

The Upper Forth Valley: Post-Settlement Historical Outline

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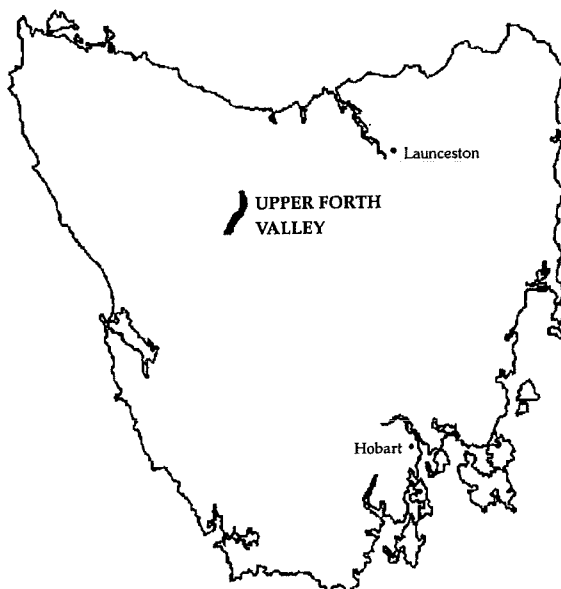
Abstract

Ever since the Van Diemens Land Company sought to open up the north-west hinterland for grazing, the Upper Forth area has attracted attention from diverse development interests. The initial interest was farming, but James Smith's ventures in the late 1850s indicated that the area's mineral and timber resources would be major incentives in the future. Timber harvesting and mining in the Upper Forth have brought some return on investment, but poor accessibility hindered exploration and development.

Accessibility to the area has always been of primary importance. From 1897, with completion of the Innes Track, a traffic of miners and developers moved through the area, but the most important physical change in the Upper Forth was the construction of Patons Road in 1908, directly resulting in development of the Oakleigh Creek wolfram mine. This in turn brought considerable land clearing, including the development of the private blocks near Borradaile Creek and, later, operation of the Dove timber mill. The power schemes of the 1960s brought further improvements to road access.

Introduction

For most of its length the Forth River passes through very difficult terrain, which explains why it was one of the later parts of the North-West to be opened up to European activity. The Upper Forth Valley has nonetheless attracted a wide variety of interests since it was made accessible in the late 1820s. These interests have been overwhelmingly concerned with the many material resources



of the region, including farming and grazing, mining, hunting, electricity generation and timber harvesting. The Upper Forth's timber and mining resources are of continuing interest. The proclamation of the Oakleigh Creek Conservation Area in December 1981 signalled a revival of interest in nature conservation in the area culminating in the current nomination for a large part of the area for World Heritage listing.

This discussion covers the post-settlement periods, i.e., since European settlement in Tasmania (1803-4). It does not deal with Aboriginal use of the Upper Forth.

Land Tenure and Non-Forestry Land Use

Boundaries of area

The area of land considered in this discussion is centred on the Lemonthyme State forest, extending east from the Forth River, over its length from Lake Cethana to the Mt Oakleigh area, for an average of about four kms to the top of the watershed between the Forth and Mersey river systems. It includes the Oakleigh Creek Conservation Area in the south. Where relevant to the discussion, some adjacent areas are included.

Land tenure

Land in the defined area is currently gazetted State forest, with some exceptions. At the southern end of the defined area is the Oakleigh Creek Conservation Area. The eastern part of this is within State forest, but the western half is unallocated Crown Land, as is a four km strip of rainforest to its north between Patons Road and the Forth River. In addition, there is land controlled by the Hydro-Electric Commission east of and including Lemonthyme Power Station, and some private holdings to the south of Borradaile Creek.

The alienated land is currently owned by Mrs Shirley Hardwicke, of Sunnyside (near Railton). The land, amounting in total to about 214 hectares, was first occupied privately around 1900, but title was not obtained until 1974.

Early exploration

During the 1820s the newly-formed Van Diemen's Land Company, a London-based group, began a concerted program of exploration of the north-west region with a view to developing it for pastoral use. An 1826 Company expedition led by Henry Hellyer marked the first visit of Europeans to the Upper Forth (Binks 1980). Hellyer and his companion, Clement Lorymer, crossed the Forth Gorge near what is now Lorinna.

Hellyer held the view that the adjoining area to the west had great pastoral potential, and

with another Company explorer, Joseph Fossey, surveyed the route for what was called 'The Great Western Road'. Within two years the route became a dray track from Deloraine, across the upper Mersey and Forth Valleys (crossing the Forth near the present town of Lorinna) and north to Emu Bay, now Burnie. At Hellyer's urging, a 10 000 acre lease in Middlesex Plains above Dove River, a tributary of the Forth, was obtained by the VDL Company.

The Fossey-Hellyer track and the Middlesex Plains venture stimulated further interest in the region. In the 1850s James Smith, the later discoverer of the Mt Bischoff 'mountain of tin', explored the Upper Forth for minerals and timber (Fenton 1891, Binks 1980). The first journey up the river itself was undertaken in 1868 by W.M. Crosby and Anthony Raymond, seeking pine timber from the Forth and Dove Valleys (Fenton 1891).

