

# Riverstone's Woodcutters & Sawmilling

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*Those jaundiced individuals who can see nothing in Riverstone but a bush, or at best, a poverty stricken nest of woodcutters and butchers, and, perhaps an impecunious auctioneer or two, and a brickmaker in the last throes of the miserables, caused by the suspension of tick.*

*Windsor & Richmond Gazette 16th March, 1889.*

The image conjured up by Paul Twyford in his late nineteenth century description of Riverstone is hardly inspiring and while his objective was to contrast this image with the reality which he saw as being far more positive he has, none the less, given us an insight into the daily work of the town's people. The economic importance of the meatworks is well understood. What is less well understood is the role woodcutting played as a source of employment and in changing the landscape of the areas surrounding Riverstone.

In the late nineteenth century, Sydney had an almost insatiable demand for firewood which, for a while, Riverstone was well positioned to satisfy. At the time areas like Nelson, Box Hill and Schofield's were heavily forested and so provided a ready supply of wood conveniently located to the railway at Riverstone.

For a period of about 20 years commencing in the 1880s woodcutting was an important source of employment for many people - the gangs of woodcutters who toiled in the bush selecting and felling suitable trees for firewood and railway sleepers, the carters who hauled the wood to the mills in small drays and the mill operators who cut the wood into shorter lengths and trucked it by rail to the Sydney market. The bulk of the wood was destined to become firewood and was cut into lengths suited to the special needs of the users. Common types were baker's wood, foot wood and two foot wood. The land owners also profited through the payment of what was known as a *bush rent* for the right to cut the trees on their property.

Some understanding of the number of people employed in the industry can be gained from this 1897 report in the *Gazette*: *The timber on the Common is now practically destroyed, little remaining but a desolation of tree stumps and littered branches. Mr Terry's Back Run is sharing the same fate. No less than 20 sleeper getters being busy there - besides a gang of fire wood cutters...*<sup>1</sup> (Terry's "Back Run" was located in Old Pitt Town Road, Nelson.)

These numbers are only indicative because by 1897 the industry was in decline and only two mills were still operating in the railway yard.

Sawmilling had burgeoned as an important industry ten years earlier. In 1934 the *Gazette* published the reminiscences of two long term residents of Riverstone. One, Thomas Davis recalled:

*I first came to Riverstone in 1878 ...The first sawmill in Riverstone was situated where the present dams are, near the meatworks office. It was carried out by Messrs McCulloch, Andrews and Drew, and was in charge of Mr. Andrew Turnbull, the well-known bridge and road contractor. After a time the mill was removed to a site closer to the railway station, where Taylor's Produce Store now stands; all the timber for Cockroach Alley was cut at this mill. It was later run by Messrs Barber & Sons for a while, then Messrs Boyd and King wound up the company. Others also cut wood there.*<sup>2</sup>

Some of the "other" mill operators were my great-grandfather Samuel Mason, his brother - James Mason, E. Carey, Tom Whorton, E. Comer, the Ouvriers - John, James and Charles, James Robbins, Fred Beggs, Alex Fyall, John Schofield, E. MacNamarra and John Wilkinson.

Not all of these mills operated at the same time or at the same location. The mills were powered by steam traction engines that could be driven from one location to another and it was common for the operators to move their mills to the railway yard most conveniently located to the source of wood. Sam Mason's mill was most probably the longest serving mill in the station yard and even it was moved at least three times - initially from a site on the Marsden Park side of the railway to Mulgrave, then to the station yard and later to Quakers Hill.

In 1891 James Mason and E. Carey moved their mills from Riverstone to Mulgrave and some years later one of the Mulgrave mills was moved to Minto. Similarly Tom Whorton moved his mill from Schofields to Riverstone and then to Doonside. While John Ouvrier's mill was first reported as being in the meatworks paddock, then in the station yard and later he established a second plant at Richmond.

