched their 'chaser' rowing boats to pursue and kill their prey. At this time whales were plentiful along the coast and highly prized.

Sheep farmers followed in the 1820s, establishing sheep runs and shepherds' camps. The sale of land grants that began in the 1830s

brought the first permanent settlers. Subdivisions of land around the then Carrickfergus Bay (now Rheban Bay) were later combined to form large sheep stations such as Rheban and Twamley. Throughout the latter half of the century property owners cleared much more of the forest. Belatedly realising the value of the remaining timber, the State Government put a stop to clearing in 1910, gazetting 6,000 acres as a Timber Reserve.

Right from the beginning the timber here was highly prized. Tall and straight, these trees have always been ideal sawlogs. The East Coast Timber Company quickly secured exclusive cutting rights from the government and built a large sawmill and tramway complex in 1911. The mill was called Wielangta.

This sawmill was responsible for the first real local community that, over time, had a population of around 100.

In 1917 the sawmill complex and the company's cutting rights were bought by the Huon Timber Company. Bushfires in 1921 almost destroyed the mill, but it was quickly rebuilt. The new, bigger mill had an unprecedented appetite for timber that could not be sustained. The complex was abandoned in 1924. Few people stayed in the town and today little evidence

remains of what was once a small, thriving community.

The subsequent history of the area is one of a generation of large sawmills and smaller 'spot' mills that milled timber from the forest until the late 1960s.

Timber harvesting in the bush

'She was hard work. We didn't have chainsaws or anything. Only had crosscut saws. Used to have to go up very high, you know, 18 to 20 feet to get at the big ones, the big trees, to get away from the spurs. See, it was nothing to fall a tree that would be 120 feet [high].'

In the bush 80 or more years ago a crew of usually two men, experts with crosscut saw and axe, felled the trees. They often stood on planks wedged into 'shoes' (notches cut into the trunks) many metres above ground. The butts of these enormous old swamp gums were often rotten in the middle or defective in some other way. The fellers climbed further up these old trees until they found better quality timber. It was always dangerous work. The timber

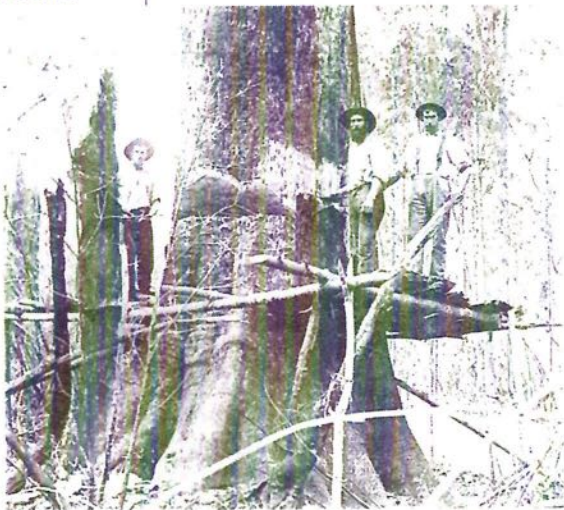
getters could never relax their vigilance - axes were razor-sharp and the forests themselves full of hidden dangers.

'I felt a bit lonely at times at 13 out in the bloody bush. I used to go out and have a bit of a cry on my own.'

Once the tree was felled its branches were removed and the trunk cut into lengths suitable for dragging through the forest.

The Wielangta timber tramway

The tramline between Rheban Harbour and Wielangta was built to haul logs to the mill and from there to move sawn timber to the wharf. Built in early 1910, the tramway was first used to carry parts for the mill itself to the construction site. The main line carried a number





Locomotive shunting wagons, c.1911 (Spring Bay Council).

of steam powered locos, but timber on the spur lines was pulled by horses to landings on the main line. After the mill closed in 1924 the metal tracks were salvaged and the line abandoned.

Locating and building tramlines in the bush was a specialist task usually done by a gang of six men. When an area was cut out, the line was extended to other stands of timber. The first tramline followed the Sandspit River upstream crossing the river in five places before negotiating a steep hill. The line then followed a creek toward the river's source in the Middle Peak area (see map). This line was called 'The 40 Chain' and the bush being worked was known as The Big Scrub. When timber arrived at the mill the wagons were unloaded by winch. The logs were then broken down into flitches on a vertical breaking down frame. The train

then carried up to four carriages of cut logs from the mill to Rheban Bay.

