

Leongatha and District Historical Society

P O Box 431 Leongatha 3953

Newsletter

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The latest news

- The Leongatha Historical Society officially became a Public Records Place of Deposit in May. Pat Spinks and Lyn Skillern went to the Pakenham Historical Society to receive the certificate. We are now able to take records of local significance not required by the Public Records Office. On the day we also took delivery of an IBM computer which was a gift from the Public Records Office. This computer is now set up in the back room
- In June the Mount Eccles community celebrated the centenary of the Mount Eccles Hall with a dinner and a Sunday gathering. A Mount Eccles history " Meeting on the Mount" written by our own Pat Spinks was launched at the dinner and has been selling well. This book is a most interesting account of the settlement and development of the area over a period of some 120 years and is a credit to Pat and her research skills. " Meeting on the Mount " is available from our society for \$20.
- The South Gippsland Historic Network has been working on the presentation on the history of sport in the shire and our society is making a major contribution to this project.
- We have been successful in gaining some excellent grants recently. These include a Shire grant for a new book storage cabinet in the hallway, a grant from John McIndoe for a printer/ scanner and photocopier, a Commonwealth Government grant for a digital camera and a State Government grant for a television set, DVD/ video player and digital video camera. The last items will be used to record interviews with members of the community.
- Andrew Cantwell has turned Lyn Skillern's teaching kit on pioneers into a web site which will be much more interesting for the target audience notably Years 7 and 8. Lyn is now working on a primary kit.
- We have had a number of school groups visit us including several classes of Grade 2 from Leongatha Primary School and Year 8 and 9 students from Leongatha Secondary College.

Annual Meeting. The Annual Meeting will be held on Tuesday August 16th at 8 pm. The guest speaker will be Bob Newton who will talk about the history of brick making in South Gippsland.

Subscriptions will be due for the next 12 months from August 16th

Feature Article

Tools of the Pioneers Number 4 *Splitting Tools*

By Ian Lester

When the early settlers arrived in South Gippsland sawn timber was difficult to obtain due to the fact that there were no saw mills and the transport systems were very poor. The only way to make sawn timber was to use a pit saw. This process was slow and laborious so most settlers chose to split timber for their building requirements.

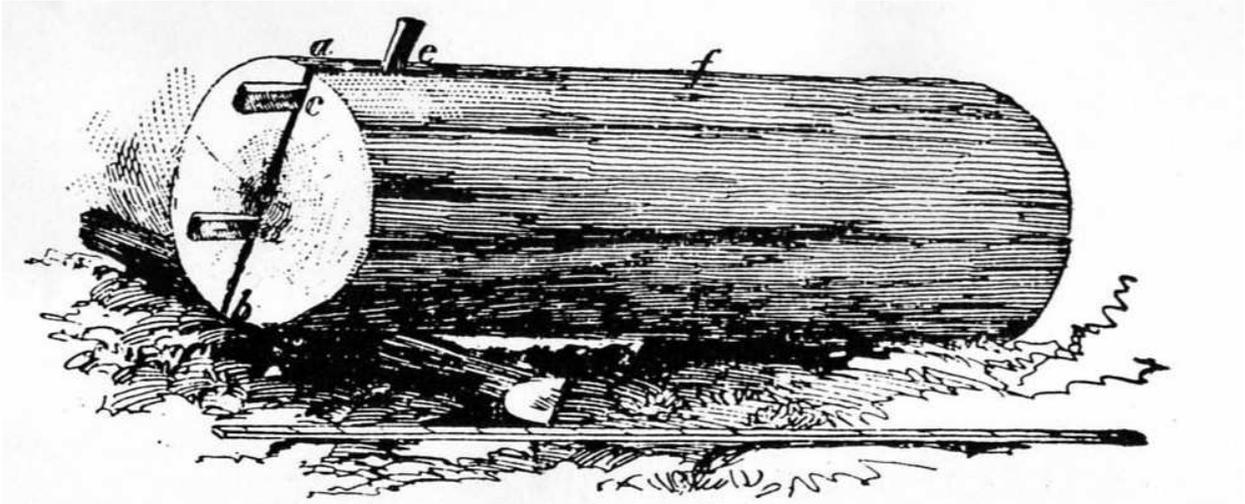
The first step was to choose a suitable tree. Big mature trees were best. Before the tree was felled it was possible to check its suitability by cutting a chip off the flank. If unsuitable the tree was by passed. When the tree was down it was cut into suitable lengths with a cross cut saw and the bark removed. The splitting was done with a maul and wedge. The maul was a heavy wooden mallet reinforced with steel rings (see diagrams on page 3). It was used in preference to a steel hammer because the latter would damage the heads of the wedges with potential dangerous results. Wedges were wedge shaped pieces of iron made in a factory or by a blacksmith. The number of wedges required would depend on the size and type of timber (that is if the timber was free splitting or tight grained). A normal set consisted of eight, 2 finely tapered starting wedges, 4 big long bursters and 2 backing off. On a big tight grained log more wedges may be required.