Samuel Mason established his mill in 1885. The Hawkesbury Chronicle reported: *Mason's new saw mills cause some little stir already and when they get in full swing things will look lively on that side of the line.*<sup>3</sup> Oddly there are several references to Mason's mills and in 1894 both Samuel snr. and jnr. are identified as mill proprietors. However, within the family there is no memory of Samuel having more than one mill. Samuel's mill was located in Garfield Road between Riverstone Park and what later became the site of the *Royal* hotel. At the time there was no hotel on this site, however, seven months later the *Never Fail* was built with a 45 foot frontage to Garfield Road and a 42 foot frontage to Carlton Street.<sup>4</sup> Prior to this Samuel worked a small farm on *Trig Hill* at Nelson. In 1886, he mortgaged the farm to Tom Maguire for £300 and according to family tradition the money was used to finance the saw mill. Two years after it was established the Mason mill was moved into the station yard.

A few months after the Masons commenced operations the *Chronicle* reported that a second mill had been established - *Another sawmill has started on the site of the old mill near the Cosmopolitan Hall; while on the other side of the line Mason Bros. are in full swing.* <sup>5</sup>

It is not clear to what extent the woodcutters, carters and mill operators worked independently. However, there is some evidence to suggest that although the individuals were self employed and worked on a contract basis, the mill owners coordinated the process - negotiated access to the trees, paid the bush rent, the wood cutters and carters and then arranged the final sale.

Another feature of the industry was that many of the contractors were related, either directly or by marriage and there is no doubt that this greatly assisted in the coordination of the various stages of production. For example Samuel Mason's mill was always known as *Mason Bros.* presumably because the business was run by his sons - Sam and Mick who worked at the saw bench, Jack who worked as a wood cutter, Bill as a wood carter and later Frank as teamster.

In 1889 Samuel's brother Jim also established a mill in the railway yard. Bill Hession (who later married Jim's daughter, Alice), Jim Robbins (Jim's brother in law), John Ouvrier and Jim Ouvrier (who married Maria Hynds, Jim's niece) all worked in the business.

The bulk of the wood was sent to the Sydney market - sometimes for very little profit. In 1886 the *Chronicle* railed against the poor prices being received and the dishonest practices which it suspected as the explanation:

*It is not to be wondered at, either, that people who are not butchers or employees of some sort at the meatworks have no money, take the wood trade, we have heard of instances where only 15s was obtained at auction for a truck load of good billet wood - in one case only 8s - out of which the sender had to pay freight, bush rent, cutting, carting and other charges. Now how all this can possibly occur except by down right robbery some where it is hard to conceive. First the weights are tampered with - for it is rarely that the weights returned are the same as the actual weights sent, and then there is the absolute giving the stuff away by salesmen and that this is a fact is well known not only in the wood trade but in everything else.* <sup>6</sup>

Whatever the explanation things did not improve with time. In 1894 the *Gazette* repeated the *St. Marys Echo* in questioning How is it that the best foot wood is still retailed in Sydney at £1 per ton while the wood senders only receive 8/6 - 10/- per ton for it, having to pay freight, bush rent, cutting etc. <sup>7</sup> Two weeks later it reported One shipper of timber received returns that left him 3d. per ton for cutting: <sup>8</sup> and yet again in 1914 - Business in the wood-drawing line has been slack on account of the low price obtainable for foot wood in Sydney. A little baker's wood is being trucked. <sup>9</sup>

Similarly the rewards for the wood cutters were not always good. In 1891 the *Gazette* lauded the benefits of collective bargaining:

*In Goulburn woodcutters have formed a Union. Why don't they do the same thing in this district where a larger number are engaged in the occupation. There is nothing like unity. In Goulburn men are to receive 3/- per ton for under 2 foot lengths and 2/6 per ton for 2 foot and over. Previously men had only received 1/3 per ton for 2 foot lengths.* <sup>10</sup>

The firewood business was not run on a sustainable basis. Through out the 1880s sufficient wood was being cut to support three mills and in 1891 the *Gazette* reported that: *The three mills in the station yard are kept going. The weekend before last at Mr. S. Mason's mill alone, 100 tons of foot wood were cut and it did not work on the Saturday either. Not a bad performance for boys.* <sup>11</sup>

However, a few months later two of the mills had moved to Mulgrave and the *Gazette* noted that *wood is evidently getting scarce as the one left does not appear to be overworked.* <sup>12</sup> The Mason Bros. continued to operate during the 1890s and at various times were joined by others but business became increasingly problematic and was described in 1895 as *just as slow as a funeral.* <sup>13</sup>

By 1900 the *Gazette* reported: *Woodcutting on the Common is not the business it used to be. The few who still remain at the trade hunt over again at the old and once rejected trees and logs, so that it is hard to see how selectors, should they take up the land, will find fire wood and fencing stuff.* <sup>14</sup>

Saw milling was a dangerous occupation and accidents were frequent. The most common were either head injuries caused by a part of the saw or a piece of wood being flung back at the bench operator or the inevitable loss of fingers.