'I think she [the locomotive] pulled 86 ton of timber out of there every day. You know, some of that timber would be four feet by two feet and oh, God knows what length, [maybe] 60 feet long. Special timber. Oh it was beautiful stuff.'

A log hauler - a steam-driven winch that controlled a roll of wire cable - was positioned at the end of the tramline. This hauled logs within a radius of half a mile to a skidway close to the hauler. Logs were then loaded onto carriages pulled by three horses and taken to the mill.

To gain access to more timber a new tramline was built across the Sandspit River and up the southern bank of Wielangta Creek. This line followed the northern bank of Falls Creek towards Pine Divide.

'About a mile below the mill the line went through a section called The Gorge, which was a tight bend under the cliff face. Great skill was needed by the driver when negotiating this section of the line. On every trip down it was the loco

assistant's job to hop down and pour heavy lubricating oil from a large brown tea pot onto the rails. In spite of this, the loco would round the bend screaming like a banshee. It could be heard for miles. Straight after The Gorge the line crossed the valley on a high trestle bridge - a hair-raising experience for anyone making their first trip. The brakes on the truck were connected by a rope and applied by the driver, who would brace his foot against the back of the loco and pull with all his might. Even so, at times the train would reach a terrifying pace going downhill when the load was unusually heavy.' (from David Beck's *The Wielangta and Blackman Bay Tramways*).

The tramway continued down the steadily widening valley of the Sandspit River before crossing sandy coastal flats to the Rheban Jetty.

The rails were originally wooden with timber decking to allow horse drawn teams to haul the timber but were replaced with iron in 1921 following, perhaps, a flood. The line between Rheban Jetty and Wielangta made little use of earthworks. It was supported on swampy ground by timber cross members.

The original steam locomotive had a conventional boiler. Its replacement

was a 'coffee pot' loco that had a vertical boiler, an extremely large whistle and an unusual lubrication system, according to its driver, Alan Wiggins. Each morning large pieces of suet were rammed into cups mounted on the engine. Steam then dissolved the suet into a suitable lubricant. *'Run on animal oil, all her life, that little engine ... mutton suet.'* A third loco arrived a few years later - its engine was the same as those used in paddle wheeled riverboats. It arrived at Rheban Jetty in pieces where it was assembled and hauled to Wielangta for fitting out.

Rheban Jetty

All activity at Rheban centred around its jetty. Originally built out from the rocks at Rheban Bay, it was soon found inadequate for larger ships. A new, larger jetty was built off Rheban Beach.

'Some of them [ships] were 200 or 300 tons. They found out it was unsuitable for them. So they built their own.'

Timber from the Wielangta mills and, later, shipments from Pony Bottom and Press' Gully mills were all brought to the four acre Rheban timber yard prior to shipping. When the tramways were in operation there were a series of loops to allow

