

## THE PORT OF ROCKHAMPTON<sup>(1)</sup>

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(Read at a meeting of the Society on June 23, 1955.)

May I assure you, that I do not approach lightly this important subject. I realize that the only true purpose of the historian must be that he reconstruct with meticulous care portion of the past. To do that he must never stray from his documented data, and may employ imagination only to help in piecing together the jig-saw puzzle with which those data present him. When tempted to expand his research he must be cautious lest he stray past his data into the delightful but dangerous maze of personal reminiscence. He may never forget that he works and speaks for an unborn posterity, whom he may misinform only at the cost of his reputation; hence this paper is completely documented.

The first vessel to enter what is now the port of Rockhampton was the schooner "Selina", whose coming was unconventional. She arrived—none knew when—crewless and waterlogged with none to welcome her. We know that she was discovered on October 24, 1848 by whom none knows, fifteen and one-half months after the Colonel Barney party abandoned Gladstone on May 9, 1847, and a little more than seven years before the first white man craft—Archer's cutter "Elida", on September 1, 1855—sailed up the Fitzroy River. What settlement there was then on the Fitzroy River was at Gracemere, five miles inland from what is now Rockhampton, which existed then as only an uninhabited river flat.

"Selina" was launched at Brisbane on May 15, 1847—Queensland's first sea-going craft—and was despatched with a timber cargo for Sydney. After shaking herself clear of her crew she apparently followed the ocean drift southwards to Gabo, thence debouching eastwards towards New Zealand, thence northward to the westerly equatorial current which carried her—as it did many message-bottles thrown

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1. See also, "*The Founding of Rockhampton*," by William Clark, Historical Society of Queensland Journal, Vol. I, No. 6, pp. 327-337.

from troop ships in World War 1 between Brisbane and Gabo—to Keppel Bay and beaches north thereof.

“Elida” loaded wool from the first Gracemere shearing, and sailed from Rockhampton in November 1855 carrying the district’s first exports to Gladstone for transshipment to Sydney. She was followed by the schooner “Albion”, which sailed through the Narrows between Keppel Bay and Port Curtis in the wake made by Flinders’ boats 53 years earlier. Small beginnings, but bigger things were on the way.

In January, 1858, J. A. Macartney, G. and J. Murray and D. Conner arrived at Rockhampton—a name without a town—and this party more than doubled the population. At Gladstone the Government Resident, Sir Maurice O’Connell, sent out prospectors to try and expand his domain, and one of them by-passed Callide’s hidden gold to stumble upon the glittering enigma that was Canoona—twenty-five or so miles north from Rockhampton. By-passing Rockhampton on his return the lucky fossicker carried his tidings to Gladstone, whereupon Sir Maurice passed the news on to Sydney, where it touched off one of the most disastrous gold rushes in Australian history. By July 1858 the situation was quite out of control. All that half-crazed gold seekers knew was that Canoona was near Rockhampton which was on the Fitzroy River.

Meanwhile, Rockhampton and its four inhabitants drowsed beside the Fitzroy, utterly oblivious of the fame that was about to descend on them, or that an argosy of brigs, barques, cutters and even rowing boats was approaching. While Flinders had surveyed much of Keppel Bay in 1802, the river was quite unknown and unmarked, so that ere long every sand-bank in both bays and river had on it some kind of craft and its gold-crazed company. Thus Pirate Point, Satellite Passage, Timandra Bank, and Bronzewing Sand got their names from craft that stranded on them.

The sudden influx of shipping, filled with men whose one idea was to reach Canoona, multiplied Rockhampton’s shipping problems over-night hundred-fold, and precipitated the declaration on October 8, 1858 of Rockhampton as a port of entry, with requisite customs and harbour authorities. Before this, however, Rockhampton’s first jetty had been built—in

front of where the Criterion Hotel now stands—obviously by the Archers to accommodate the small craft carrying supplies to, and wool from Gracemere.