The next step was to split the log in half lengthways. The log is split by driving a starting wedge into the log on the end grain close to the circumference. On a line which forms the diameter a second starting wedge is driven on the same line close to the centre of the log. As these wedges are driven further in a crack develops following the grain along the outside of the log. A bursting wedge is then driven into the crack beyond the tip of the starting wedge. As the crack progresses more wedges are driven in. The first wedges are usually released and can be used again. When the crack reaches the end of the log it sometimes falls apart. (see the diagrams on page 3). Another wedge can be inserted into the crack so that leverage can be used to split the log. Splintery strands of timber will hold the two halves together but these can be cut with an axe taking care to avoid contact between the axe and any remaining wedges. I often use timber wedges to avoid damage to my axe. If the log fails to split it might be necessary to roll the log and insert the wedges on the opposite side. If post and rail fencing is the end product radial segments of an appropriate size must be split. The next step is to split off the heart wood which left a flat area where mortices could be cut if required. For slabs, sleepers, beams and other building materials such as joists, studs and rafters where a square or rectangular shape was required the round outer sections could be trimmed off. A further step in wood splitting was the use of an explosive wedge which was inserted into the end grain of a log and an explosive charge was set off. It was mostly used in post production and if it worked well was fairly productive. It was however a haphazard and dangerous method