Mining

James Smith, whose mineral discoveries on the West Coast helped set off Tasmania's biggest mining boom, began his prospecting career while living at Penguin, and made his earliest discoveries in the Forth Valley at Golden Point, just north of the VDL Company road crossing (Fenton 1891). The discovery never came to anything, but kindled among prospectors a long-standing interest in the headwaters of the Forth. Numerous expeditions were made to the high country from Cradle Mountain south to Mt Ossa and Mt Oakleigh, considered to be rich in minerals. By 1919, various deposits of copper and coal had been located between Barn Bluff and Mt Ossa (Reid 1919). In addition, tin, silver-lead, gold and wolfram were known to be present in the Upper Forth.

A number of copper mining companies were established to develop the known fields, including the Mt Pelion and Barn Bluff companies (N. McCoy, pers. comm). In 1908 a road was built into the area for this purpose (E. Foster, pers. comm), but while a few shafts were sunk close to the Forth River in the Pelion area, the ventures never became commercially viable. It was while building

this road that Paddy Hartnett discovered wolfram (N. McCoy, pers. comm), from which tungsten, used to harden steel, could be produced.

Mining of the Upper Forth wolfram deposits began during World War I (1914-18). Several mines operated in the area for short periods, including the 'Birthday' and 'Lone Pine' mines north of Oakleigh Creek (N. McCoy, pers. comm.). The most successful mine, located about 1.5 km south of Oakleigh Creek, was to function intermittently over 70 years, most actively during the World Wars. It was last operated, to extract wolfram and tin from old tailings, in 1985-86. Operation of the mine involved several landscape changes. Apart from the clearing and earthmoving at the mine site, this included clearing of timber in several other places for fuelwood and feed paddocks for pack horses.

Farming and grazing

The Middlesex Plains venture by the Van Diemen's Land Company did not deter pastoralists later in the 19th century from taking stock for summer grazing to the Borradaile and February Plains, the high country forming the watershed between the Upper Forth and Mersey river systems. Several parcels of land were leased for pastoral purposes (E. Foster, pers. comm.).

It was not until early this century, however, that land was cleared closer to the river for better quality, year round pasture, mainly for cattle. G.H. Bott, E.G. Gisborne and F.A.W. Gisborne selected adjoining blocks south of Borradaile Creek amounting in total to nearly 214 hectares. At least two dwellings were built, including a substantial weatherboard house at the southern end of the blocks which became known as 'Gisborne's Hut' (Figure 2). This was the home for some years around 1910 of John Grigson and his wife. One and possibly two other families lived on other selections. Besides pasture, the blocks were planted with potatoes (E. Foster, pers. comm.).

The Gisborne blocks have since fallen into disuse. Following the granting of title to all

eight blocks to Mrs Shirley Hardwicke, a process completed only in 1984, land clearing has again been undertaken and timber taken from the blocks.

Hunting

The Borradaile and February Plains east of the Upper Forth have been favourite hunting haunts throughout this century and probably in the latter part of the 19th century. A number of shelters were erected on the exposed plains during the 1920s and 1930s (E. Foster, pers. comm.). A modern version of these is 'Basil Steer's Hut', at the northern end of February Plains, named after its current and long-time seasonal occupant, who shoots and snares for skins.

Track and road construction

Inaccessibility to the Upper Forth has always been a major barrier to development: the Forth Gorge was described by surveyor J.E. Calder in 1866 as an 'abominable ravine' (Binks 1980), and the VDL Company track was, from the time of its construction, virtually impassable over much of its length for most of the year. From the 1880s, however, when the West Coast mining boom began, the Upper Forth formed part of a major route from Launceston to the West Coast.

In 1896-97 E.G. Innes led a party of six men to cut a track from Liena on the Mersey River across the Borradaile and February Plains to the headwaters of the Forth near Mt Pelion East and thence to the site of present-day Rosebery via Mt Inglis, Granite Tor and Mt Farrell. Five years later, surveyor Robert Ewart's party cut another track from the Forth Valley at Frog Flat south-west to join the track linking the Derwent Valley with the West Coast (Binks 1980).

Improved accessibility sparked renewed interest in the region's own resource potential, particularly minerals and timber. In 1908, following recently discovered copper fields in the Barn Bluff and Mt Pelion regions, a road was constructed from Lorinna south along the Forth Valley for about 30 km to

Douglas Creek (N. McCoy, pers. comm.). The copper venture was unsuccessful, but the road was to be used by the wolfram mine established not far to the north. About the same time, Sloans Bridge was built spanning the Forth near its junction with Hartnett Rivulet, intended to serve the Barn Bluff copper fields (Reid 1919). The Lemonthyme Road was constructed by the Hydro-Electric Commission in the 1960s for access to the Lemonthyme Power Station.

