

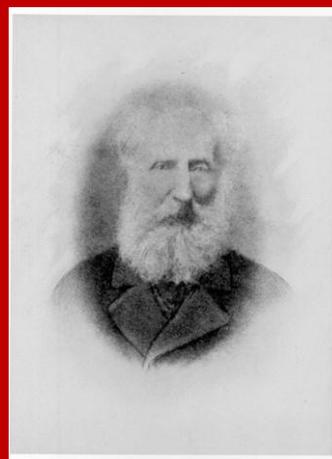
HISTORY IN THE SHADOW OF THE MOUNTAINS

A journey through the history of the Sapphire Coast

Part 4 – Squatters & Selectors



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Other squatters from Monaro up on the tableland soon penetrated the Towamba and Bega valleys using traditional Aboriginal travel routes, such as the Bundian Way, which runs parallel to what is now the border with Victoria. They were led along the Bundian Way by Aboriginal guides.

From 1836, after much political debate and pressure, squatters could legally occupy their runs, paying £10 per year for the grazing rights, under the *Crown Lands Occupation Act*.

In 1837 Tarlinton officially obtained one of the new squatter licences for 'Bredbatoura' and in 1838 was granted a grazing licence, legitimising his occupation. He made his residence at 'Bredbatoura'.

During this time others also settled including Alexander Imlay who was granted a squatting licence for Cobargo. Other squatters from the Braidwood district followed the same route as Tarlinton into the Bega Valley. These included Henry Badgery, John Campbell, Bill Gerard and Thomas Cowper. It was not long before the richest and most accessible lands along the river flats and valleys were occupied.

In 1834 Governor Bourke visited the region and in a dispatch to the Home Office in the United Kingdom, described the Twofold Bay district:

"Already the flocks and herds of the colonists spread themselves over a large portion of this southern country.... The excellence of the pastures in the part of the colony I am describing has induced graziers to resort to it; and much of the fine wool, which is exported to England, is taken from sheep depastured on vacant Crown Land beyond the limits assigned for the location of settlers."



Peter Imlay

Following the Governor's visit, the Imlay brothers arrived – Alexander Imlay was in the Governor's party. They acquired over 65,000 acres of squatters' runs and began permanent settlement of the region at Biggah (Bega) with their employees, including some assigned convicts.

Interestingly, all three Imlay brothers were military surgeons. Peter and George Imlay set up whaling stations at two sites in Twofold Bay – one at Snug Cove and a second on the southern shore on the beach near the present site of Edrom Lodge at East Boyd. Aboriginal whalers manned the latter station. The story of whaling in the region is described in the previous chapter (Part 3 of this series).

Peter Imlay had two ships carpenters build a house by the river between the current sites of Candelo and Kameruka and began breeding horses, sheep and cattle. In 1834 he received support from Governor Bourke for his plans to trade in cattle and salted provisions between Twofold Bay and Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania). Alexander Imlay had intended to introduce steam navigation and develop trade in wool from the Minarro (Monaro) district. However, bushfires and drought in the summer of 1839-40 almost ruined them and they borrowed from bankers, the Walker brothers in Sydney. George Imlay, having diagnosed himself with an incurable disease, took his life at what is now called Dr George Mountain between Bega and Tanja.

The severe economic depression of the 1840s finally ruined the Imlay enterprise and the Walker brothers took over the Kameruka property and eventually sold the runs to the Twofold Bay Pastoral Association.

George and Alexander Imlay were left with four runs totalling 37,000 acres (15,000 ha) around Bega, 'Tarraganda', and Cobargo. Peter Imlay purchased these runs in 1847 after the deaths of his two brothers.

Twofold Bay Pastoral Association

In 1852 a consortium of seven prominent businessmen formed the Twofold Bay Pastoral Association and acquired some 400,000 acres (161,876 ha) of grazing leases on the south coast and Monaro. 'Kameruka', was the head station. Threatened by the land reforms in the Crown Lands Acts bills they bought as much land as possible in their own names and disbanded the Association in 1860. One of the seven was Robert Tooth, whose family established the Kent Brewery on its original site on the Parramatta Road, Sydney – giving eastern Australia the now famous 'Tooth's K.B.' beer.

In December 1848 a ship, the *Bermondsey*, disembarked immigrants at Twofold Bay to work for the Association at 'Kameruka' and 'Tarraganda'. Another ship, the *Caesar* brought German migrants from Hamburg to Twofold Bay in March 1855, also to work for 'Kameruka'. Many of these families are still landowners today.