In 1888 the *Gazette* reported that Mick Mason, one of Samuel's sons was injured - *It appears that he was cutting a piece of wood on the bench with a circular saw and by some means or other the saw brought a piece of it round, which flew up knocking five of his teeth out, besides other nasty bruising on his face.* <sup>15</sup>

Jim Mason sustained a similar accident - *Whilst Mr. James Mason was engaged cutting wood with a circular saw in the station yard on Wednesday, he received some nasty cuts on the face. By some means or other the saw broke and parts of it flew up into his face. He was very fortunate to escape as well as he did.* <sup>16</sup> Sadly his good fortune did not continue - shortly after Jim moved his mill to Mulgrave the *Gazette* reported:

*News came to hand at 11.45 am on Friday that as Mr. J Mason of Mulgrave was cutting some*

*wood with a circular saw, the saw broke and flew up with terrific force, striking Mason on the head and inflicting serious injuries. Mr. Hession instantly rode into Windsor for a doctor but unfortunately Dr Gibson was away in Richmond at the time, whilst Dr Callaghan was laid up in bed. Mr. R.A. Pye, Chemist went out to the scene of the accident whilst a message was dispatched to Richmond for Dr Gibson and a wire was also sent to hasten his return. We are sorry to have to report that Mr. Mason succumbed to his injuries a short time after the accident. The deceased was a popular and well liked man.* <sup>17</sup>

According to Evie Hines, her father Will Hession rode to Windsor to seek medical help and as he galloped past Carey's hotel at McGraths Hill he called out and asked that they take brandy out to Mulgrave to help revive James but it was to no avail. <sup>18</sup>

On the 27th February, 1892, the *Gazette* further reported:

*On Saturday last an inquest was held at McGraths Hill before the Coroner J.B. Johnston Esq. on the body of Mr. James Mason, who died from the effects of an accident which happened the previous day at Mulgrave Railway Station. Evidence was given to the effect that the deceased was engaged in cutting wood at his saw mill. He had cut a piece of very tough wood when some how it again came into contact with the circular saw, which was revolving at the time. The piece of wood was thrown back with great force and struck the deceased on the side of the head inflicting terrible injuries. He fell backwards upon a heap of wood and sustained a fractured skull. He was conveyed to McGraths Hill but did not long survive. A verdict of accidental death was recorded.*

*The deceased was a good hearted man and well liked by everyone who knew him. He was married and leaves a wife and nine children, the eldest of whom is about 16 years of age.*

*Our Riverstone Correspondent writes:*

*A gloom was cast over the town on Friday last, when the sad news reached here that Mr. James Mason of Nelson had met with a fatal accident at his saw mill, Mulgrave. The deceased was well known, and everyone, both in the neighbourhood he lived and here, had the profoundest respect for him, consequently the very greatest sympathy on all sides was expressed at the terrible calamity. For 2 years he worked his Mill in the Station Yard but wood became scarce and as there was a rush on the Pitt Town Common at the time, he thought he could do better at Mulgrave where he shifted his plant about 6 mths ago. All who were able to procure a vehicle on Saturday did so, while those who failed journeyed to Windsor by train to pay the last tribute to the genial "Jim Mason" as he was familiarly known.*

*Owing to the death of Mr. J. Mason the cricket match between the Kellyville Club was cried off and the race between Bomibel & Mulgrave was postponed until today Saturday at McGraths Hill.*

Sam Mason jnr. also suffered a number of injuries. In 1892 Sam nearly severed his thumb and forefinger <sup>19</sup> while two years later he smashed the fingers of his right hand.<sup>20</sup> However, a more serious accident in 1901 saw the end of Sam's saw milling days:

