

RISE AND DECLINE OF PORT DOUGLAS

[By J. W. COLLINSON, F.R.G.S., Aust., Hon Life Member of the Historical Society of Queensland, Inc.]

(Read at the Monthly General Meeting of the Society on 23rd August 1951.)

The founding of a settlement, to be called Cairns, at Trinity Inlet, in the first week of October 1876, was followed by all the initial phases of changing the primitive bush into a habitable town, the clearing of the land and erection of buildings and providing landing facilities on the shore of the Inlet. But the most important and the only factor which was to guarantee any permanence to the settlement was not neglected, and the coastal rampart was prospected for a road, preferably a dray road. Packing by horse while making on the whole a quicker trip, took only a limited load compared to a team. Some success was attained on opening the Thornborough Road, via Kamerunga (the Lower Crossing), and ascending the range by the aid of spurs and sidelings on creeks on the mountain side until the top was reached, and thence to the Middle Crossing (now Kuranda), and on to Groves' Creek to its junction with the Clohesy, over the headwaters of Blackfellow's Creek on to Neil Rosing's (the Upper Crossing). The range was steep and difficult, only horse teams could be used on account of the bends, and loads had to be limited. Although hundreds of tons of goods were transported over the range, and nearly £10,000 was spent on the road by the Government, it was impossible to convey heavy machinery to the field, and at flood time the three crossings of the Barron were impassable, and any suggestion of a better connection to the coast was being eagerly investigated by the people most interested, the mining population of Thornborough.

The first news of any success in finding a better route was contained in a telegram from Cooktown to Brisbane on 15th March 1877. Cooktown had adopted an attitude of ridicule to the founding of Cairns, based on their fears of being ousted from the back country trade. Cairns they knew was nearer to Brisbane and a better port.

On the 26th March the Cairns correspondent to the Brisbane Press mentions the rumour of a new road to White Cliffs. The first definite news of any discovery of fresh access to the sea was the announcement on the 28th May of great excitement at Thornborough, and the departure of Mr. Hodgkinson, the gold warden, to ascertain the practicability of a road. The discovery had been made by Christie Palmerston and W. Little at the end of April. In the official report of 11th June 1877, on the new road down the Mowbray River to Island Point, special mention is made of the great hardships encountered by Palmerston and party searching for the Gap since the previous April. A glance at the map shows how near the dividing range of the eastern and western waters approached the coast at this point, and the Mowbray River offered the only outlet down the steep descent to the coast. The track followed the river valley, with deviations into small creeks and gullies to make the grade, with the one exception of the "Bump," where the road almost spiralled on short turns on a double "S"; where the male passengers by the coach going up were always requested to get out and walk to the top on a goat track. Which reminds the writer of a similar practice on the ascent of the Herberton Range road. Just before the official report was made public, the first move came from Cairns. On Monday, 28th May, R. Chisholm's cutter "Fairy" left Cairns with five passengers, to seek the rumoured port. Twelve miles out a carpenter named Webb fell overboard and was drowned. They anchored for the first night at Double Island. At daylight they ran for Red Cliffs, but were not able to land, then on to White Cliffs, but found no opening. They then went on for ten miles and found the mouth of a river which they named the Morey, with seven to eight feet of water on the bar at high tide, but dry at low water. On Wednesday they made a scouting trip three miles south and found the old camp of Little and Palmerston, known by the letters W.L. and C.P. on a tree. They returned to the river and pulled up it about ten miles and returned; at about five miles up three of the party found tracks of shod horses travelling up and down. They followed the tracks of these horses for some three miles without result. The party then returned to Cairns, and reported the whole anchorage was extremely hazardous.

On 15th June the s.s. "Fitzroy," W. B. Ingham in charge, and with nine passengers on board, left Beardmore and Olive's wharf. At 1 p.m. they passed through the strait separating Double Island from the mainland; at 3 p.m., opposite White Cliffs, they saw some tents there, but did not attempt to land. One passenger on board was Mr. Hawkins, of Smithfield, who was one of the first party on the "Fairy" that had searched for a new port and had named the Morey River after the police magistrate at Cairns. But Palmerston had already named this river the Mowbray on his trip to Island Point. They came to an anchor abreast of the river bar at 5 p.m.; crossed the river bar at midnight and entered the river, a fine stream, 300 yards wide with three to four fathoms a mile up, and arrived at the white settlement of one tent and half-a-score of men, and doubled the population. Next morning a street was marked off on the river bank thirty feet above high water mark, a fine site for a township.

