



Sugar in Central Queensland

Central Queenslanders know of sugar cane production in near Bundaberg and Mackay, but likely few realise that sugar was once also grown near Rockhampton. The Yeppoon Sugar Company mill and plantation at Farnborough operated from 1883 until the early 1900s, when labour laws were changed to restrict the use of Islander labour. A short-lived plantation and mill at Alton Downs (Pandora Mill), and another (Cawarral Sugar Company) at Cawarral, had failed with the price crash of 1884.

Although cane was collected from as far away as Tanby, Zilzie and Joskeleigh, the Farnborough mill had many problems (including failure to sell all the company's shares, water shortages, poor roads, and low sugar prices), ending in foreclosure in 1898.

A second (private) company increased the capacity of the mill from 80 to 130 tons per day (or about 2,000 tons of sugar in a season) and made other improvements. While the mill did acquire a steam traction engine for hauling, most of the heavy work was done by Kanakas

(Islanders), even on the small privately owned farms beyond the plantation.

With the passing of the *Pacific Islands Labour Act* in 1901 the mill closed and assets were disposed of over the following years. While transportation was always a major problem, it is unlikely that there was sufficient water or suitable cane growing areas within the mill's likely service area to justify a mill, even if there had been a rail/tram connection.



Two wheeled horse drawn wagon typical of those used in Farnborough sugar plantations (Courtesy Mrs Faye Warcon), from Panochini, p 160.



Wagons at Farnborough Sugar Mill (Courtesy John Oxley Library) from Panochini, p 120.

Timeline [Griggs]

- 1870: Peter Murray established a sugar production venture near Rockhampton, but abandoned it in 1873 after sugar cane crop ruined by frost
- 1875: No Rockhampton area sugar production
- 1880s: Pandora Mill semi-mechanised, only new mill having a concretor for crystalisation
- 1885: 2 plantations
- 1895: 1 tenanted plantation (Yeppoon)
- 1901: Pacific Islands Labour Act stopped most use of Islander labour
- 1905: No Rockhampton area plantations
- 1911: Ranking Royal Commission into the establishment of new sugar mills rejected Yeppoon District
- 1916: The Short Inquiry (Ryan Labor government) recommendation against any new central sugar mills was accepted by the Premier.

South Sea Islanders & the Kanaka Trail

South Sea Islanders provided much of the labour for the sugar industry prior to 1900. The Kanaka Trail was built over the bluff in 1884 to transport sugar to port, initially more than 46 km to Thompson Point, and later to Ross Creek (Yeppoon). In 1898 the railway reached Tanby,

allowing the sugar to be railed to Rockhampton and onwards to the Bundaberg refinery.

Although the Yeppoon Sugar Mill may have provided barrack-type 'residences' required under legislation, the Islanders preferred to live in 'camps' where they built their own grass huts.

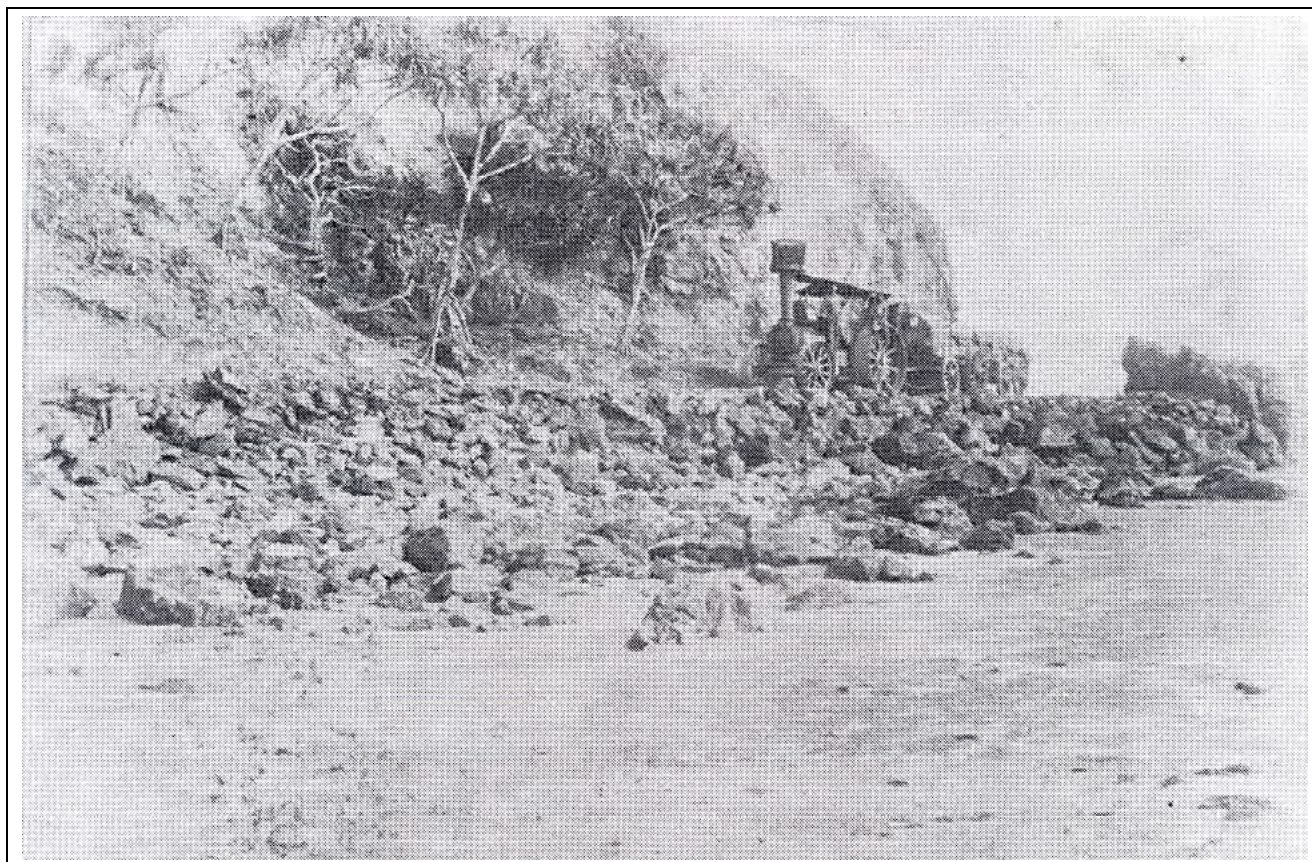
The Islanders manually cleared some 2000 acres and planted 1000 acres of sugar cane cane. In 1999 furrows from the cane hoeing were still visible in the paddocks near the camp sites. When the legislation changed in 1901 many Islanders remained in the area, moving to the Joskeleigh area where their descendents can still be found today.

References and Further Reading

Griggs, Peter G (2011). **Global Industry, Local Innovation: The history of sugar cane production in Australia, 1820-1995**, Bern: Peter Lang.

Livingstone Shire Council (1999). **South Sea Island Cultural Sites Guide: Sites in Livingstone Shire**, Yeppoon: Livingston Shire Council, South Sea Islander Cultural Mapping Project.

Panochini, Peter (2001). **The Trail of Endurance: A journey from paradise**, Yeppoon: Livingston Shire Council, South Sea Islander Cultural Mapping Project.



Loaded steam traction engine hauling sugar around The Bluff road (Courtesy John Oxley Library), from Panochini, p 161.