As most of you may know, Canoona was a tantalising duffer, and when the in-coming stream of gold seekers met the out-going stream of disillusioned miners, the former refused to leave their ships which, having extorted a handsome price to carry them north, had to carry them back south for little or nothing. Those who had landed were less fortunately placed, and a canvas town of about 5,000 people sprang up on the flat which is now Rockhampton. Among them were no doubt men who prospected for and rapidly worked out the alluvial gold in the Fitzroy basin. And so 1858 passed to an uneasy end, almost indeed, as if ashamed of itself, as many misguided chasers of “saint-seducing gold” considered that it should.

In 1859 attention was given to marking the river channels, oil drums and nail cans providing buoys, and packing cases were elevated to the dignity of river beacons. Tenders were called in the Government Gazette on January 5, 1861 for Rockhampton’s first public wharf, but no record could be found of any acceptance thereof. On March 25 tenders were called “for the erection of pilot’s cottages at Cape Capricorn.” There being then no lighthouse there, it appears from this that Rockhampton’s first pilot station was at Cape Capricorn. At that time the port limits included Broadsound, so that St. Lawrence was within the Port of Rockhampton. “To obviate conflict of authority”, the port limits were amended on February 5, 1863, to take in Cape Manifold, which was forty-two miles South of the first port limits, and forty-nine miles North of those now used.

Two years before any systematic survey of the river had been made, and before a bucketful of spoil had been removed from its bed, a land sale of sixty half-acre town allotments at the town of Herbert—so-named after Queensland’s first Premier—was held at Rockhampton on May 23, 1863, when about four allotments were purchased. The town of Herbert is now Broadmount, about twenty-nine miles from Fitzroy bridge. On January 20, 1864 the barque “Woodbine” berthed at the town wharf. She came from London,

and was the first vessel of her size to negotiate the unimproved river.

On January 27, 1864, Civil Engineer Plews recommended the building of stone walls "running parallel to the axis of the stream, and raised to mean high-water", which walls had proved their efficacy "in the Clyde and other rivers." Then the Legislative Assembly in Brisbane passed a motion on September 7 "that it be an instruction to the Secretary for Lands and Works to take immediate steps for effectually removing the impediments to navigation at the Upper Flats, Fitzroy River." Civil Engineer Brady reported that building the walls recommended by Plews would be more costly than leaving the river to take its course, and dredging any silage that occurred.

H.M. surveying ship "Pearl" was at work in Keppel Bay during 1864—the first survey since that of Flinders sixty-two years earlier. Then early in 1865, Portmaster Heath made the first systematic survey in the river. His work was at Upper Flats, where the first river dredging was about to commence. Later in the year the twenty-five horse power dredge "Bremner", with a dredging capacity of about fifty tons per hour, began operations there. On February 28, 1886 a lightship under E. Westaway was stationed at Upper Flats, both to mark the cutting and to indicate the available depth of water.

Brady reported in April, 1866, on The Narrows—which are twenty-three statute miles long, with ample water at each end but drying about three feet at low water in the centre. He estimated that the cost of a channel three feet deep at low water and 200 feet wide would be from £15,000 to £20,000. More was to come of this later. Keppel Bay pilot station—by now on Cape Keppel—was connected by telegraph to Rockhampton during 1867, and the Rockhampton-Westwood railway was opened on September 17, 1867.

Although the Rockhampton Municipal Council controlled the wharves and collected wharfage dues, it had no power either to improve river channels or even dredge wharf berths. On the other hand, pastoralists believed that wharfage charges paid by them on their wool was spent on Rockhampton's streets. Later events were to prove that the pastoralists were right.

Engineer for Harbours and Rivers, W. D. Nisbet, reported on May 28, 1875, that a two-mile line of piles to mark the site of the first training wall had been driven. The line was on the south bank, just below the old magazine and windmill at the upstream end of Upper Flats. Thus the training wall was started ten years after river dredging was commenced.