*A serious accident happened to Mr. Samuel Mason jnr. on Friday morning last while working on Mr. James Ouvrier's sawmill. It appears that he got hold of a forked piece of wood. As he pushed it along the bench the saw seemed to catch a shattered piece of the log and drew Mr Mason's hand into the saw. Three fingers and the thumb of the left hand were severed, part of the hand also being cut off. Mr. Mason was at once conveyed to Dr Studdy's residence where the hand was dressed. This is the most serious of the many accidents that Sam has met with during his time with the saw. It is not long since he got his forefinger cut off. The deepest sympathy is expressed for Mr Mason as he is liked by all who knew him and sympathy is also felt for his wife and 5 young children.* <sup>21</sup>

At the time of the accident there was no such thing as worker's compensation or unemployment benefits. To help Sam and his family a benefit concert was held at the Riverstone Odd Fellow's Hall. The concert raised £27/12/6, costs were £1/2/6, leaving £26/10/- to tide Sam over. <sup>22</sup>

The mills developed as an important part of the day to day life of the town's people and were a constant source of interest. The logs often produced more than just wood. Curiosities like the discovery of *a horse shoe embedded in the middle of a thick dry box log, which appeared to be 30 or 40 years old,*<sup>23</sup> the odd snake and on one occasion a native cat all provided simple amusement for the town. When Jim Mason and E. Carey moved their mills to Mulgrave the *Gazette* lamented their leaving *How we will miss the delightful music of the buzz saw!* <sup>24</sup> Clearly people were a lot more noise tolerant in those days. Twelve months later the *Gazette* waxed even more lyrically - *The gentle buzz of the merry circular-saw enliveneth the proceedings and trucks loaded to the top with firewood, stand on the rails ready for Sydney. A shrill whistle is heard, and an engine cleaves its way through the crisp morning air ...* <sup>25</sup>

It is not clear what happened to the Mason Bros. mill. In 1899 the *Gazette* reported that Sam jnr. had moved *his mill to Douglass Siding (Quakers Hill) and is lashing through the wood for Mr. C. Ouvrier who has purchased a bush paddock from Mr. Pearce.* <sup>26</sup> Sam's father was 65 years of age by this time and it may have been that he simply relinquished control of the mill to his son. An alternative explanation is that the business had failed and the mill was sold to pay creditors. This explanation has some currency in the family, however, I have been unable to find any evidence to support it. Whatever the explanation, Samuel snr. had by this time, ceased describing himself as either a saw mill proprietor or wood merchant and simply identified himself as a wood carter.

Three months later it was reported that having completed the contract for Charles Ouvrier the Mason

Bros. would take charge of James Ouvrier's mill at Riverstone. James Ouvrier had purchased a mill in 1896 and moved it to the station yard. <sup>27</sup> When it was first established, Ouvrier's mill was *worked by Mr. John Hay at the bench assisted by Mr. Beattie and Master Jack Hay.* <sup>28</sup> Sam Mason jnr. was

still operating Ouvrier's mill in February 1901 when half of his hand was severed. He had only one finger remaining on his left hand and this spelt the end of his days as a sawyer.

Emily Mason, Jim Mason's widow, retained the Mulgrave mill and it was operated on her behalf by her brother Jim Robbins and son in law Will Hession. In 1895 the mill was badly damaged by fire. The *Gazette* reported that:

*It is not often that you hear from us (Mulgrave) but I am sorry to have to relate that on Friday night or rather Saturday morning, the 6th instant, a disastrous fire occurred and caused the destruction of Mrs. J Mason's wood cutting mill and 3 trucks of wood belonging to various persons. Every thing at the mill seemed alright at about 10 p.m. and the guards of the goods train that left the goods here at 12 p.m. say that they saw no sign of fire but at 4 a.m. Jas. Robbins and Jas. Mason who work the plant, were aroused by the roaring of the fire, but were unfortunately unable to save anything, as by that time every thing was enveloped in flames. They could only stand idly by and watch the fire did not spread and get at the engine which beyond a good scorching is not thought to be damaged. I would also like to remark that I am very much surprised by the apathy shown by the people of Windsor. The fire was seen by several people, I am informed, at about 4 a.m. and was even thought by several people 'that it was the railway station premise's, and yet not a soul came out to see if help was necessary. All day Saturday Messrs. Mason and Robbins had to stand by and pour water on the burning heap, a bucket-full at a time, and so fierce were the flames, that the water was licked up before it fell in the fire. I did think that the Windsor folk would have shown more sympathy with Mrs. Mason in her misfortune.* <sup>29</sup>

