



## Aborigines

For at least 34,000 years prior to European occupation Tasmanian aborigines harvested wood products. They used bark to construct rudimentary huts and shelters, timber for tools and weapons such as spears, nuts and berries as a seasonal food source, and the fermented sap from the Central Highlands cider gum as an alcoholic drink.

## Convicts and whalers

When European explorers made landfall in Tasmania in the late 18th century their first task was to procure timber to repair their vessels. For example, on 25 August 1788, before their date with mutinous destiny, Captain William Bligh's men dug a saw pit at Adventure Bay on Bruny Island and cut up a number of logs. These fleeting encounters with Tasmania's coastal forests were followed by more sustained logging, mostly by convict gangs, in the vicinity of the first permanent settlements at Hobart and Port Dalrymple (Launceston). Between 1815 and 1850, timber-getting by convict labour became a major activity at the penal settlements and probation stations such as Sarah Island and Port Arthur. Sealers and whalers also procured timber to use either as firewood in the rendering of whale blubber or to repair their ships and whaleboats.



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## Women in the work force

Although considered an exclusively male domain, as far back as the 1830s timber-getting was occasionally undertaken by women. During this period, a visitor to Recherche Bay noted: "At this place there are several gangs of men, from thirteen to fourteen, sawing timber for different persons, among them there is one female." In the first half of the 20th century, several family-run logging and sawmilling operations in the State involved women who undertook many jobs in the forest and the sawmill, including tree felling. For example, a bushman remembered that a sawmiller at Cockle Creek employed "his daughters who used to take the place of men and there was a write-up in the papers, of the girls working and helping fall the timber and wagoning it into the mill".



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## Freedmen and farmers

From the beginning of white settlement in Tasmania, freed convicts spread out into the forests and became the first professional timber-getters. They produced a variety of wood products including sawn timber, palings, shingles and barrel staves which they sold to agents in town. When convict transportation ended in the late 1850s, many more freed convicts found ready employment in the timber industry which was booming because of the need for timber at the Victorian gold fields. Pastoralists and agriculturalists were also "tree-getters" in that they ringbarked and removed large quantities of trees.

The advent of steam-powered mechanisation (c.1855) led to large-scale commercial sawmilling with the first permanent sawmills constructed in the forests and attendant crews of men employed as specialists to fell logs, cart them to the mill and operate the sawmill plant. By 1900, big corporations had taken over much of the industry, building dozens of large sawmills and working the forest around them. However, falling timber prices and the Great Depression of the 1930s financially ruined many of these corporations which were replaced by many independently operated spot millers – who were often farmers clearing their own land of timber. At this time the State, with Commonwealth funding, gave many unemployed men work preparing pine plantations and cutting tracks through the forest.



## Royal restrictions

When the earliest European explorers and settlers first encountered the Tasmanian landscape, the scale of the forests must have seemed so vast as to be immeasurable. As well as appreciating the amazing natural beauty of the place, explorers such as the Nicholas Baudin were also quick to recognise the potential of Tasmanian forests to supplement the dwindling European timber reserves used by navies of the day. Soon after the establishment of Hobart in 1804, some tracts of forest were reserved by Royal decree as timber reserves for the Royal Navy. “Royal Forests” had been part of British land tenure since the Middle Ages, the Hobart reserves therefore continued a long tradition of forests belonging to the Crown.

Unreserved forest was available to the first generation of timber-getters who were expected to supply the new colony with timber for building construction. An impediment to the timber-getting industry was a ban placed on shipbuilding to restrict commercial competition with British companies and prevent convicts escaping. When these restrictions were finally lifted, a thriving shipbuilding industry developed which required large amounts of timber.

2.1



## Assessing the forest

In the past, as today, when securing a patch of forest, timber-getters had to know whether the trees were suitable for milling. For example, eucalypts were and remain the favoured timber for construction purposes, while species such as myrtle, King Billy pine, celery-top pine, blackwood and sassafras were obtained for more specialised uses such as furniture making, coachwork and window sashes. Often the requirements were even more specific. For example, tall eucalypts or so called spar timber was preferred for structural features such as pylons, while large diameter swampy’s (e.g. *Eucalyptus ovata*) were favoured for board timber.

The structure of individual trees was also important. Physical characteristics such as a straight trunk, lack of knots and an absence of lower limbs made the timber more valuable and easier to mill. Likewise, to be commercially viable, stands had to be free of rot and disease which weaken and discolour wood. A timber-getter remembers that “if we saw a tree with a bad head on him, a dry head, then it could have whip rot which can come right down through him. We were very wary of this”. A good forest assessor had to assess not only the external appearance but also the internal quality of trees. Some assessors bored holes in trees to get a cross section of the timber but most learnt to tap the tree and “hear” the quality of the timber. Trunks, branches and leaves were also examined for telltale marks left by insects and parasites.

2.3



## Farms versus forest

Forest growing down to the water’s edge provided ready access to timber for the young colony. Over time, however, this supply was exhausted and the timber men were forced to move inland where they came into conflict with agricultural landholders who ringbarked, burnt and grubbed much of the virgin old growth forest covering the State. Farmers considered forests to be expendable in their quest for land for growing crops or grazing stock. Consequently, until the second half of the 19th century, timber-getters were forced to rely either on short-term and uncertain leases over Crown land or buy their own freehold land at premium prices. In 1898, the State government finally enacted laws which granted exclusive leasehold rights to forested areas to timber enterprises; however, the waste of timber is still remembered with anger by today’s timber-getters: “This pencilwood we log today is nothing compared to the old growth the cockies torched in the early days. What a waste”.

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