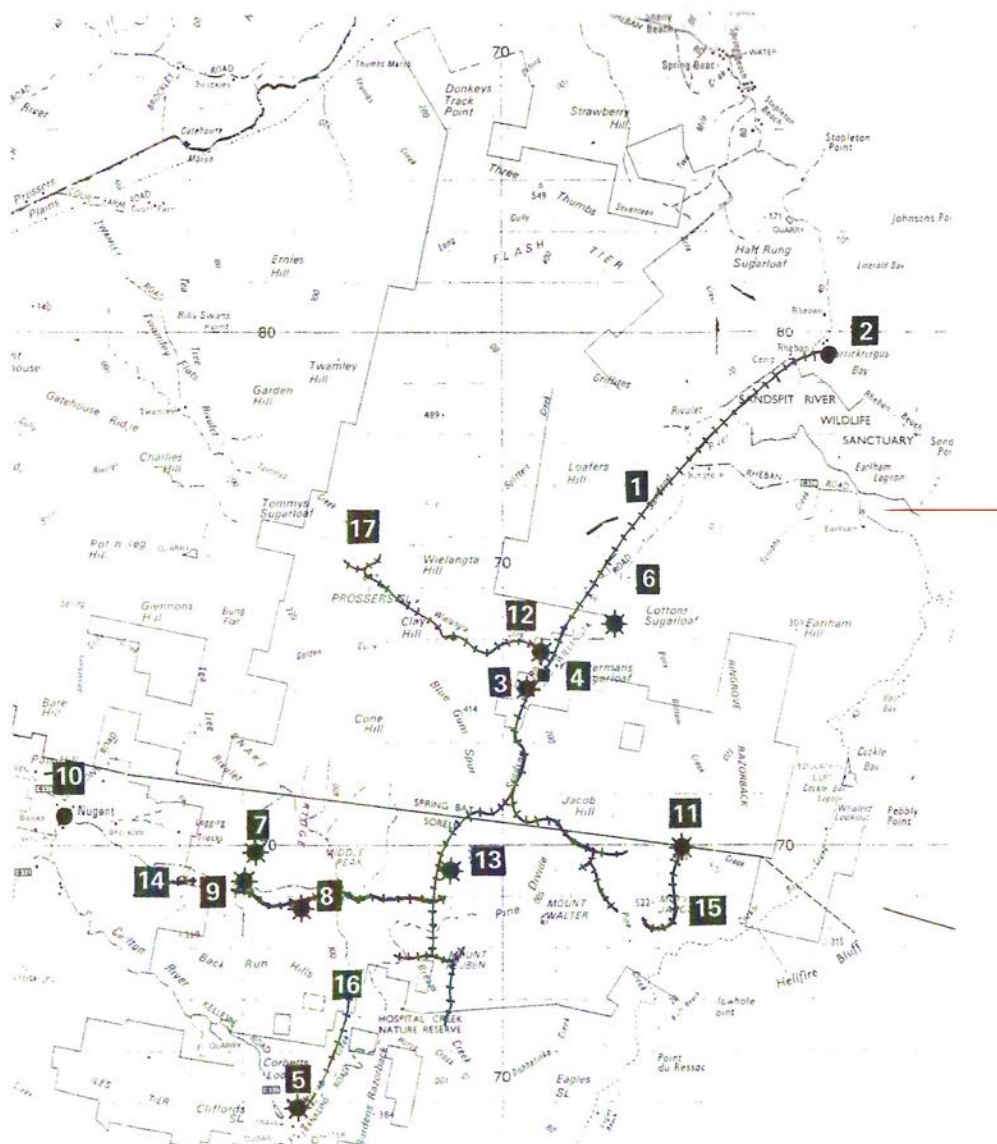


Hand hewing blue gum beams. (*Forestry Commission*)

Wielangta 'big mill' under construction, c. 1910.
(*Allport Collection, State Library of Tasmania*)



Map of Wielangta State forest showing historic sites



1	Wielangta tramway	2	Rhyeban wharf	3	Wielangta mill
4	Wielangta township	5	Old Kellevie mill	6	Pony Bottom mill
7	Campbell's mill	8	Purdon's mill	9	Hayes mill
10	Nugent timber yards	11	Pine Creek mill	12	Press' Gully mill
13	Wielangta little mill	14	Purdon's tramline	15	Pine Creek tramline
16	Old Kellevie tram	17	Press' Gully tram		

Plan of the Wielangta settlement c. 1922



Plan by Astrid Ketelaar, drawn from
information supplied by E. Hayes and
V. Clark.



(left) Wielangta tramway bridge.

(below) 'Coffee pot' locomotive on the Wielangta tramline.
(both photos from the Allport Collection, State Library of Tasmania)





Wielangta 'big mill' nearing completion, c1911 (*Allport Collection*, State Library of Tasmania).

shunting operations directly onto the jetty. Usually, though, timber was racked in the yard, loaded onto carriages and pulled onto the jetty by horses. All the timber ships winched their cargo aboard in slings. Most was kept below deck, but could also be stacked above deck

Apart from timber, eucalyptus oil, produced at a nearby distillery, was also shipped from Rheban. This was sent on the ship to Hobart that supplied the bulk of the Wielangta township's needs.

The original Wielangta mills

The original Wielangta mill was finished in 1911 by the Hobart firm Russell Allport and Company who started sawmilling in the Wielangta forest as the East Coast Timber Company. The mill was built on the eastern side of the Sandspit River.

The mill was powered by an enormous steam engine that had a 12 foot flywheel. It had a full steam bench with twin circular saws that could cope with the huge logs found in the area. The engine was unusual in that it was rope- rather than belt-driven. A race from the river provided water for the boiler.

