

CEDAR IN THE GERRINGONG DISTRICT

BACKGROUND

As soon as the Colony of New South Wales was established in 1788, there was a need for good timber to build houses, boats, furniture, etc. Most of the trees around Port Jackson were unsuitable, so it was not long before the governors were sending expeditions up the Hawkesbury and Hunter Rivers where there was plenty of cedar – the ideal timber for these purposes. Red cedar (*Toona australis*) was especially prized for its natural beauty, its resistance to insect attack, its ease of working and its durability. It is a tall deciduous tree growing to 55m high and up to 3m in diameter. The first export of cedar from NSW was to India, aboard the *Experiment*, as early as 1795. By 1803, free settlers had a roaring trade transporting the cedar from the Hawkesbury and South Coast back to Port Jackson; so much so, that the Government had to declare the Crown's ownership of all timber in the Colony, and started to regulate and license its harvesting.

CEDAR IN THE ILLAWARRA & SHOALHAVEN

As early as 1805, cedar had been found in the Illawarra (not yet an authorised cedar-cutting area) and in the Shoalhaven, which was an authorised area. The tight regulations on the Shoalhaven timber encouraged illegal cutting of cedar on the South Coast, to the point where it was banned in the Shoalhaven in 1814 and in the Illawarra in 1823. Government Surveyor, George Evans, hinted that all around the area of Five Islands (including Gerringong) there was illegal cedar cutting as early as 1812. The only legal way to cut cedar was to purchase the land it was on, or to have the governor grant a licence to cut it on Crown Lands. Because of the terrain, the only viable way to get cut cedar from here to Sydney, initially, was by water. In the Shoalhaven, Alexander Berry had Australia's first canal dug, in 1822, primarily to export cedar from his properties around Nowra.

GERRINGONG & DISTRICT

Cedar was the first industry in the Gerringong area. Michael Hindmarsh and wife Cecelia arrived in 1827 to establish their 640-acre property, Alne Bank, as the first European settlers in the area. By 1828, they were employing five convict labourers specifically to fell the cedar on their property, estimated by them to be 60 000 feet of timber. For three years, he probably sold his cedar to Thomas Hyndes, at present-day Toolijooa, or to Alexander Berry to transport it to Sydney on their own ships. At one shilling a foot, cedar was a lucrative business, and, in 1831, the Hindmarshes were able not only to buy their own boat, *The General Bourke*, to transport cedar from what would become Boat Harbour, but also to buy more cedar country between Alne Bank and Saddleback. Two years later, they had thirteen convicts cutting cedar, and had virtually given up farming to concentrate on cedar cutting, until (by the mid 1840's) nearly all the cedar had been removed.

FELLING, CUTTING & TRANSPORTING

Before 1833, there is no record of the use of bullock wagons to transport cedar logs – a common practice in more open and flatter country. In the Gerringong area, trees were felled with axes and rolled into a gully to be cut into 3-4 metre long logs on site; then they were cut into flitches (planks) by rolling them over saw pits or onto platforms. Long two-handled saws were then used, with one

man (the top dog) pulling up on the saw, and his partner (the underdog) pulling down. A plumb bob (weight on a string) was used to mark even, vertical lines for cutting consistent widths. It was very dirty and dangerous work, with many deaths and injuries from falling trees, saw cuts, and the ingestion of sawdust. Flitches were hauled on sleds by horses along narrow tracks to Boat Harbour, just south of the Gerringong township. The last cedar left Alne Bank in 1847, after two decades of logging.

TODAY

170 years later, there are very few old cedar stands left in the area, but, on Curry's Mountain and in Foxground, cedar is starting to come back naturally in the new-growth rainforests. There is also a stand of it preserved in Minnamurra Rainforest.

[In the GDHS Museum, examples of cedar can be seen in the meeting room, together with photographs of sawyers, portraits of Michael and Cecelia Hindmarsh, and a model of sawyers working in a pit].

REFERENCES

- Jewell, Kevin, "Cedar", Parts 1-3 in *Gerringong-Gerroa Village Whispers*, Nov. 2011 – Feb. 2012
- Hamblen, Sandra, "Cedar Industry" (notes for talks to Kings School Pupils, 22-23 Feb. 2012)
- Cronin, Leonard, *Key Guide to Australian Trees*, 1988, Reed Books, Frenchs Forest

Tony Butz (2013, revised and expanded, 2016)