Chapter 13: Good and Bad Times

A thriving sawmilling industry existed at two centres around the bay by 1900. The steam-driven mill continued at Waterhole Cove until 1868. Then the industry faltered until 1884, when large sawmills were established by the Catamaran River and at Leprena on the western side of the northern bay. By 1900 the population living there exceeded 100 at each centre. It was around the turn of the century that coal mining also offered employment, and an active industrial period followed for a few years. The seams of coal proved limited or uneconomic. As trees were felled, their distance from the sawmill increased. This required timber rail tramways establishing a network radiating out from an area and moved on when that area was harvested. The same applied to transporting coal.

By 1939 a complex network radiated from harbour-based centres at Catamaran, Leprena and Cockle Creek. Traces of these lines survive today in regrowth forests. One moss-covered segment runs by the shore on the north-eastern peninsula in the area of the French activities in 1792.

The timber industry is necessarily situated in forests, so bushfires prove a recurring hazard. The Catamaran mill was destroyed in a 1914 bushfire, coinciding with the abandonment of the coal mine there. The spasmodic and transitory nature of frontier employment was again demonstrated at Recherche Bay when the community of around 100 people, supporting a school and a store, faced sudden unemployment. Today the media feature factory closures and speculate about the future employment of the urban employees. The history of much of rural Australia also has been a boom and bust story of employment, as rural industries prosper then fold. Recherche Bay is a classic example. On a smaller scale than urban plant closures, the impact upon the families dependant upon a timber mill or colliery was no less drastic.

Some people moved away to seek employment, a solution easily but drastically met in 1939 with the outbreak of war. Others chose to remain as self-sufficient food producers. The trade-off was the fresh air, scenery and freedom. The soil suited vegetables and small market gardens sustained a few people, with cabbage growing a feature. Flower gardens remain prominent in memories, indicating that, even in stressful situations, people have values beyond economic survival. In the meantime garden produce, hunting and the resources of the harbour sustained those who remained behind awaiting the next outbreak of industrial activity.
Further north, the Leprena sawmill complex continued to expand until 1939, when that enterprise also closed. Another 100 or so people who had congregated there faced a similar choice of whether to leave or subsist. At its peak, the mill supplied workers with bread; the bakery oven survives as a ruin amidst forest.

During the 1920s the Leprena sawmill produced up to 50,000 super feet per week. The logs arrived on trollies that ran on the wooden tramlines. All the logs were cut from a selected area and within a practical haulage radius. When that area was cleared of suitable trees, the tramlines were extended to exploit a new forested sector. In laying down the rails it was essential to consider the gradient that the steam engine hauling the logs could negotiate. As the mill needed to keep working, the axemen were assigned a daily number of wagon-loads of saw logs. Lighters transported the sawn timber to Bennetts Point, where it was loaded onto a ship. The extensive wharf at Leprena survives today as hundreds of timber decking planks in the mud and substantial posts.

Parry Kostoglou made an exhaustive archaeological survey of the remains of the Recherche Bay timber industry, which effectively ended in 1939 with the closure of the Leprena sawmill. Smaller operations cut out remaining stands of old growth trees and regrowth timber during the 1930s and 1940s. Since then, the forest has regrown, so that today the French explorers would find the view in some directions not unlike the romantic scenery which inspired them.
Leprena timber mill site.

The Leprena timber mill wharf in 2006, last used around 1940. Photograph by John Mulvaney.

Kostoglou’s research indicates that seven large sawmill enterprises operated sporadically at Recherche Bay between 1884 and 1952, while perhaps six small sawmills intermittently exploited the bay’s resources between 1897 and 1957. Significantly, if the development of a systematic ecotourism industry was contemplated, the surviving remains are extensive. Omitting the many northern identified places on the Lune River and Southport Lagoon, the number of archaeological sites identified by Kostoglou between the D’Entrecasteaux River area and Cockle Creek is 36. These include mill sites, sawdust heaps, discarded machinery, tramways, wharves and house areas. The tidal and waterlogged zone around Leprena has preserved considerable areas of tramway and the traces of the wharf extend for 300 metres. This complex represents an industrial heritage worth preserving for potential ecotourism that also stresses archaeology. Kostoglou’s perceptive consultancy report merits publication, with its memorable photographic documentation. It demonstrates the rapidity of environmental change in a wet, forested environment.
Coal Mining

The coal industry was subject to comparable fluctuating fortunes. Presumably, early timber getters for the Catamaran mill must have seen coal exposed at the surface from uprooted trees. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the first coal mining attempts were in that area around 1900. Prospects were judged sufficient in 1902 to attract the Minister of Mines and the Government Geologist, W. H. Twelvetrees, on a tour of inspection. They also visited the Glen colliery, south of Leprena, where coal was found in 1899. On this latter prospect, Twelvetrees was non-committal in his report, observing ‘nothing much can be said beyond that coal seams undoubtedly exist’. And nothing much did eventuate there.