It was recorded on April 25 that Stevedore Powis had introduced a seven-horse power donkey engine—the first to be used at Rockhampton in loading and discharging cargo. The Railway Department moved into port matters in April 1877, when it announced that the plans and section of the Nankin-Herbert (Broadmount) railway line of twenty-two miles were almost completed. The motion for such a line was initiated in the Legislative Assembly on August 17, 1876, on the motion of Mr. Buzacott (Rockhampton). Nobody seems to have asked why a railway should be built to a port that had neither effective entrance nor residents. But the development quickened interest in land sales at Herbert (Broadmount) when twenty-eight town lots were sold on October 23, 1877.

First mention was made on January 5, 1878, of Central Island anchorage, twenty-one miles from town, being used for lightering inward and “topping off” outward bound ships.

The “Rockhampton Bulletin” of October 24, 1877 was scornful of the sale of town lots at Broadmount, recalling that in the previous sale in 1863, the half acre lots which carried an upset price of £8 per acre, were the same lots for which the Government then wanted £100 per acre. Of the fourteen purchasers of the previous day “they probably thought it worth while to throw in a few pounds on the distant chance of some enterprising Government running the railway to Broadmount.”

The first of what came to be popular bay excursions was run by S.S. “Lady Bowen” from Rockhampton to Beachton and Sea Hill on January 1, 1878. She carried 700 excursionists. Ultimately Beachton became the Golden Shore, and for a time sported an hotel, but the opening of the railway to Emu Park sounded its death-knell.

Workmen on the new quarantine station on Mackenzie Island, Broadmount, were stated on February 25, 1878, to be plagued with mosquitoes and sandflies, notwithstanding which, good progress was being made on the main building. The first quarantine station was at Sea Hill.

On May 7, 1878, the Municipal Council took over from G. B. Shaw the collection of wharfage dues. This terminated a custom that had grown up with the port.

By now rumours of McIlwraith's proposed Dalby-Gulf of Carpentaria railway project were in the air, with its condition that spur lines be run to the coast at Rockhampton and Townsville. The westward extension of the Central line from Westwood was already nearing Emerald. But Gladstone folk had other thoughts, and on August 24, 1878, they petitioned that the terminal of such spur line be at Port Curtis, and not Rockhampton. This petition varied the annual efforts of Mr. Norton M.L.A. (Port Curtis) to convince the House "that the works now under construction on the Fitzroy River should be suspended."

On September 29, 1880, Premier McIlwraith moved the second reading of the Railway Companies Preliminary Bill. He revealed that the Bill, if passed, would enable the Government to consider the offer of a London syndicate to build a railway from Dalby or Roma, 800 miles to Parker Point, Gulf of Carpentaria, for a consideration of alternate land blocks of 10,000 acres per mile of railway.

The Railway Companies Preliminary Bill passed its final stages in the House on November 17, 1880, and it was reported on September 7, 1881, that the Government had allocated £25,000 "for execution of works at Port Alma." In less than five weeks (October 28, 1881) the Premier and party visited the site which had sprung over-night from being merely one of the coast's many indentations, to being an important link in a trans-continental railway project. At a banquet to him at Rockhampton two days later McIlwraith twitted his hosts for having left it to him, a stranger, to "discover the magnificent port of Port Alma". He also asked them why they had not, even then, discovered "the grand canal which they possessed in Casuarina Creek". A considerable body of 1955 critical opinion considers

that its distance from Rockhampton detracts considerably from the Premier's seventy-four years'-old estimate of Port Alma, and tortuous Casuarina Creek has long since been sealed off by stone walls at its upper junction with the river. Its last function was to receive the mangled remains of S.S. "Karaweera", which broke her back nearby on July 7, 1902.

The truth is that by far the greater part of Rockhampton trade was carried by small coasting steamers to the town wharves and cargo, from large steamers anchored in the bay, was lightered to town maybe cheaper—even allowing for depreciation of the currency—than it is carried from Port Alma to Rockhampton to-day. Hence, having a deep water port dumped unexpectedly into their laps surprised rather than interested the sturdy burghers of Rockhampton.

On January 21, 1882, Major-General Fielding, director with power of attorney for the Australian Trans-continental Syndicate, Ltd., London, offered to purchase at cost price—when completed—the Port Alma wharf from the Queensland Government, with option of re-purchase up to ten years. The Premier replied, that while the Government would support such a proposal, it was necessary that it be made through a private Bill.