On the 16th at 3 p.m. the "Fitzroy" left to return to Cairns, but took the bar at 1 a.m. on Sunday morning. Soon after struck a coral reef and lost the rudder. A temporary steering apparatus was constructed and a course set for the track of passing steamers. Saw the light of the s.s. "Florence Irving" at 2 a.m. on the way to Cairns, but could not hail her, and then made for shelter under the lee of Low Woody Island. From there stood across to the mainland again, about sixteen miles, and by eight o'clock were under the lee of Island Point, where they found the "Terrigal," a ketch of forty tons, laden with timber and about sixty passengers from Cairns.

On the following morning, the 18th, Mr. Ingham decided to run up the inlet toward the site of the township on the Morey or Mowbray as the river had been differently named. Mr. W. C. Smith, manager of the Bank of New South Wales, and Mr. Morgan, the Crown Lands ranger, two other passengers and the captain from the ketch accompanied them. The "Fitzroy" steamed four miles up, landed some of the passengers, who walked three miles to the township, and returned.

On that day, Monday, Pilot Mylchreest, with C. T. White and other members of the crew of the Customs whaleboat at Cairns, came into the port.

On Tuesday the 19th the "Captain Cook" schooner

entered the harbour. On the same day the A.S.N. steamer "Dugong" arrived from Cairns with seventy passengers, having been chartered by O'Donnell and Pickett, hotel-keepers of Cairns, but anchored a long way off in the roadstead. Some of the passengers were landed and walked to the township on the Morey, but returned to the steamer the following day with an adverse report, and the "Dugong" returned to Cairns. Captain Murray, of the "Dugong," refused Mr. Ingham's request for a tow back to Cairns, but lent Mr. Ingham a bag of coal, to carry on with. Mr. Ingham then steamed the "Fitzroy" to the south side of Island Point. On Wednesday the "Terrigal" anchored there, and at 11 a.m. saw the "Dugong" pass south-bound for Cairns.

About 2 a.m. on Thursday morning Mr. Ingham succeeded in rounding Double Island Point; an attempt to get fuel was curtailed by a falling tide and shoal ground. Next day, Friday, he endeavoured to get out of the reefs, but the fuel was exhausted; eventually the "Fitzroy" was beached with Mr. Munroe and a kanaka in charge. The others walked three miles to the mouth of the Barron, remained there all night, and were picked up by the "Louisa" on her regular trip from Smithfield to Cairns. The shelter at Island Point, that they had run into after leaving Low Woody Islands, was named Terrigal Harbour from the ketch they found there, and the Inlet they explored for five miles, Ingham's Inlet. It seemed fitting to honour Mr. Ingham, who at his own expense had investigated Mourilyan Harbour and the Moresby River, was the first to explore the Lower Barron River and the intricacies of Trinity Inlet; and again on this last visit the newest of new settlements. Very soon there was a street of tents on the Mowbray River, a mile and a half from the sea, as campers came from White Cliffs and miners arrived from Thornborough.

The story then moves from Cairns to Cooktown. And the hero, Captain Daniel Hugh Owen of the s.s. "Corea."

Cooktown business men were prepared to accept Captain Owen's opinion as to a port at Island Point (which had been boo-hoed at Cairns), and led by Mr. Callaghan Walsh chartered the "Corea" for £200, loaded her with building material and stores and sailed south and arrived there on the 30th June. Here they

were met by a party of men who had walked over from the Mowbray when news of the steamer's arrival had reached them. The occasion was celebrated by all in a festive manner, a new settlement was founded, though little was known of the new road or its possibilities. In any case, Cooktown was showing signs of decadence, and the contact with Thornborough was considered worth taking a risk.

During the month of July there was a continuous influx of businessmen from Cooktown. Walsh and Co. had erected a store and wharf, had brought the barge "Maggie Logan" from Cooktown as a lighter to steamers which could not enter the inlet; while Johnston and Severin, timber merchants, opened a branch of their Cooktown business.