Twelvetrees recommended boring at some locations in the Mesozoic sandstone on the prospective Catamaran and Glen fields. His map shows that an extensive timber tramway already linked the mine with Catamaran River mouth. This tramway was sufficiently stable to bear the weight of 12-ton logs, so he presumably thought that it might also serve the coal industry.

A sample of coal collected by Twelvetrees from the existing six-metre shaft proved capable of powering the steamer upon which he sailed. Significantly, however, the shaft had to be baled out and water level was a constant problem. Twelvetrees noted another limiting factor due to water was that the coal tended
to be friable (‘to make slack’) and break up into small pieces, which could choke a furnace. This placed severe limitations on saleability. Following this visit, the Catamaran Coal Mining Company produced coal until 1906, when its capital ran out.6 Undercapitalisation was a permanent feature of the various company attempts to mine.

Between 1907 and 1921 abortive and costly attempts were made to mine the coal at Catamaran, boosted by a cursory but grandiose report in 1912 which predicted over two million tons of coal from the 317 acre lease. A wharf and large coal bins were constructed, only to be destroyed later by fire, and over two kilometres of steel tramway was laid down along the former wooden tramway’s route. The scheme’s finances collapsed. When the tunnel collapsed a later project failed.

Work commenced in 1914 to sink a 40 metre deep shaft to access a three metre thick coal seam. Funding ran out as usual, and that shaft entrance is visible today over a kilometre north-west of the Catamaran bridge. Indeed, the entire coal mining area, now largely revegetated, contains many hidden hazards for unwary bush walkers.

Base of coal storage bin, Evoralls Point.

Concrete base of the coal bin and loader at Evoralls Point. Photograph by John Mulvaney, 2006.

That new main shaft was pumped out in 1923 when mining recommenced and major works became possible in 1925 through new investment. A narrow gauge tramline over three kilometres long was constructed to the deep water at Evoralls Point, where facilities for storage of 1,200 tons and rapid loading were provided.
The *James Craig* was purchased for use as a coal hulk, to be towed to Hobart when filled. Substantial concrete foundations on the high land at Evoralls Point, surviving today, indicate where the coal was conveyed down to sea level. They are overgrown with trees and understorey, as are the traces of the tramway. 75 years sufficed to convert a very visible industrial complex to archaeological remnants.

Overturned tram engine near Evoralls Point.

Overturned tram engine on tramway to Evoralls Point coal bin. Photograph by John Mulvaney, 2006.

This time production appeared to justify the expenditure, when 9,950 tons of coal were produced during 1926 and output during 1927 was on course for greater tonnage. However this mine was not meant to be an easy investment. At Christmas in 1926, a creek flooded the mine, adding to operating costs. Then the main shaft met a fault and the coal seam was lost, requiring expensive tunneling. This was followed by a union dispute on Hobart’s waterfront. When the mine company refused to pay the unloading rates demanded, the mine shut down. Reopening in 1928, it closed two years later when the company became bankrupt.

The seventh company to try its luck on the coalfield was formed in 1931. It abandoned the previous ship loading plant and transferred operations to a small wharf constructed at Waterhole Cove. A new mine location also was chosen. Despite the annual production of some 10,000 tons, misfortune struck when the company’s tunnel also met a fault. This mine finally stopped production in 1939, the year in which the Leprena sawmill closed. Catamaran resumed its life as a
ghost town, a future archaeological prospect and a symbol of undercapitalised ambition.

James Craig

The Catamaran Coal Mining Company purchased the *James Craig* in late 1925 and towed the hulk to Recherche Bay to serve as a bunker for the coal brought to the wharf. Within two years the vessel was found to be unsuitable for this function, so she was towed up to Coal Pit Bay and anchored near the French anchorage of 1792.

*James Craig (then the Clan Macleod), New York harbour 1890.*

The *James Craig*, then named the *Clan Macleod,* New York, 1890. Sydney Heritage Fleet.

*James Craig* was built at Sutherland in 1873 as the *Clan Macleod.* Launched a year later, this square-rigger iron barque is a heritage item today, a rare survivor of the iron ships of the Clipper era. The nine decades that separated her construction from that of the *Recherche* reflect the immense technological progress within that period, even though the design harnessed wind power.⁷

The ship was constructed of wrought iron plates riveted on to iron frames and stringers. While her mizzenmast was pine, the two mainmasts and bowsprit were of iron; the tallest reached 35 metres. The interior of the iron plates was
covered with cement as protection. Almost 55 metres long, the vessel’s beam was nine metres and its hold was 5.5 metres deep. Access to the hold was gained through three hatches.

During the first quarter century, Clan Macleod sailed the world’s trade routes carrying coal or general cargo. Her first voyage to Australia in 1879 carried British general cargo to Brisbane. As the years passed competition increased from coal driven steamships, which were faster and more reliable timewise.

An Auckland merchant and ship owner, J. J. Craig, bought the vessel in 1899, but he only renamed it after his son, James Craig, in 1905. Her first voyage was to take Australian Newcastle coal to Auckland. She made 34 trans-Tasman voyages until 1911, when she was purchased by the British New Guinea Development Company, and converted into a storage hulk in Port Moresby harbour.