It was reported on March 23, 1882, that the tender of Messrs. Burns and Twigg of £21,823 for erection of Port Alma Wharf had been accepted. On May 17 following a boring test at the site of the new wharf was declared satisfactory.

On August 4, 1882, the Gladstone Progress Association protested against the proposed developments at Port Alma, but the Premier stated on September 14 that the policy of the Government was to get main lines to the best ports, and ". . . . Port Alma was reckoned so good a port by private individuals that they were quite prepared to connect it by rail at their own expense". Answering a question in the House on September 5, the Treasurer (Mr. A. Archer) replied that, without knowing the depth of inundation, it was known that the country behind Port Alma was occasionally covered at high spring tides.

Subject to ratification by Parliament, the Government concluded an agreement with the Australian

Trans-continental Syndicate Ltd., London, which was published on January 3, 1883, to construct the land-grant railway from Dalby to the Gulf of Carpentaria.

The McIlwraith Government's Transcontinental land-grant railway bill was defeated in the Legislative Assembly on July 4, 1883, by twenty-seven votes to seventeen. A suggested railway route from Rockhampton via the south bank of the river, past Central Island anchorage, thence across Casuarina Island to Port Alma, was also discarded.

Port Alma wharf, 500 foot long and sixty-three foot wide was completed and taken over by the Government in September, 1884. It cost £36,869 and was not connected with the shore, a condition which prevailed until it was opened by rail connection twenty-seven years later—June 4, 1911.

After pondering over the great boon that had descended upon them, 1,280 Rockhampton petitioners prayed in June 1889 that Port Alma be connected by rail with Rockhampton, only to be met the following month by 1,485 Rockhampton petitioners who would have none of the unsolicited blessing.

On January 16, 1890, the clam dredge which was built at Rockhampton started dredging in the narrows, and, contrary to common belief, the bottom was found to be of "rotten clay slate beneath a layer of clay, sand and shingle at two feet six inches below water". Owing to the "extremely hard and obstinate nature of the material throughout the Narrows cutting" operations were suspended and the dredge laid up in May, 1891.

On August 8, 1892, the Portmaster "ventured to give his opinion" in regard to a deep water port "for your very important district", of Port Alma. He said that "the total absence of foreshores or dry land on which the necessary buildings could be erected renders this site unsuitable for a commodious business port". But he warmed towards Broadmount, the Middle Channel into which had a depth of twelve feet six inches at low water, but it could be dredged to sixteen feet within a year at a cost of £12,000 "and this appears to be the only difficulty to the adoption of Broadmount as the convenient port for Rockhampton."

Meanwhile, the Rockhampton Chamber of Commerce, discounting the belief that lightning does not



strike twice in the same place, and scenting the danger of another free, deepwater port being wished on Rockhampton, appointed a special committee of its members to investigate thoroughly the potentialities of all known sites for deep water port purposes. The committee held twenty meetings and examined many persons with shipping knowledge. It also inspected Double Head, Broadmount, Emu Park, and Port Alma, and in its report to the Chamber dated October 13, 1893, it unanimously nominated Port Alma.

On October 17, 1895, Mr. Philp (Secretary for Railways) disclosed to the House that it was the intention of the Government, on the coast railway reaching Gladstone, "to run a small steamer with mails and passengers from Gladstone to Broadmount daily". The discovery by the Premier of Port Alma notwithstanding, it would appear that the Government was unaware that the Fitzroy River extended inland past Broadmount. Yet each day coasting steamers made the twenty-nine miles from Broadmount to Rockhampton which the Gladstone-Broadmount ferry could have negotiated with equal facility.

The Nankin-Broadmount line was before the House on September 24, 1895 when the Minister for Railways quoted Chief Engineer of Railways (H. C. Stanley) as saying "there can be little doubt that, viewed as a matter of railway policy, the Broadmount scheme is likely to, prove by far the most satisfactory, both as regards economy of construction and maintenance, distance to travel, prospective traffic, and convenience for working." For himself, the Minister said that "the proposed branch (line) and wharfage accommodation will prove highly remunerative to the Department, as well as beneficial to the public of Central Queensland."