This boiler came from Melbourne where it was said to have been used for the production of the *Argus* newspaper. The enormous flat sawdust heap near the mill was reputed to have covered ten acres to a depth of four feet. It was often used for picnics and sports days.

In 1917 the mill was sold to the Huon Timber Company. After the 1921 fire the rebuilt mill was known as the New Mill. The timber used to rebuild was cut at a satellite mill that became known as the Little Mill. The New Mill now boasted a larger complement of saws. When both mills were operating up to 70 men were directly employed. Most of the workers lived either at Wielangta or in bush huts near the Little Mill.

The appetite of the new mill was formidable. The new and extensive tramway network around the Little Mill could barely keep the rebuilt

mill supplied. By 1924 timber within reach of the tramway network had been exhausted. When the increasingly idle mill was finally closed that year its plant and equipment was sold off and the site abandoned. The empty building was razed by bushfires in 1928.

The Wielangta township

The township was first 'officially' mentioned in 1917. However, it seems certain that the first settlers came into the area in 1911 when mill construction started. As the community grew a general store/bakery, engineering shop, a school and two boarding houses were built near the mill.

The 1921 fire not only meant reconstruction of the mill but also of several houses. Residents and mill workers spent two days and nights trying to save the mill and the township from a fire with a front that spread from Buckland to Bream Creek. Pumps were rushed from Hobart but arrived too late to save the mill:

'All Wielangta was ablaze and we could see the flames and the smoke and we were broken-hearted because we were sure Dad was dead, we thought he couldn't survive. He [had] used all the water in the tanks, everything. They went inside and sat in the kitchen in the

old homestead, told the animals this was it, we have to be prepared to die. By some luck of fate the wind changed. It burnt all round and Dad was saved.'

The school, opened in 1917, also doubled as a public hall for dances. At its peak it had 35 pupils. The annual school picnic was held on the huge, flat sawdust heap. The entire settlement was involved and the then mill manager would be there with a pocketful of threepenny pieces. He made sure all children got a prize.

The general store/bakery kept the community stocked with all kinds of supplies. Cakes, buns and bread were all baked in the shop's brick oven.

In the early days of the township mail and meat came from Orford via Rheban. Both were carried on a slider, which was made of a box attached to two saplings which, in turn, was harnessed to a horse. All other supplies came by ship from Hobart.

There were two boarding houses. The first, known as Mum Swan's, was on the west bank of the river and provided meals and board for up to thirty mill workers. Today the site is marked by some exotic plants and a gravestone of a child,

Alex Swan, killed in an accident in 1919. The second boarding house, said to provide better comforts, opened later. It had originally been the ten-room mill manager's house.

Most mill workers lived at Wielangta but some came every day from Nugent. Others came from Kellevie and Copping. Up to a dozen of the houses in the township were owned by the Company and rented to its employees.

All transport, apart from the tramlines, was on foot, bicycle or horse. Horses were heavily relied upon and subsequently well looked after. A man could borrow a horse from its owners at Nugent, ride to Wielangta then let the horse find its own way home.

'We had the dancing ball. We amused ourselves, we could catch yabbies in the creek but we had to work fairly hard, we didn't have a lot of play time. We would go trouting, we had a stick with some cotton on it and Mum would bend us up a tiny pin and we would gather some worms and catch trout in the creek, basically we amused ourselves.'

Social life revolved around games, picnics and dances at the school. The nearest pub was a ten mile walk to either Buckland or Triabunna. One hapless drinker died of

exposure after falling asleep in a hollow log. He was not found until a week later, when searchers were attracted by his dog, who had not left his master's side.

The closure of the mill in 1924 saw most people move away. A caretaker stayed on for another two years. When he left the school and store closed.

Other timber harvesting operations

The Wielangta sawmill was the first and certainly the most ambitious timber harvesting operation mounted in that part of the forest. However, there were a substantial number of later mill operations that generated a new chapter in the region's history.

Old Kellevie mill

The first mill to operate on the Nugent side of the Wielangta forest block was known as the Old Kellevie mill. Owned by H. Jones & Co, this mill began operations in the early 1920s and kept going for seven or eight years. The timber for this mill came from the fringe of the large area of scrub near the 'top huts' and the Pine Divide. It was then carted to Boomer Bay near Dunalley for shipment.