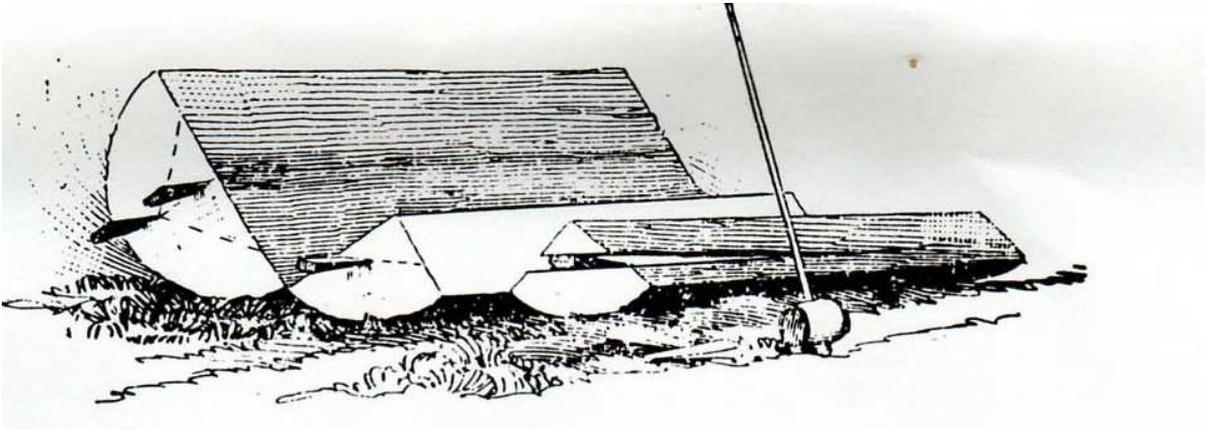


Jim Landry, Lola Bailey's father cutting a tree with a maul and wedges

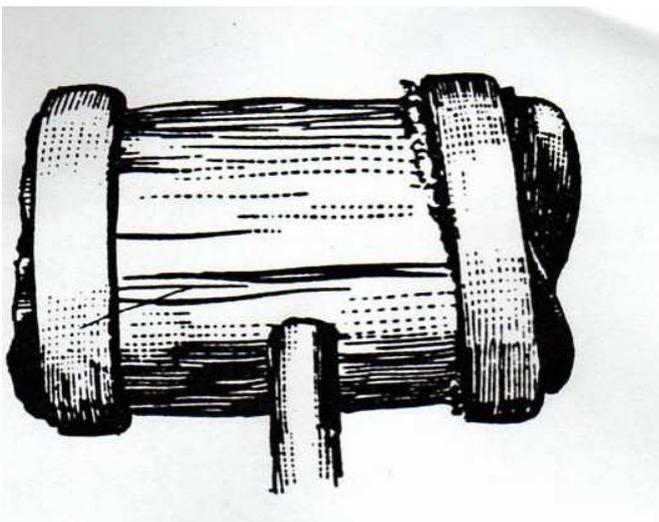
Another aspect of timber splitting was the production timber for shingles, fence palings, pickets and external weather boards. The tools and process were the same for all products. For these items a free splitting timber was needed to give a good finish. Such trees as mountain ash, blackwood or she oak (casurina) were selected. The log was first cut to an appropriate length (for shingles 15" to 18" and as long as required or possible for palings and weather boards. Sometimes these were up to 8 feet). The log would be split into billets prior to being split with a froe and mallet into the final product.



Placing the wedges to split a log



The split log with maul



Maul



Ian Lester using a froe to split shingles

The froe was a steel blade sharpened on the lower edge with a handle at right angles. The blade was driven into the grain using a user made bottle mallet (due to its shape). The placement of the froe prior to striking dictated the size and shape of the final product such as the taper on a weather boards or the parallel faces on a shingle or paling. Once the back of the froe blade was level with the block the handle was rotated around the blade to split off the required piece. Final trimming was done with a shingle hatchet.



A shingle roof viewed from underneath.

Guest Speaker in May: Harold Verdon on the Korumburra Mines

Harold was born in Mirboo North in 1934 and started work in the mines at Korumburra at the age of 14. His brother Jack also started at 14. There are only 20 miners left who worked in the mines at Korumburra. At 71 he is the youngest ex miner.

Black coal was first discovered by William Hovell in 1826 at Cape Paterson. It was found by various settlers and explorers throughout South Gippsland over the years. Coal was first discovered at Korumburra in 1872 and mined commercially from 1891 until 1957. The last train load out of the Sunbeam Mine consisted of 4 big 40 ton truck loads. Coal was found at Jumbunna in 1885 and mined until 1904. The mine was actually in North Outtrim and the coal was transported to Jumbunna on a flying fox. The coal was carried in buckets along a cable. The next discovery was at Outtrim on 16/10/1892 and this was mined until 24/12/1958. The Wonthaggi deposits were found on 11/11/09 and mined until 20/12/1968. Nearer to Leongatha coal was mined at Berry's Creek. The largest seam was found in the Coal Creek mine and was approximately 5 to 6 feet thick. 500 miners worked in the Coal Creek Mine in its time. At the peak of production 1895 it produced 500 tons of coal per day. The siding went into Coal Creek on 28/10/1892. with the rail line going to Jumbunna in 1894 and to Outtrim in 1896. In the working life of the Korumburra mines there were 29 deaths and in the Wonthaggi mines 71 deaths. Recent research has indicated that there were more. The

youngest person killed in the Wonthaggi mines was Morry Clark who was 10 years old.

Many youngsters started work in the mines at the age of 8, 9 or 10 years of age.

In the early days all the work in the mines was done by horse power, man power, horse teams and bullock teams. There were no mechanical works at all.. All the water was taken out in tins and buckets. The miners were paid for the skips of coal taken out. A skip weighs about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a ton. The pay was from 1/- to 5/- per skip and varied according to the coal quality. If a miner worked in a low seam he got 4/- to 5/- per skip as it was harder to fill the skip. A miner in a large seam received 2/- or 3/- as it was easier to mine. This was how things were evened out. As time went on the mine companies installed hand pumps to pump out the water. When they carted the coal away from the mines it was moved by bullock team or horse team. Most Wonthaggi coal went to Inverloch in the early days and was loaded on to ships and barges then shipped around the country. There is more coal still left under the ground in South Gippsland than was ever taken out.