James Craig submerged, 1960s, Recherche Bay.

The James Craig hulk resting in Recherche Bay in the 1960s, before its rescue during the early 1970s. Sydney Heritage Fleet.

James Craig regained some standing because of World War 1 shipping shortage, when she was refitted and rerigged. A normal trading life seemed likely when she was purchased in 1918 by Henry Jones and Company, of IXL food. Unfortunately, she suffered damage en route to Sydney and was towed to port. A bad voyage to New Zealand followed. Then she was towed to Recherche Bay to await cargo, but none came. So she lay there at anchor. Eventually sold to the Catamaran Coal Mining Company and stripped down to her hull, her life as a coal bunker proved short. The derelict vessel was towed up the harbour and abandoned. Her second-last misfortune was to break her cable and drift. Then came disaster. As she was a hazard to other ships an enterprising fisherman blew a hole in her stern. She settled on the sandy and muddy bottom which
d’Entrecasteaux had once judged excellent for holding the anchor. The stern was in five metres of water, while the prow stood high above the water. Sheltered in the harbour and its hull preserved below the seabed, *James Craig* survived there for nearly 40 years.

The hulk suffered senseless indignities during those forgotten decades. Vandals blew holes with gelignite in over a dozen places and an arsonist destroyed the decking; the above water iron plates rusted into a maze of holes. Recherche Bay slumbered as a vacation fishing harbour and on a favoured walking track south from Cockle Creek. This was the same path worn by generations of Aboriginal Tasmanians and followed by Labillardière’s party to the south coast.

A Sydney group of historic ship lovers knew of the *James Craig* and feared that she might be refloated and taken to the San Francisco Maritime Museum. This was a time when modern technology offered a challenge to heritage ship lovers and maritime archaeologists to investigate or refloat sunken wrecks. The world looked on in wonderment when, in 1970, television screens showed Isambard Brunel’s leviathan, the wrought iron *Great Britain* brilliantly rescued and refloated in the Falkland Islands. Viewers saw it being towed up the river from Avonmouth to the Bristol dry dock in which she had been built 130 years earlier.

Australian waters around 1970 also provided exciting discoveries. First came the retrieval of James Cook’s *Endeavour* cannons from the Barrier Reef. Off Western Australia, Dutch shipwrecks were located and excavated beneath the sea. The first ship was *Vergulde Draeck* in 1972 and the *Batavia* followed.

It was March 1972 when *James Craig*’s challenge was accepted by a group of Sydney and Tasmanian volunteers who patched holes and made a sandbag coffer dam near the stern to negate the three metre wide hole blasted in the stern. The long task of pumping out the water from this leaky hull commenced.

A salvage team arrived in October 1972 and the ship gradually started to rise from the natural moorings in which she was embedded. By May 1973 the hull was in a sufficiently repaired condition to stand the strains of towing. The tug *Sirius Cove* nudged the ship out of her Recherche Bay homeport and towed it to Hobart.

Funding restoration and a place where she might be permanently berthed proved to be difficult and changing problems over many years. Eventually *James Craig* was towed to Sydney. The decision by the Sydney Heritage Fleet organisation to totally restore the vessel so that it was capable of sailing with passengers posed problems. How authentic? Compromises were necessary without changing the basic appearance, using some excellent historic photographs of the vessel in her heyday. Mild steel substituted for wrought iron for those plates that required replacement; to meet contemporary regulations engines, shafts and
propellers were fitted. This seems a practical solution to endow a rusty hull with
deeding, masts and people, but ‘authenticity’ is questionable.

The 1873 owner-financier of *Clan Macleod* would be intrigued, however, to learn
that the restoration of his craft cost 12.5 million dollars. It is a reflection on the
preconceptions or bias of Australian society that material objects — houses,
ships, city landmarks — readily attract supporters, defenders and fund raisers.
The preservation of the heritage values of the cultural landscape at Recherche
Bay are more intangible — symbolic friendly racial contact, descriptions of lost
Aboriginal lifeways, a landscape symbolic of the first European experience and
their philosophical preconceptions, archaeological sites hidden within forests
— but are they any less important or worth funding because they are more
elusive and thought-provoking?

**ENDNOTES**

1 In an unpublished consultant report Parry Kostoglou produced an excellent study of historic timber
getting between Cockle Creek and Lune River (1993), which included clear maps of the tramways.
Whitham (1983) did the same for the Catamaran Colliery. Bruce Poulson’s short history of Recherche
Bay contains excellent data on social life of residents around the bay.
2 Dunbar in Gee and Fenton (eds), *The South West Book*, 1978: 34.
3 Kostoglou, ‘Historic timber-getting’, 1993. This unpublished archaeological report contains a wealth
of historical and contemporary images, which show the extent of surviving remains.
4 On coal mining, see Whitham, *Papers and Proceedings Tasmanian Historical Research Association* 30
(1983).
6 This, and the following information are based upon Twelvetrees, 1902 and Whitham, 1983.
7 The following account of the *James Craig* draws upon Toghill, 1978 *The James Craig*, and Richards,