But the important matter of effective access to and from the proposed wharf had not assumed its due importance, and on Engineer G. F. Elliott (Harbours and Rivers) recommending South Channel on October 2, 1895 "which was then considered to be the only practicable approach to Broadmount" the Portmaster discounted this view, stating that to dredge South Channel "to seventeen foot at low water would involve shifting 800,000 yards of mud and sand."

On January 1, the Rockhampton Harbour Board came into existence, and the new board shouldered its task of developing a thirty-two mile tidal river, at the mouth of which successive Governments had started two ports, without asking Rockhampton folk if they wanted either. In truth, those folk at that time had their thoughts centred on the river, which they had prodded successive Governments to deepen from three feet at low water in 1877 to a minimum depth of ten feet in 1897.

On August 3, J. Watson signed a contract for £31,617 to build Broadmount wharf and approaches by March 31, 1898, and on April 13, 1897, C. G. Wilcocks contracted with the Railway Department to build the Nankin-Broadmount railway of 15 miles to be completed by the end of the year. The reason for this concentration of effort was the opening on October 18, 1897 of the coast railway from Brisbane to Gladstone. The contract for deepening the Narrows—started in July 1897—was also marked for completion on January 21, 1898.

One of the first acts of the new Harbour Board was to protest against the unstable Middle Channel being developed as an entrance to Broadmount, but the Government went ahead. Indeed, on July 1, 1898 the Portmaster (Captain Almond) announced that "Broadmount wharf and (Middle) channel, when completed, would make Broadmount one of the finest and most accessible ports in Australia."

The port of Broadmount was opened when the Nankin-Broadmount line was completed on January 1, 1898, and by July 29 the plan to carry mails and passengers from the rail-head at Gladstone to Rockhampton was in full swing. The special, shallow-draught S.S. "Premier" embarked passengers and mails at Gladstone, carried them via the Narrows to Broadmount where they were transferred to a waiting train which carried them to North Rockhampton. Here they were carried by road to the river ferry by which (Alexandra railway bridge being sixteen months from completion) they were carried across the river, and thence by cab to their home or hotel. Just on £100,000 was spent on Broadmount wharf and the railway line thence to Nankin junction, when by merely continuing per

steamship for twenty miles to Rockhampton by river—as coastal ships of increasing draught were doing—passengers and mails could have been carried direct from Gladstone to Rockhampton!

Then began a period when the infant Harbour Board was bombarded with advice, of varying heights and depths of intelligence, on the best method for subjugating and harnessing to human service its untamed, wayward, hydra-headed river. The river at its narrowest was to be bridged at False Point to enable Broadmount's railway to serve isolated Port Alma. The town rocks—from which the town got its name—were to be blown away to let more water into the upper reaches of the river, and so obtain increased ebb tide scour. North Passage—near Broadmount—was to be closed to produce the same happy result. That except when the river was in flood only as much tide could ebb as entered the river, and hence there would be less of both flood and ebb when passages were closed, troubled theorists not at all.

Another school has always itched—and still itches—to cut across the base of Pirate Peninsula; that was estimated fifty-eight years ago to cost £129,078, and would cost almost £500,000 now—merely to straighten and shorten the hoyden river. I invite all of you who travel by air to count the straight rivers—unless within rock walls—between here and Sydney. When playing with hydraulic forces, Nature simply abhors straight rivers. On the other hand, straightening and shortening the river would permit the tide to penetrate farther upstream, to the peril of the town water supply which was then drawn from the lagoons and sub-artesian sands near Gracemere.

On September 11, 1907 a meeting of the Pastoral Employers' Association of Central and Northern Queensland met at Longreach to protest to the Harbour Board for "not providing a permanent entrance into Broadmount, and to request that the Board will immediately open a permanent channel to that deep-water port". In his annual report for 1907, Harbour Board chairman R. S. Archer, stated that, "to meet the demand for a deep water port, and to have such port connected with the railway system with the least possible delay, the Board had applied to the Government

for the Bajool-Port Alma branch line to be constructed”.