The Berry's Creek mine was founded by the Moyer family in the early 1900's. A block of coal from Berry's Creek weighing half a ton is in the London Museum.

As time went on the mining companies obtained hand wound winches to wind the coal out of the mines. Two men used to wind the coal out of the mines one on each side. One of these winches is to be found today at Coal Creek. Technology advanced and steam driven pumps and winches took over from the hand equipment. Inside the mine the work was done with picks and shovels with the miners on their hands and knees or laying on their sides or backs. Miners worked in spaces from about 18 inches to 5 feet wide. When the Sunbeam Mine closed in 1957 the distance from the tunnel mouth to where the miners were working was about 3 miles. The mining was done in three levels. The depth of the Sunbeam mine when it closed was about 1200 feet. Towards the end of the mining era the miners received 59/- per day and the wheelers and others underground received 57/4. It was better money than working for the local council. Harold did not know why he went down the mines but it was a rewarding experience.

Many things happened in the mines. In 1924 there was a strike. The story of this strike was shown in the film "Strikebound". During the strike a man called Stan Garrard, who was not a miner but a service hand, decided to join his fellow men underground as he had nothing to do. When the miners went back the management did not give Stan Garrard back his job. The miners went off the job in support of Stan. He was offered a job wheeling a barrow of coal from the mine near Ritchie Reserve to the town and to deliver it to people in the town. He took the job and wheeled the barrow loads of coal to town. He became a legend of the town. When he reached the top pub he was given a beer and at the barber shop he got a cigar. At the end of the day he left the barrow at the last place he delivered the coal to and went to the top pub. The mine manager found out where the barrow was and took it. Stan went to the police and reported the barrow stolen. The mine manager was told by the police to return the barrow, give the man back his job and get on with managing the mine or he would be charged with theft. When "Stag" Garrard died in 1987 his wish was that his ashes be buried at Coal Creek. His ashes are buried near the school.

On 27th of April 1916 a young 5 year old boy called Jack Rudd fell into the Jeetho Shaft and his body was never found. He came to the area with his parents in 1910. A memorial now lies at the head of the fenced off shaft in the paddock.

In the area there were shaft mines and tunnel mines. Most of the mines in the Korumburra area were tunnel mines the same as in Wonthaggi. Outtrim mines were both as were Jumbunna. Berry's Creek was a tunnel. The Jeetho shaft is in a paddock on the left just before the Coal Creek Motel. The pit pony presently at Coal Creek named Jasper is typical of the Korumburra mine ponies. In the early days when the mines worked 24 hours the ponies

stayed down the mines for 6 days and nights and came up on Saturday night and went back down at midnight on Sunday. The ponies mainly went blind, deaf and had arthritis but were great characters.

The Sunbeam Mine was owned by the Sunbeam Coal Company. The Austral Mine was owned by a Mr Peter Hudson of Korumburra who had the big house next to the Medical Centre. He was one of the hardest men to ever own the mines and was one of the instigators of the big strikes in the mines. He wanted a lot of money for his coal but did not want to pay the miners much. The miners were not rewarded when prices were good and this caused the big strikes. The Austral mine was near Fishers Timber Yard. The Sunbeam mine and the Austral mine once meet by accident and within five minutes the water was going through the hole like a big river. They had to get out quickly. Most of the miners who died in the mines died of black damp, bad air, which got into the system and they died straight way. Many died from cancer, Harold's wife's father and all her brothers died of cancer. There was a lot of gas in the mines but it was Wonthaggi and Kilcunda that had the worst gas.

The coal was sold to the railways, the butter factories at Leongatha and Korumburra, Joe's cordial factory and any other factory which needed black coal to run. With the development of the brown coal and briquettes in the Latrobe Valley the black coal became too expensive. As a result the coal mines closed.