

## THE IMAGINARY COURTENAY PUCKEY

Brian Rogers, in one of the interesting addresses to the IHS I have had the pleasure of hearing, presented the results of his long-term research into Puckey's fabled saltworks at North Beach and Fairy Creek.

Mr Puckey emerged as the most private of men - seemingly determined to keep himself hidden from history. Puckey did not advertise much in the local press and all that is left to record his supposed efforts at salt-making are one poor-quality photograph, two pencil-sketches by a man called F.R. Holderway dating from 1910 and a letter from one of the daughters (written long-after the fact or fiction).

Yet despite the absence of a rich lode of evidence to bring him back to life, it is the very nebulousness of the information which still lingers about Courtenay Puckey in the memory of local residents which makes him interesting. Puckey is one of the few figures of Illawarra history around whom it would be possible to build a romantic aura of mystery, intrigue and alchemy.

For someone who left so little concrete historical record, Mr Puckey

nonetheless bequeathed to the Illawarra an inordinate number of rumours and snatches of gossip.

And what was most exciting to witness on the night of the Mr Roger's address was the way in which the sparsity of evidence began to elicit comments, speculations and remembrances from the audience.

It was revealed that for some residents the reclusive Mr Puckey was a potential German spy during the First World War, silently signalling to submarines from his 'Seafield' residence. Then, as now, in both life and art, it would seem that most history is guessing and the rest is prejudice.

Nonetheless, some of the audience speculation was of great interest. Someone suggested that the 'tanks' remaining on site at Puckey's Estate may have been used for the cultivation of seaweed so that Mr Puckey could extract iodine to utilize in his pharmaceutical practice. Another suggested he might have been trying to extract gold from seawater!

All in all after Mr Rogers's most erudite explanation and slide-shows on salt production at various European sites, it seems to my ill-educated mind that it is virtually inconceivable that Mr Puckey was attempting to produce salt in commercial quantities.

The only contribution I can offer to the debate is that, after re-visiting the site recently, it seems to me the thing that Mr Puckey was most in need of was not salt, but water. 'Seafield' was surrounded by lots of brackish water, but very little fresh-water was to be conveniently had after a lengthy dry-spell. If I'd been Mr Puckey I'd be looking for a way to supplement the rain-water from the roof.

Such idle speculation aside, the really interesting fact to emerge from the audience contributions during the evening was from Del Mowbray. She recalled that, as a child, she was taken to Mr Puckey for treatment of a toe-infection. Her strongest memory, apart from the fact that he cured the complaint, was that when Mr Puckey bent down to examine her toe, he revealed a large wart on his balding pate!

Now if a chemist (and presumed herbalist) of the legendary ability of Mr

Puckey could not get rid of the warts on his own head, what precisely was occupying the time of this unusual man!

Perhaps another commentator on the night had the answer: Mr Puckey only pretended to make salt. It was really just his simple way of justifying spending an inordinate amount of time communing with sea and scrub and coastal estuary in a place which must surely have been one of the most desirable of all residences for a very private man who appreciated a type of landscape which is now all but extinct in its pristine form in Illawarra.

Puckey remains one of the most interesting and elusive figures in Illawarra history. He is up there with Eugene Dominic Nicolle - and both men seemed to have possessed an unusually diverse range of interests. And both of them left so little historical record, a fact which makes them seem more like 'Dreamtime' rather than 'Renaissance' men.

Brian Rogers is to be congratulated for both his fielding of the questions and interjections of an extremely curious audience and for the exemplary way in which he refused to place more weight on the very fragmentary surviving evidence concerning Mr Puckey than it could bear.

It was a most enjoyable evening and one which maintains the fine standard speakers have established this year. My congratulations to Mr Rogers on a most illuminating and heuristic address.

### *Joseph Davis*

Mr Rogers also deserves thanks for alerting members to the existence of the Holderway sketches. Most members, as I was myself, were probably unaware of their existence. I'd done lots of research on Puckey in the WCL's Local Studies Collection and never sighted them. It turns out they are filed in the photos collection under 'Fairy Creek'. They are reprinted below. WCL has no details regarding them except that they are from a 'sketchbook'. Can anyone help? The sketches made in 1910 are reproduced below.