One hundred and twenty pounds was collected to open the new road, and in August a public meeting was held to inaugurate the opening of the road to be called Palmerston's Track. At Thornborough the businessmen and mine owners and managers subscribed £200 as a reward to Palmerston and his mate. Teams were then camped at the top of the range waiting for the scrub to be cleared over the "Bump"; meantime goods were being sent up the range to them by pack-horse. It is recorded that the supply of pack-horses and mules was entirely inadequate to meet the needs of Cairns and Port Douglas.

In August a correspondent described the progress of the new settlement, stores and pubs going up in all directions; the town presented all the indications of a new rush.

Early in September the first teams reached Salisbury from Thornborough, and thirty teams were camped at the four-mile, but it was not till the 4th October that the first six teams were loaded and despatched.

The survey of the town into allotments was completed in October by Surveyor Warner. The coastal steamers made Island Point a place of call, anchoring in the roadstead; though the s.s. "Llewellyn" anchored at Low Woody Isles and transhipped passengers and freight to the "Maggie Logan." On the 24th October the first plant and machinery was loaded on to Kennedy's two waggons, together with seven tons of goods for Mr. Buls, mine manager, of Beaconsfield.

In November the Hon. J. R. Dickson, Hon. C. S.

Mein, and John Macrossan, M.L.A., visited the Port, which in future was to be known as Port Douglas, the inlet was named Dickson Inlet. Two thousand pounds was promised for roads; a mail service to Thornborough; and a port of entry. In this month the first births were recorded, to Henry Hansford a boy; and to Costalla, late of Thornborough, a girl. Clifton and Aplin's paddle-steamer "Annie" brought an influx of businessmen from Smithfield; including John Walsh's store and stock. Rutherford and Crees, chemists, of Cairns, arrived in the "Louisa," Mr. John McKinley, storekeeper, was on board, but returned to Cairns. John Hogsflesh, well known on the Palmer, took the first mail to Thornborough on the 12th December. The end of the year saw many other businessmen arrive from Smithfield.

On the opening of a port of entry, Mr. E. R. N. McCarthy was appointed acting sub-collector of Customs; Samuel Denton, tide-waiter. Sergt. W. Pickering became acting clerk of petty sessions.

The principal official appointments early in 1878 was the transfer of Edward Morey as P.M. from Cairns; and later on, James Powers, the C.P.S. at Cairns, to the same office at Port Douglas.

The branch of the Bank of New South Wales at Cairns was closed in September and a branch opened at Port Douglas; the gold escort from Thornborough had previously been diverted to the Port.

In January 1878, John Graham and party, cedar-getters on the Daintree, commenced cutting cedar on the Mossman River. In February a road board was formed; out of eighteen candidates Mr. Callaghan Walsh, Wilson, Purdie, T. Farrell, and D. Henry were elected. A land sale on the 9th April realised £1,552. Before the end of the year 1878 the contractor, W. P. Clarke, completed the erection of the Low Woody lighthouse. Louis Borghero had taken over the mail contract from John Hogsflesh. One of his misadventures was the spearing of six horses near Rifle Creek by the blacks.

In 1879 the Lands Office and also the District Court were transferred from Cairns to Port Douglas and a contract for the erection of a school at Cairns cancelled in favour of Port Douglas.

Meantime the road had received attention at a cost of £1,946/16/7 and a road opened from the Mitchell

across the Granite, but this was diverted to the Springs, an easier route for teams, but increasing the distance from sixty-six to seventy-six miles. In later years the road from the Springs was taken to Granite Creek. When the coach road was opened to Georgetown the route was also through the Springs to Cattle and Leadingham Creek and the Chircan Crossing on the Walsh. This, too, was altered when the tin mines at Herberton were opened up; and it only remained when the railway terminated at Mareeba in 1893 for that centre to become the distributing point for mails, passengers and goods for Georgetown, Herberton and Thornborough, as well as the connection of the roads to Tinaroo, Cairns, and Port Douglas.

The Queensland National Bank opened a branch at Port Douglas, with Mr. Pritchard in charge. The number of pubs in Port Douglas has been variously stated, said to have reached twenty-one in 1879; but on the passing of the Licensed Victuallers' Act of 1879 there were fourteen licensed premises in the town, two at Craiglea (the 4 Mile) and one at the Mowbray (the 7 Mile).

