

## Chapter 12: Lady Jane at Recherche Bay

Lady Jane Franklin was one of Australia's most enterprising wives of colonial governors. She was energetic, incurably inquisitive and had faith in improving people through industry and education. In 1838 she purchased 1280 acres of virgin forestland on the western bank of the Huon River, naming it Huon Fernlands (Franklin today). Her vision was to convert it into a settlement of free tenant farmers who would strive to purchase the land. Sea and river transport were essential to supply the settlers, so she arranged for a boat to be constructed for £300. It was built at Port Davey from Huon pine. Named *Huon Pine*, it was completed in 1839.

Late in 1838, the Franklins hosted a visit from the ornithologist John Gould and his artist wife. Captain King, the superintendent of government vessels, wanted to assess Huon pine resources, so Lady Jane seized the opportunity to accompany him to inspect her *Huon Pine* at Port Davey. Joining the party on the government schooner were six passengers, including Lady Jane, John Gould and Ronald Campbell Gunn, public servant, advisor to the governor and a botanist of note. Five accompanying servants ensured they spent a pleasant voyage. To guide the vessel, Bruce, the Recherche Bay pilot, was recommended but they preferred an elderly retired pilot, Lucas.<sup>1</sup>

Bad weather drove them to shelter in Recherche Bay for about one week. Although Lady Jane suffered from toothache, even the bad weather did not prevent her from exploring. First, she was rowed to the D'Entrecasteaux River. She then turned her attention to the French visit and the garden. Lucas, the pilot, 'knew nothing of the garden,' but he remembered two trees fallen onto the beach, to which inscribed copper plates had been nailed. When he saw them years before an inscription still survived. They followed a track through the bush made by whalers, then walked along the sandy beach until they reached the trees. The inscription had disappeared, but rusty nails which had fixed the notice attracted Lady Jane's interest, so she souvenired one of them and one of 'two circular knobs' carved near the base of the trunk. Could this have been a remnant of the carving of Wraeggowraper, referred to by Robinson?<sup>2</sup> At least one inscription left by the French, according to the log of *l'Espérance*, was the latitude and longitude.<sup>3</sup>

They probably were close to Delahaye's garden at this time. Some days later when they again searched for the garden, they were in the wrong area, evidently too far north, so they failed to locate it, although they may have found another

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French attempt at gardening.<sup>4</sup> The only source for her knowledge of the garden must have been Labillardière. Gunn made a further unsuccessful search.

Lady Jane's diary contains clues to the busy waters of D'Entrecasteaux Channel and of human activities within the bay. During those few days she mentions a whaleboat, a barque from England and two vessels en route to Hobart, a schooner for the same destination, a storeship for the pilot station and the Bruny Island lighthouse and a ship bound for London. Within the harbour was a whaling station, with shears erected for cutting up the carcase. A boat had collected a load of whale oil. Not surprisingly, and in the best Victorian prose, she complained that 'our olfactory nerves were sorely disturbed by the effluvia from some putrid whale carcasses which were lying on the sand'. She trusted that whaling days would have ended before the proposed Ramsgate settlement below Catamaran River built 'its lodging houses and bathing machines'.<sup>5</sup> That proposed settlement never eventuated, although the place was surveyed.

While Gould collected bird nests and eggs with persistence, even visiting an island in the Channel and capturing a live penguin, Gunn and Lady Jane were interested in the economic prospects for coal mining. Gunn observed the coal seams in the Cockle Creek area reported by Labillardière, but considered that the coal was of a 'very indifferent kind,' so another 60 years passed before a serious attempt was made to exploit coal in that area.

Exploring the area near the French garden indicated on the map, they came upon traces of coal. This time, a sample was collected and sent to Hobart.<sup>6</sup> Although it was 1840 before any commercial interest, this action signified the beginning of a brief coal mining enterprise on the north-eastern peninsula.

Despite toothache, bad weather and the pervading stench, Lady Jane enjoyed herself. She even assigned place names (Mount King, Lucas Bay) in the approved imperial manner, despite the likelihood that they had European names already. Finally, praise for the coastal surveying by the d'Entrecasteaux expedition: it 'laid them down with an accuracy which leaves nothing more to be desired'.<sup>7</sup>

These few observant days at Recherche Bay provide a valuable record, and stimulated an interest in coal. They are an interesting social document on life on the pioneering frontier. Their presence at Recherche Bay links the names of prominent Victorian individuals — Lady Jane Franklin, John Gould and R. C. Gunn — with this cultural landscape.

