

SETTLEMENT IN ILLAWARRA IN 1840:

In 1914 a conference was got together in the town of Wollongong to make arrangements to celebrate in some suitable manner the centenary of the settlement in the Illawarra district. As an old resident I was invited. When the Conference opened there were about forty present, composed of old hands, Mayors, Shire Presidents, and other representative men. I had come from the farthest distance, from Wagga, and had travelled the previous night and morning over three hundred and fifty miles. This shows how the means of travelling had improved since I reached Wollongong in 1840.

When the conference met, in comparing notes with others present I found that I had been eleven years in the district before any of the others.

In 1840 there was a stockade erected on this neck of land, and some hundreds of prisoners were confined in the place and were then working to excavate a basin in the solid rocks, to accommodate the coastal vessels when loading and unloading.

There was a considerable number of soldiers guarding the prisoners and sentries constantly marching backwards and forwards outside the stockade to see that the men did not escape¹.

The climate and soil in the Illawarra made the place suitable for settlement, the greatest drawback being the want of suitable ports.

When we reached Wollongong, Captain Plunkett, whom my father had known in Ireland, was Police Magistrate, and Parson Mears², who had charge of the Anglican Church, was known to my father in the old country. Three of Parson Mears' sons, who were then boys, afterwards resided in Wagga, one of them, John, became Inspector of Police.

Another resident of Wollongong at that time was Dr. Davison, who was afterwards the first to open a general store in Wagga, it being conducted as a branch of his Gundagai business.

In Wollongong in 1840 there was a market square in the centre of the town. Stocks had been placed in the centre of the square and I have often seen men locked by the legs in the stocks. The market square is still in Wollongong, but the stocks are gone.

When my father had time to make enquiries about the situation of the land he had bought he found there was a good road made by prison labour for over two miles of the distance, but, where the track branched off from the main road, the last mile was impassable for wheeled vehicles³. He found it would be necessary to cut a track through the scrub as the growth of timber and vines was so dense that even a man on foot could not force his way through the vines without the assistance of a sharp implement.

My father engaged a man who had a bullock dray to cart his goods, including provisions he had bought in Sydney, to the nearest point to the land he had purchased and as the season was summer he decided that he would camp out until he could get a track open to our land, and have a hut erected. It was easy to make a temporary gonyah in Illawarra, where there were large trees from which bark could be stripped. We made an unfortunate beginning. My eldest brother, who was my senior by six years, fell when getting into the dray. The wheel passed over his thigh and broke

it. This was a sad misfortune at such a critical time, when my father had such difficult work before him.

Luckily my father was soon able to secure the services of Dr. O'Brien, a skilled surgeon, who set the limb. The three eldest of the children were girls, so my father had little assistance. My sisters were soon able to assist my father, who without delay, had a hut erected on his land. He then employed men to cut down the big trees and scrub. When the timber had been drying a few weeks it was set alight, and the fire consumed the whole except the stumps and part of the trunks of the large trees.

Grass and clover seeds were scattered in the ashes; we soon had a good grazing field. The land not required for pasture was sown with potatoes, maize and pumpkins, which all grew rapidly. I have never seen better crops of these articles produced. My father procured fruit trees and planted a small orchard. Then he went in for tobacco growing, and some of my first work was to cover each tobacco plant with a small strip of bark or a shingle just before dark to protect it in the early growth from frost, then to remove the cover first thing in the morning. When this work was done I had to herd the cattle and horses out in the forest the rest of the day.

My mother would at night read aloud from a newspaper or book to the family, and my father got his three boys to write a lesson in their copy books each night in winter. He wrote the headlines in the books as neat and as plain as copper-plate. The little education I got was chiefly from my mother and father.

My father had bought land and stock in 1840, in a boom time. In '41 and '42 there was a banking and commercial crisis. Money became so scarce that land, stock, and produce became almost unsaleable. I have known my father to send produce to Sydney by the coastal vessels, and that when sold the articles only realised the cost of transit and the commission agent's charges. I have seen good cows and four-year-old bullocks sold in the market square at Wollongong for ten shillings each.

—JAMES GORMLY,

"Exploration and Settlement in Australia" (1921).

1.—This refers to the construction of the first harbour basin by Captain (afterwards Lt.-Col.) George Barney, described in "The Port of Wollongong" by C. W. Gardiner-Garden, pp. 9-10.

2.—Rev. Matthew Devenish Meares.

3.—The land purchased by Gormly's father was at Hell Hole, in the deep valley between Mount Keira and Mount Nebo. The "good road" would have been Mount Keira Road, constructed a few years before along a line marked out by Major Mitchell in 1834.