

A THIN VENEER OF LEECH-MANIA THE STORY OF ILLAWARRA'S EARLIEST EXPORT INDUSTRIES

(the involvement of Coutenay Puckey and the real origin
of the place-name 'Thirroul')

Tea-tree and leeches.

It's unlikely way to make a quid, but long before our dairy-butter and black diamonds began to make big bucks for the Illawarra, tea-tree wood and the medicinal leech were quiet little earners for the emerging local economy.

The first report of an Illawarra product being exported in exchange for money comes from the Diary of Lady Jane Franklin.

She was the wife of the Governor of Van Dieman's Land (Tasmania) and when she visited in 1839 she noted that there was much tea-tree at the entrance to Lake Illawarra, some of which she claimed was profitably used in veneering and sent to England.

Sadly, Lady Jane's casual remark is the only extant record of this pioneering trade.

But our trade in the medicinal leech is a completely different matter.

Today, leeches are simply curious (if rather annoying) blood-suckers which force the well-prepared to carry some salt on long bush-walks.

But our nineteenth century Illawarra ancestors knew better.

Back then, the unlikely leech was the height of fashion.

What's more, it was also health-giving and profitable.

Indeed, in the early 1800s there was actually such a thing as 'Leech Mania'. And not only in Illawarra.

So attractive were leeches thought to be that the fastidious women who adorned the Paris salons used to deck their dresses with embroidered leeches.

Yes, believe it or not, the leech was once a fashion-statement.

It seems inconceivable today. But only when we forget that, for our forebears, leeches were not just distasteful blood-suckers.

Last century, leeches were strongly associated with the cure of ailments and were therefore treated with great respect.

Since Roman times, many illnesses had been considered to result from 'bad blood'. Drawing off that 'bad' blood was believed to bring relief. Everything from gout to nervous breakdowns, along with more conventional kinds of swelling, was dealt with by the application of three or four blood-thirsty leeches to a strategic part of the anatomy. I have even read of syphilis being treated in this manner!

In early Illawarra, doctors were few and far between and the humble leech often stepped into the breach. And even if you were fortunate enough to be treated by a doctor, he would probably prescribe a leech as treatment anyway. The Oxford English Dictionary even records the word 'leech' being used as the common term for physician as late as the 1870s.

I have seen no reference to the use of leeches by Aboriginal Australians prior to the white invasion, but leech-craft has the longest colonial pedigree possible. The surgeons on the First Fleet set sail for Botany Bay with a supply of leeches on board to treat both convicts and sailors.

Much was their delight (and discomfort) when they spent their first night on Australian soil under canvas and discovered that Australia had its own plentiful supply.

It was to be a fortuitous discovery for, while Australia was being colonised, a vast trade in leeches had begun in Europe.

Between 1827 and 1844, it is estimated that France imported over 500 million leeches.

In 1824 alone, England imported 5 million leeches which were sold for between one and two shillings each.

The great blessing for locals was that English demand soon outstripped supply and the Illawarra, along with other regions of Australia, was able to get a piece of the action.

Various individuals were able to augment their income through collecting the Illawarra medicinal leech and selling them to exporters. And it wasn't just a fly-by-night trade.

Indeed, even as late as the 1920s, some Illawarra barbers were still dispensing leeches to customers. They were useful for all sorts of purposes.

Both pugilists and victims of domestic violence would often tell one of their children to nip on down to the barber shop to get a few leeches to help reduce the swelling on a blackened eye.

Back then, the unlikely leech was the height of fashion.

By the close of the 1930s, however, the use of leeches for medicinal purposes in Australia had all but died out, being relegated by medical experts to the realms of superstition.

Late last century and in the early years of this century, a number of Illawarra chemists also dispensed leeches. The most famous of these local chemists, Courtenay Puckey (after whom Puckey's Estate is named), is reputed to have actually employed people to gather them as well as collecting them himself. After capture, they were temporarily placed in beer-bottles, sealed and sent to Sydney for export.

I was once told by a now deceased long-time resident that the escarpment at the back of Thirroul was the favoured site in the Illawarra for leech gathering. I'd often wondered why this would be so.

As it turns out, even this country's original owners recognized the area in Thirroul today known as 'Mortgage Hill' as a cornucopia for leeches.

As a letter written by William Sadler ('the last native of Port Kembla' [sic]) in the Illawarra Mercury in 1892 reveals, the word 'Thirroul' is actually a misnomer:

"My attention has been drawn to the ugly, meaningless name, 'Thirroul', recently given to the railway station previously known as Robinsville [sic]. I am told that the old aboriginals are credited with having referred to 'Thirroul', but the old natives never gave a name without a meaning.

"The original name of Robinsville [sic] was 'Throon', and it was so called because the place was infested with mountain leeches, which sucked more or less of the blood of every native who invaded that hunting ground.

"The name was impressed - perhaps more than any other - on children, as it was not considered safe to take them within the precincts of the leech dominions. The native name of mountain leeches is Throon."

Most people have assumed that the name 'Thirroul' means either cabbage tree or cabbage palm. This was certainly the view given by the Railways Department when they changed the name of the station from Robbinsville to 'Thirroul'.

It has taken a long time to track down the source of the Railways Department information on native names, but the blame for the misnomer recognized by William Sadler can now be firmly laid at the feet of both a Government Clerk and the poor handwriting of a former politician who also happened to be proprietor of the *Illawarra Mercury*, Archibald Campbell.

Campbell was something of an antiquarian and also greatly interested in Aboriginal names. In his list of Aboriginal words which was forwarded to the Railways Department (see inset), the Aboriginal word for 'Bush Leech (blackfellow doctor)' is transcribed as "Dthurroon".

The word for Cabbage tree (listed directly underneath the entry for leech) is transcribed as "Dthirrawell".

It is a word very much like that of the modern word 'Tharawal' which is often used to designate both a local Aboriginal language and a local Koorie grouping.

Some delicate soul (presumably the Government Clerk) appears to have decided that a word meaning 'Leech' was unsuitable for such a distinguished village as the old 'Robbinsville' and has opted for the word 'Dthirrawell'.

However, because of Archibald Campbell's atrocious handwriting the clerk transcribed the word for cabbage tree - "Dthirrawell" - as 'Thirroul'.

The clerk appears to have thought the 'Dth' combination unsuitable for English-speaking ears and so elided the initial 'D'. He also appears to have altered the middle 'aw' to 'o' and to have mis-read the poorly written 'ell' as 'ul'.

And so Thirroul was to lose its original Koorie name and, in time, an export industry as well.

But it may interest readers to know that leeches are making something of a medical comeback. Occasionally, at least since 1985, some brave doctors have experimented with leeches to reduce swelling in some specialized operations.

The anti-coagulant in leeches ('hirudin') is apparently also occasionally used when grafted veins fail to join properly.

What's more, in Wales at least, leeches are today being farmed for their 'hirudin' which is then extracted and used in creams and ointments.

Who knows, the leeches still surviving on the escarpment at the back of modern-day Thirroul may once again become the focus of an export industry to alleviate the unemployment problems of the northern Illawarra?

In reality, however, it's a bit much to hope that that an economically depressed Illawarra can look forward to a 'leech-led recovery'.

For sadly, up on Mortgage Hill at the back of Thirroul, there are one or two old-timers who claim that a new species of 'money-lending leech' is quietly bleeding an entire generation of potential home-owners completely dry.

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