It was 1840 before Hobart business interests took the presence of coal seriously. Hobart was supplied with coal from the convict-mined Saltwater River mine on Tasman Peninsula. This Recherche Bay coal was said to be superior to the latter, so a company was formed and an exploratory shaft was sunk. To critics it seemed a cosy arrangement, where investors were supplied with free convict labour, working in competition with the government colliery's convict workforce on

the Tasman Peninsula. Initially the coal was found to be of good quality, although this decreased with time as much sediment was mixed with it. Around 1,300 tons were shipped to Hobart but the area was soon exhausted, despite the investment in sinking two shafts. The main shaft, a circular masonry-lined hole, reached a depth of 36 metres. However, most of the coal was won from the beachside outcrop rather than from underground. Traces of this work still exist on and near the beach adjacent to the 'French garden'. During the years 1841–2 the flow of coal to Hobart was small. 1843 was the peak production year, when 70 convicts laboured there. Critics drew attention to the fact that most labourers had been transferred from the government colliery at Saltwater River, consequently decreasing its output.

The end of the Van Diemen's Land Coal Company approached. Two workmen admitted to the Hobart hospital suffered from advanced scurvy. Clearly the company underfed and exploited its labour force, and the Colonial Secretary demanded the attendance at the mine of a doctor. Such costs were beyond the company's resources, so the short-lived company collapsed. The initial coal mining enterprise at Recherche Bay lasted only about three years.<sup>8</sup>

Recherche Bay illustrates the problem of finding a staple industry that could sustain permanent settlement. Whaling and coal mining proved to be non-renewable resources. The pilot's station established in 1836 was withdrawn in 1851.<sup>9</sup> Timber was an obvious candidate for that staple. Back in 1833 Robinson observed gangs of timber workers 'sawing timber for different persons'.<sup>10</sup> It is not known whether this temporary activity produced timber for local use by whalers, or whether it was shipped to Hobart.

There was a brief revival in timber getting at Recherche Bay during the years 1853–4. This was a direct consequence of the Victorian gold rush, when suddenly increased population required housing. It is said that hundreds of timber workers came to Recherche Bay. In 1854 a steam-powered mill was established on the western side, at Waterhole cove, where d'Entrecasteaux obtained water. Some pubs were associated with this thirsty industry, but the patrons presumably left the area because the *Sawyers Arms* licence was not renewed following 1854.<sup>11</sup>

With sawn timber available, there were opportunities to build or repair boats. The 1863 survey map shows three huts at Bennetts (Observatory) Point, with a sailing boat, labeled 'craft' on the land. It is situated in the area where the large artificial rock platform stands today which may have served the builders. At least two boats were built at Recherche Bay in 1853–4, presumably at the place indicated on the map. A 22-ton cutter, *Recherche*, was built in 1853 and the 58-ton schooner, *Friends*, was constructed in 1854.<sup>12</sup> Possibly this dry-stone platform was first constructed in 1792 and enlarged during the 1850s.

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One of the ship builders was Thomas Moreland, who had a whaling station at Gagen's Point for some years. In 1855 he applied to purchase 10 acres there, presumably the location of the district's first post office, as Moreland was appointed postmaster. Around the same period, Richard Woolley obtained land near the former pilot station.<sup>13</sup> During the mid-1850s, therefore, some permanent settlers were adjusting to life there. Around 1833, at the height of the whaling boom, a surveyed township area had been laid out between Cockle Creek and Catamaran River. It was named Ramsgate, but it was 20 years before people decided for a permanent existence at Recherche Bay, and even then, the numbers proved ephemeral.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Based upon Mackaness, *Correspondence of Sir John and Lady Jane Franklin*, 1947: 38-9; Woolley and Smith, *A history of the Huon*, 2004: 75.

<sup>2</sup> Mackaness, *Correspondence of Sir John and Lady Jane Franklin*, 1947: 43; Plomley (ed.), *Friendly mission*, 1966: 376.

<sup>3</sup> Plomley and Piard-Bernier, *The General*, 1993: 75.

<sup>4</sup> Mackaness, *Correspondence of Sir John and Lady Jane Franklin*, 1947: 48, 50.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*: 43.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*: 42, 49-50.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*: 53.

<sup>8</sup> Information drawn from Woolley and Smith, *A history of the Huon*, 2004: 163-8.

<sup>9</sup> Woolley and Smith, *A history of the Huon*, 2004: 123, 210 n707.

<sup>10</sup> Plomley (ed.), *Friendly mission*, 1966: 709.

<sup>11</sup> Woolley and Smith, *A history of the Huon*, 2004: 123-4, 147.

<sup>12</sup> Woolley and Smith, *A history of the Huon*, 2004: 153; District Surveyor, G. Innes map, dated November 1863, County of Kent, Parish of Purves.

<sup>13</sup> Woolley and Smith, *A history of the Huon*, 2004: 123.