Squatters and Australian History

'Squatting' was originally a derogatory term for persons occupying vacant land without purchase or lease. From the mid-1820s the occupation of Crown land without legal title became more widespread and often by people from the upper echelons of colonial society. As the wool trade boomed with export to England, the occupation of pastoral land for raising cattle and sheep increasingly became a more lucrative enterprise. Squatting had become so widespread that by the mid-1830s New South Wales Government policy shifted, under considerable political pressure, from opposition to regulation and control. The term squatter then became 'respectable' applying to the occupiers of Crown land under a lease or licence.

The term soon became associated with people of elevated socio-economic status and entrepreneurial attitude. By 1840 squatters were amongst the wealthiest people in the colony of New South Wales and, later on, even the subject of prominent Australian painters (see picture below).



A famous Australian painting called 'The Squatter's Daughter' – by George Lambert in 1930s (Gwendoline Ryrie from Micalago Station on the Monaro)

Settling the Land

The *Crown Lands Acts 1861* (NSW) were introduced by Premier John Robertson to reform the system of settling and holding Crown land. The Acts enabled unsurveyed land in certain unsettled areas to be selected and bought. It allowed 40 to 320 acre lots to be sold for £1 per acre on a deposit of five shillings per acre, the balance to be paid within three years. At the end of the three years, there was an option to treat the balance as an indefinite interest-free loan, as long as five percent interest was paid each year. The landowners, called 'selectors', were required to live on their land for three years and to make improvements worth £1 per acre. This system created two classes of landowners - selectors and leaseholders.

The land selection process under the Crown Lands Acts was rather chaotic throughout the colony. Existing lessees used a range of tactics, including 'dummy' nominees (such as using the names of unborn children and other tricks) to gain land selections. Widespread abuses led to a Royal Commission in 1883. The Bega District however was regarded as one of the few successful areas where the Acts had facilitated orderly settlement of land, despite the consolidation of lots to make larger holdings of as much as 500 acres.

The Crown Land Acts are considered to have contributed to the successful development of the dairy industry in the Bega Valley and the creation of a sense of community based on independent farmers. The success of the dairy farms along the Bega River flats and in the Tantawangalo, Wolumla and Candelo areas was noted in 1871 in the *Town and Country Journal*.



Blanchard's Dairy, a typical 19th century dairy farm in the Cobargo area (note the ringbarked trees in the background – removal of trees encouraged pasture growth).

Bega's population trebled between 1861 and 1881 and it became a municipality. During the 1880s the district is described as being one of the wealthiest in the colony.

Bega farmers were able to ship their produce of cereal, maize, potatoes, livestock, dairy and pork products to Sydney, Melbourne and Hobart from the Tathra wharf. The wharf was built in 1861-62 from funds donated by farmers and the Illawarra Steam Navigation Company. The restored heritage listed Tathra Wharf is the only coastal steamer wharf remaining in NSW. Others have been destroyed by storms and/or been dismantled.

The excellent maize grown on the Bega River flats, particularly at Jellat Jellat, was the subject of reporting in the rural press in the 1870s. It remains a major crop in this district.



The Bega Co-op in early 20th century

The Bega Creamery Co-operative was established in 1899 to serve as a central production factory for the dairy farms in the region. Initially it produced butter and milk which was sold around the country. The co-operative now produces 'Bega Cheese'. You can visit the historic building at the Bega Cheese Visitor Centre in north Bega. It is signposted at the northern end of the bridge.

Wattle bark - an early cash crop

When Europeans first came to the far south coast in the 1820s and 1830s they discovered that the bark of the local Black Wattle (*Acacia mearnsii*) had high tannin content. This is used to tan hides. The bark from this area was highly valued because of the quality leather it produced. The tannin was a vital economic resource in the 19th century because society depended on harness and saddle leather for use in transportation and farm production.



In 1833, three hogsheads (a barrel of about 250 litres) of wattle bark liquor were exported to London from the port of Eden. By the 1860s wattle bark liquor was being exported from Eden, Merimbula, Tathra and Bermagui. Newspaper reports of the time state that bags of chopped bark were stored at the wharves waiting to be shipped. In 1868 a bushfire overran the wharf storage area at Bermagui and bags of bark were burned along with storage sheds and other goods for export.



Wattle bark mill at Eden