

PUCKEY'S NON-EXISTENT NORTH BEACH SALT WORKS

Some readers will no doubt have noted my scepticism with regard to the likelihood of Courtenay Puckey ever attempting to produce salt in Wollongong.

As I have stated in this journal before, I suspect that what Puckey was trying to distil at his Seafield residence was not salt, but water. And that any salt pro-

duced was just a by-product of this quest and that he would never have had any intention of attempting to produce it in commercial quantities.

Nevertheless, I was almost won over by Brian Roger's highly entertaining address to the Society last year when he used the existence of some man-made channels cut into the rocks at North Beach as support for the sole piece of existing evidence of Puckey's putative North Beach Saltworks - one very hazy photograph in the WCC Local Studies Collection inscribed 'Puckey's North Beach Saltworks'.

On reading Michael Organ's excellent edition of *Old Pioneer's Reminiscences of Illawarra* (Illawarra Historical Publications, Woonona, 1989, p. 20.) while searching for information on my latest local hero, Patrick Lahiff, I found the following passage:

"Some 56 years ago the late Patrick Lahiff had two salt pans cut out of the peaks of the rocks near where the men's baths (Wollongong) are now situated, for the purpose of producing a commercial salt. Under the cliffs and close to the Mount Pleasant line was erected a pumping and condensing plant. Years later Mr Puckey, chemist of Wollongong, took over the plant as a chemical laboratory and carried on work there for years."

This, in my view, explains both the photo in the Local Studies Collection and the cutting in the rocks. I humbly submit, therefore, that there was no Puckey's North Beach Salt works.

As for the supposed Seaview works, all we have in the way of evidence to suggest their existence is a copy of a sketch by an unidentified artist in the Local Studies Collection along with a handful of *in situ* artefacts which are as likely to have been used for obtaining fresh water as commercial salt. I personally think it's time Wollongong City Council took down its misleading Heritage signs from the Puckey's Estate, but I'd be delighted if someone could prove otherwise. I look forward to some lively debate.

Old Pioneer's only other mention of commercial salt-making in the Illawarra is of "George Brown - the father of the late John Brown of Brownsville...producing a commercial salt on Gooseberry Island [in Lake Illawarra], which salt was used by settlers for salting butter." (p.67) According to Old Pioneer, this occurred "About the year 1830...".