Pony Bottom mill

A mill operated here before being moved to Ringrove by the Chesterman Company in the late 1930s. Logs were brought to the mill by horse along a single tramline. Milled timber was sent by road to Rheban in lorries. The mill did not have a log hauler but used horses and, later, army surplus vehicles to drag timber from bush to mill. (Pony Bottom got its name from the capture of a convict here who had escaped from Triabunna on a stolen pony early last century.)



Pony Bottom sawmill, 1934 (*Central Coast Courier*).

Campbell's mill

Around 1930, the Campbell family set up a mill at the junction of Holdings Creek and the Carlton River. A tramline was constructed to the end of the road to Wielangta and two houses were built for mill

workers. The mill operated only for about six months as it was found to be uneconomic to haul timber to the mill using bullocks and horses.

'They tried to pull the timber out of the little scrub with a team of bullocks. And, of course, by the time they got operational they had spent all their money.'

Purdon's mill

A few years after Campbell's mill closed Jones and Co took up a lease in the Wielangta forest. The Purdon

family opened a new mill further up the Carlton River, sub-letting the area from Jones and Co. The Purdons extended Campbell's tramline to what became known as the Nugent timber yards. The Hayes family there leased 900 acres of forest through which Purdon's tramline ran. An agreement was

reached between the two families whereby Hayes could use the tramline provided Purdon maintained it. Most of the married men who worked for Purdon's lived at Nugent near the timber yards where five or six houses were built for them. Some men lived in bush huts near the mill while others lived

in houses previously built for Campbell's mill. The mill closed in 1949.

Hayes family mills

Throughout the Purdon operation a series of box mills near Oldings Creek was established by the Hayes family. The first box mill was located at Dry Gully where timber was cut for making apple boxes. The Hayes family owned the rights to a section of Purdon's tramline that ran to their timber yards at Nugent. Both the Hayes and Purdon operations used petrol driven locos. The Hayes loco was a four wheeled machine without reverse gear, which meant a turntable had to be built for it. The Hayes mill moved from Dry Gully to Oldings Gully where a succession of at least three spot mill sites were established. At one stage it must have been a fairly large operation capable of cutting house timbers. The traction engine that operated this mill was salvaged in 1984 and is now on a farm near Nugent.

Nugent timber yards

The men that worked at these mills and lived near Nugent used to ride their motorbikes to the timber yard here then walk the rest of the way to the mill. Timber brought to the yards was sorted then racked. After sorting the timber was loaded onto horse-drawn carriages that ran on

rails. Hayes and Sons had the contract to cart timber from the yard to Hobart.

Pine Creek mill

Around 1937, Edward Chesterman and Co opened a mill at Pine Creek. This operation reflected the passing of the steam era as the log hauler was now powered by a petrol engine. This hauler is the one recovered by the Forestry Commission and is now on display at the Commission's Triabunna offices. Tramlines were built near the Big Scrub towards Mount Jacob and Pine Divide, reaching timber not available to the New Mill. The timber from the Pine Creek mill was carted out by truck on a rough track either to Rheban or Hobart via Pony Bottom. The mill was burnt down in 1939.

Press' Gully mill

About 1940, Edward Chesterman and Co started a new mill at the junction of the Sandspit River and Wielangta Creek (Press' Gully). A tramline was built on the southern side of Wielangta Creek, heading to the saddle south of Prossers Sugarloaf. Branch lines from this main line reached Wielangta and Flagstaff Hill with another crossing Wielangta Creek lower down. This mill occasionally cut timber for the State Government, most of which

was used for bridge construction and repair. For example 40,000 super feet were used for the causeway at Midway Point. The decking wood was replaced every four or five years. All timbers from this mill were trucked either to Hobart or to the Rheban Jetty.

Postscript

This short history of timber-getting activities in the Wielangta forest has been complemented by a full archaeological survey of historic sites relating to the timber industry - see Kostoglou, 1992. In addition to the sawmill and tramway sites referred to here, a further 24 mills, dwelling sites, log landings and tramways have been located and their histories compiled. The Forestry Commission is now going through the process of setting up a management programme to protect the most significant of these sites so the history of this forest does not merely remain a written one.

These sites are part of Tasmania's historic cultural heritage.

Please help the Forestry Commission to look after them for the benefit of the community by leaving them as you found them. Please don't move or collect any material from these sites.

**The Historical Society
of the
Municipality of Sorell**

Further reading

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*For further information
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