An agreement under which the Government would hand over to the Harbour Board Port Alma Wharf, construct the Bajool-Port Alma branch line “with adequate wharf lines and approaches” was adopted by the Harbour Board on March 31, 1908. An express mail-train was to link Port Alma with Gladstone, the then terminal port for the northern mail service.

Following this development a conference between railway and coastal shipping representatives met on April 1, and agreed to a draft arrangement under which “ships which had hitherto lightered their cargo to and from the Bay would berth at Port Alma wharf.”

On May 17, 1908 the Pastoral Employers’ Association met again at Longreach, to switch their demand from Broadmount to Port Alma. It was stated on November 6, that in the nine years from the opening of Broadmount in 1898, a total of 2,372 coastal ships—as distinct from ships using the river—entered Keppel Bay, and of them only 213, or nine per cent., entered Broadmount. The other 91 per cent. anchored in the Bay “just as they did before a penny was spent on Broadmount.”

After twenty-seven years of isolation, Port Alma wharf was connected by the Bajool-Port Alma branch with the main railway line on June 6, 1911. But the wharf’s use by coastal ships was not long sustained, though coastal import trade was superseded by export overseas trade. Thus, in the forty years to 1952, while the average coastal imports decreased by 6,270 tons per annum, the export overseas trade increased by 11,317 tons per annum, but the total average Port Alma trade increased by only 5,047 tons.

So we have seen that, driven to make a forced choice of a deep water port the Harbour Board on its own initiative and knowledge selected from the two ports offering, Port Alma, whereupon the Government developed Broadmount. Acceding to the Government’s decision the Harbour Board selected South Channel as the entrance to Broadmount and the river, but the Government developed the unstable Middle Channel. Then when the coast railway reached Rockhampton on

December 19, 1904 the Government tossed unwanted Broadmount into the Board's lap. Broadmount had been in use for only seven years, and with its abandonment the £100,000 or so spent on it went down the drain—along with quite a few official reputations.

The history of Rockhampton's port development would be incomplete without reference to sea-borne trade, without which no port may survive. In the ten years to 1907 the annual average of bales of wool carried by ship from Rockhampton town wharves was 57,420, but in the five years to 1952—or forty-five years later—the wool exported from Rockhampton by ship was practically nil. Nor was this a one-way loss. The annual average inward general cargo decreased from 57,420 tons in the ten years to 1912 to an average of 31,288 tons in the five years to 1952. This decrease was forty-six per cent., and that despite an increased population in the Harbour Board area of 40 per cent. in the thirty-six years between 1911 and 1947.

Another important fact is that two-thirds of the total 26,445,600 tons of spoil removed from the Fitzroy river bed, and seventy-one per cent. of the 1,564,330 tons of stone deposited in training walls to 1945, were so removed and so deposited prior to 1915—or thirty years earlier. That the planned development of the river was sound, and such development was well carried into effect is revealed by the fact that river depths below low water had not decreased in the thirty-seven years of sporadic maintenance-dredging from 1915 to 1952. Moreover, in the fifty-six years to 1952 the percentage of total Rockhampton cargo carried per river to town wharves was higher at the end, than at the beginning, of that period.

From these facts it is clear that the Fitzroy is a noble river that, contrary to common belief, does not differ from any other river that responds to development. It is equally clear that, for forty years no serious, sustained effort has been made so to develop it.

During the past few years experiments, at professorial level, have been—and are being—carried out to ascertain the hydraulic performances of the Fitzroy river at its mouth. The intention is to determine if there is within the river mouth a suitable site for a

deep water port, with appropriate access through a channel that can be developed to/and maintained in a condition of stability. The modern practice of making a facsimile model of relative parts of the river mouth has been followed, and such model is, I believe, on view in Cairncross Dock.

The moral to be drawn from this range of facts over upwards of three-quarters of a century I leave you to assess for yourselves. Many of them impinge on present Governmental policy, which is outside the scope of this paper.