The mill was restored and continued to operate until at least 1910 when there was a report of an action in Windsor Court between William Hession and Brown over the payment for repairs to machinery at Hession's Mulgrave mill. <sup>30</sup> In 1902 Emily Mason left the district to take up residence at Newtown and Bill Hession took control of the mill. Bill did not operate the saw himself. According to his daughter he had eight drays and preferred to cart wood to the mill. His benchman was Hugh Holmes.

<sup>31</sup>

Although the heyday of the saw mills was over by the turn of the century some, like Fred Beggs at Schofields, were still operating at the outbreak of the 1914-1918 War.<sup>32</sup> Between the Wars and as recently as the early 1960s firewood was still being cut for domestic consumption - for fuel stoves, coppers, chip heaters and of course, heating. It was cut sporadically and primarily to augment other incomes. The technology had changed greatly but the methodology was fundamentally the same.

Amongst my grandfather's - Frank Mason's, papers I recently found a receipt, dated 11th May 1933, for £35 - the *bush rent* to remove all the dry timber on a Kurrajong property known as *Trafalgar*. In

c1950 Frank's son Brian purchased a *hargan saw* - a mobile circular saw powered by a single cylinder, BSA, motor bike engine. These saws were mounted on wheels and could be taken into the bush to cut logs and could also operate as a bench saw. They were far more mobile than the steam driven engines but no less dangerous. In 1951 Brian purchased a 100 acre bush block at Maroota where he and his father cut firewood which was then trucked back to Garfield Road where it was split. Nearly seventy years after Samuel Mason established his mill, history was being repeated.

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References:

- <sup>1</sup> *Windsor & Richmond Gazette*, 12.06.1897, p6.
- <sup>2</sup> *ibid*, 00.00.1934, p0.
- <sup>3</sup> *Hawkesbury Chronicle*, 04.07.1885, p3.
- <sup>4</sup> *ibid*, 07.08.1886, pp2,3.
- <sup>5</sup> *op cit*.
- <sup>6</sup> *ibid*, 02.10.1886, p3.
- <sup>7</sup> *ibid*, 04.08.1894, p5.
- <sup>8</sup> *ibid*, 25.08.1894, p10.
- <sup>9</sup> *ibid*, 26.06.1914.
- <sup>10</sup> *ibid*, 21.03.1891, p4.
- <sup>11</sup> *Windsor & Richmond Gazette*, 16.05.1891.
- <sup>12</sup> *ibid*, 12.09.1891, p9.
- <sup>13</sup> *ibid*, 12.01.1895, p5.
- <sup>14</sup> *ibid*, 10.06.1900, p12.
- <sup>15</sup> *ibid*, 29.09.1888.
- <sup>16</sup> *ibid*, 19.04.1890.
- <sup>17</sup> *ibid*, 20.02.1892.
- <sup>18</sup> Oral information supplied by Evie Hines (1895-1983), daughter of William Hession & Alice Mason, 03.07.1982.
- <sup>19</sup> *Windsor & Richmond Gazette*, 30.07.1892, p6.
- <sup>20</sup> *ibid*, 22.09.1894, p3.
- <sup>21</sup> *ibid*, 16.02.1901, p12.
- <sup>22</sup> *ibid*, 20.04.1901, p11.
- <sup>23</sup> *ibid*, 14.09.1895, p12.
- <sup>24</sup> *ibid*, 05.09.1891, p5.
- <sup>25</sup> *ibid*, 02.04.1892, p8.
- <sup>26</sup> *ibid*, 18.02.1899, p4.
- <sup>27</sup> *ibid*, 22. 08.1896, p12.
- <sup>28</sup> *loc. cit*.
- <sup>29</sup> *ibid*, 13.07.1895, p8.
- <sup>30</sup> *ibid*, 16.04.1910.
- <sup>31</sup> *ibid*, 09.11.1907, p4.
- <sup>32</sup> *ibid*, 03.07.1914.