Electricity generation

In the early 1960s the Hydro-Electric Commission began development of a major new power scheme utilising the waters of the Forth and Mersey river systems. Part of this was construction of the Lemonthyme Power Station, on the Forth River at the head of the newly-created Lake Cethana. The Station, completed in 1969, used water taken by tunnel and penstock from Lake Parangana on the Mersey River.

Nature conservation

In 1922, under the provisions of the Scenery Preservation Act, 1915, a Scenic Reserve was proclaimed in the Cradle Mountain area, taking in about 64 000 hectares mainly to the south of Cradle Mountain (TGG 1922). The eastern boundary of the Reserve north of Mt Ida (near Lake St Clair) was described in the proclamation as 'a north-westerly line (passing over Mt. Pelion East) for a distance of 27 miles or thereabouts'. The boundary of the reserve as described excluded all but the extreme south-west corner of the area under discussion. The site of the wolfram mine was outside the boundary, as was virtually all the current Oakleigh Creek Conservation Area. However, the remoteness of the region at the time made precise definition on the ground an impossibility. The described boundary, when traced on current maps, also excludes most of Lake Dove, which was almost certainly not the intention at the time.

In 1934 the same area was proclaimed an Animal and Bird Sanctuary under the Animals and Birds Protection Act, 1928 (TGG 1934). In June 1936, Sanctuary status was

extended to cover 124 650 hectares (TGG 1936a). The boundary, which was more precisely defined than in earlier proclamations, closely approximated the current National Park boundary. The major exception was in the Upper Forth area: the boundary followed Oakleigh Creek to its junction with the Forth, therefore including all the current Oakleigh Creek Conservation Area. In December of the same year, the same area was declared a Scenic Reserve (TGG 1936b), thus effectively giving full National Park status to the defined area.

In May 1939, about 1300 hectares south of Oakleigh Creek was revoked as Scenic Reserve (TGG 1939a), although in December of the same year it was again included in the Cradle Mountain - Lake St Clair Animal and Bird Sanctuary (TGG 1939b). The reason for this revocation has not been ascertained, although the known wolfram deposits south of Oakleigh Creek are a likely motive. The area maintained its status as a Sanctuary until December 1981, when it was proclaimed the Oakleigh Creek Conservation Area. The eastern half of it was declared State forest in 1983.

The Cradle Mountain region as a whole has long been seen to have great conservation importance. Conservation interests have from time to time expressed interest in the area south of Oakleigh Creek, but the current preoccupation with the remainder of the Upper Forth does not appear to have any precedence. The current interest appears to have stemmed, perhaps entirely, from plans to harvest timber from the area.

Timber Harvesting and Land Clearing

Timber harvesting

James Smith was first to explore the potential of the stands of pine in the Upper Forth and Dove valleys. In the late 1850s he took a small quantity of King Billy pine from the Cradle Valley area. His example was followed in 1868 by Crosby and Raymond, who attempted, with partial success, to float about 200 logs down the length of the Forth River (Fenton 1891).

Large scale exploitation of the area's eucalypt resource was delayed by poor access to the area. In the early 1940s Claude Davis and Ray Parker, of Sheffield, established the Dove Mill near the Forth River south of its junction with the Dove. During its 25 years of operations, the mill took logs from as far afield as the Gisborne blocks south of Borradaile Creek, using steam power for haulage. The mill was burned down in the late 1960s (E. Foster, pers. comm.).

In 1975-76 logging of 20 hectares of Crown Land in the Upper Forth began a new period of harvesting activity. Before the 1983 Management Plan came into operation, further harvesting covered about 165 hectares.

Fuelwood harvesting

The Oakleigh Creek wolfram mine involved extensive clearing near the mine site to obtain fuel for ore treatment. About 50 hectares of land on the ridge to the south-east of the mine was cleared of all timber. The fuelwood was used in the local processing of the ore during its first years (N. McCoy, pers. comm.).

Other land clearing

When the Oakleigh Creek wolfram mine first opened about 1916, transport of the partially

treated ore out of the valley required pack horses in considerable numbers. These were used to carry the ore in stages to Lorinna, from where it was carted to a railhead near Sheffield. Feed paddocks for the pack horses were made by clearing land at the junction of Oakleigh Creek with the Forth River. Cleared paddocks at the Gisborne block (about three kilometres south of Borradaile Creek) were used for second-stage horses. Further clearing was done on the western side of the Forth near its junction with Hartnett Rivulet (where a bridge crossed the river) for feed paddocks for the horses intended for use by the Barn Bluff Copper Mine near Lake McRae, but this mine was never developed (N. McCoy, pers. comm.).

Recent Developments

The State forest within the Lemonthyme area was subject to close examination by the Helsham Inquiry from May 1987 to May 1988 to determine if part or all of the area qualified for World Heritage nomination or contributed to an existing World Heritage Area. The Helsham Inquiry subsequently determined that a large part of State forest in this area qualified for World Heritage nomination. Much of the Lemonthyme area is currently subject to a joint State-Federal Government nomination for World Heritage listing.

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