In 1880, the discovery of tin at Herberton gave a marked impetus to the prosperity of Port Douglas, though Cairns benefited to some extent with the opening of Robson's Track and a pack-horse service. It was in this year, too, that Cobb and Co., already running a through service to Georgetown, started a regular service to Herberton and beyond. Murphy and McDonald had started a coach run, but in a few months it was taken over by Cobb and Co.

The first Divisional Board, proclaimed in 1879, was named the Cairns Division, and embraced all the territory from Cape Tribulation to Cape Grafton; westerly by the Daintree River to the Hodgkinson River, and back to the coast on the north bank of the Mulgrave River. The Board to meet at Port Douglas. In January 1880 the first meeting was held at Port Douglas. Cairns was in No. 1 sub-division and was represented by Louis Severin and James Pyne. But to attend the meeting meant a journey by steamer and return, at the very least a loss of three days, and as in a similar case at Cardwell and Ingham an appeal for a new division succeeded. In 1880 Cairns was granted their own Board, and the Douglas Divisional Board proclaimed.

The first members were: D. P. Thomas, Smith, D. Henry, G. L. Rutherford, Gray and Keating.

It was in the same year the sensational discovery of tin at Herberton was made, and brought a wave of prosperity to the Port. At the end of the same year speculators were land-seeking for sugar growing and large areas were taken up at the Mossman.

In 1883, Mrs. Parker, a wealthy Melbourne investor, erected a mill at Brie-Brie on the Mossman River, and commenced sugar-manufacture, but owing to the fall in the price of sugar and discontinuance of recruiting coloured labour the mill closed down.

A new note was struck when Herberton initiated a movement for a railway to the coast, and Port Douglas, Cairns and Geraldton entered the field in competition, each with its own Railway League. The battle is a history in itself, but the honour eventually fell to Cairns. Seven years from its commencement the terminus was reached at Mareeba in 1893, and Port Douglas, in danger of becoming a "ghost town," was thrown entirely on its own resources. All its trade to the interior ceased. This was also the year of the great financial crisis.

Meantime the Divisional Board had made improvements in the town and opened up roads, but as the total population was 630 spread over 780 square miles, with a revenue of only £700 per annum, which included endowment, its activities were somewhat limited.

In 1896 the "tick" or "Texas fever" swept over North Queensland, causing tremendous loss to cattlemen. Along the coast particularly, every dairyman lost up to 80 per cent. of his milkers, and at Port Douglas the disease was specially severe, it being one of the driest seasons for many years.

But 1896 was also the beginning of a new era with the establishment of the Mossman Central Mill. The reward of dogged perseverance came to the pioneers of the district who had held on in spite of losses. The population increased and by the year 1900 had increased to 1,500; the revenue of the Divisional Board doubled; £22,000 had been borrowed from the Government and the mill tram-line connected to deep water at the Port, with a service twice daily to the Mossman. As a result the business centre, Government offices, banks, tramway depot and repair shop, wharf, hos-

pital, and many other activities gave to the Port all the appearance of a thriving town.

I had seen it in 1896 when the Mill was being built, and for the second time in 1900, but on my next contact with the town as editor of the "Port Douglas and Mossman Record" in 1914, the business houses had become only shipping and forwarding agencies, three hotels catered for travellers; one bank, and the hospital remained. The population of the town had dwindled, the whole of the interests were being gradually moved to the precincts of the Mill. The Shire Council Tramway was in the hands of the Government Receiver, only the Government offices, the shipping and the hospital maintained the town. Even at that time special trams were run to important civic functions, balls, election meetings, or the picture show at Lunn's Hall, at the Mossman.

With the opening of the Cook Highway in December 1933, the shipping service was reduced, the hospital had already been moved to the Mossman and Port Douglas was by-passed. The tramway service came into the hands of the Mill, the passenger service was discontinued in December 1935; its usefulness became restricted to the conveyance of sugar from the Mill for shipment, and general goods from the steamers for the Mossman.

To-day the town, established in 1877, is a quiet hamlet, its attractions being its fine hard beach of four miles, on which the writer was borne in a car at seventy miles an hour for a short stretch in 1938; and the Low Woody Isles and the lighthouse.

Fishing and excursion parties and tourists find much to interest them in this one-time hectic spot, which during its early career was crowded with pack-horses, horse teams, coaches, and saddle horses, and all the bustle and excitement associated with the early days of mining in the interior.