



***Browns Waterhole
Lane Cove River
an
Extended History***

Lane Cove Valley W

Kissing Point Rd

**Kissing Point
Road**

Kissing Point Rd

 **Browns Waterhole**
Brown's Waterhole

Lane Cove Valley Walk

Lane Cove Valley Walk

Lane Cove River

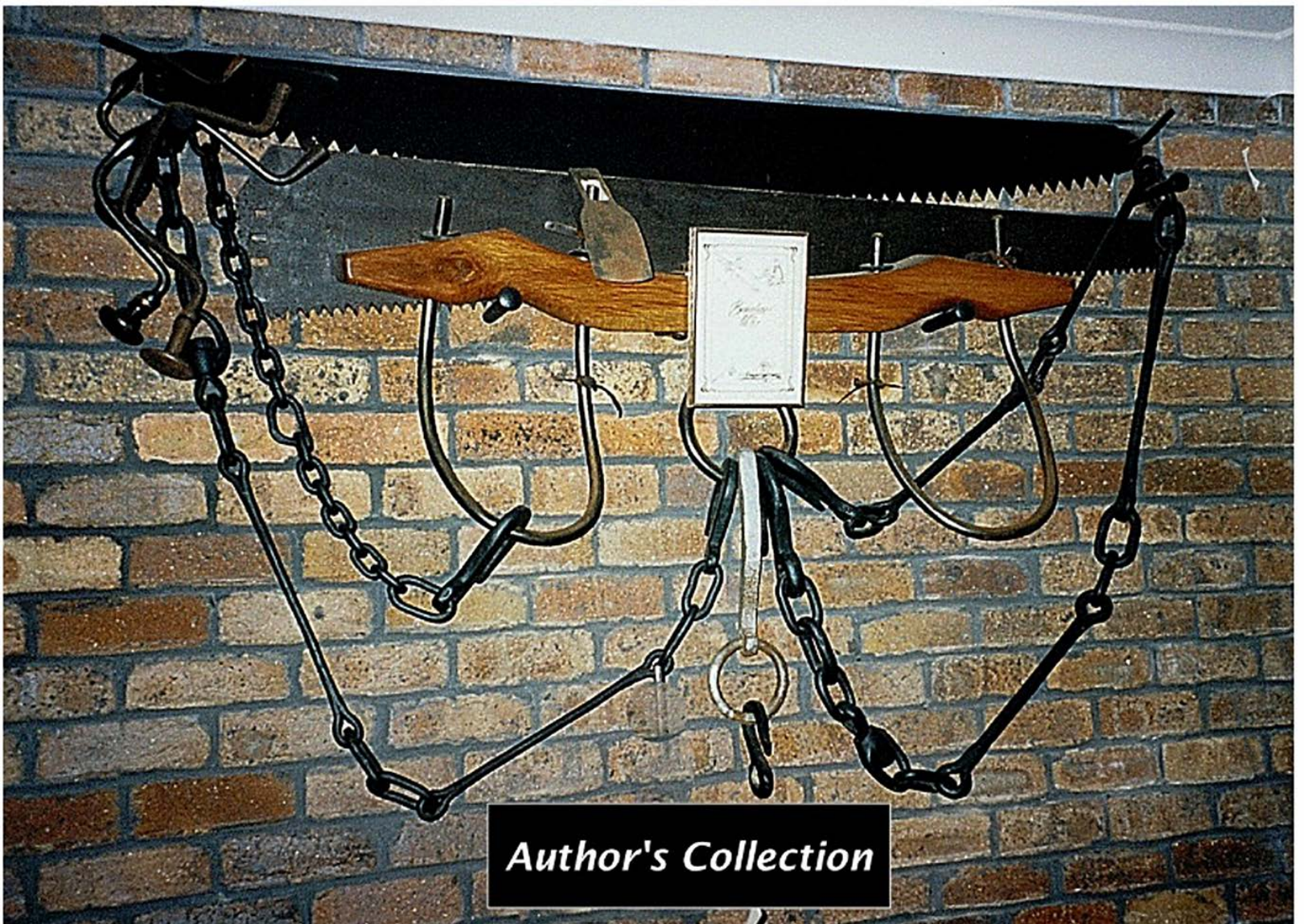
BROWN'S WATERHOLE – LANE COVE RIVER

An extended history

The name Browns Waterhole seems to have attached itself permanently to that location on the Lane Cove River, where it is joined by Terry's Creek. It is named after John Brown, in that his bullock drivers were known to camp there at the end of the day during the period 1862 – 1872 when he was the northside's major timber-getter. I am his great-grandson, and the author of *The Brown Family Chronicles* which can be found in local, State and National libraries. That work was the culmination of many years of research into the extensive timber industry in what was then described as Lane Cove and now generally known as Ku-ring-gai. Browns Waterhole lies within that area. While "Brown" has taken over the name of this locality it could possibly have been used by bullock-teams, (and horse teams), back to the 1820's and 1830's by then timber-getters such as Berry and Wollstonecraft, Fowler, Pymble, Matthew and others.

BROWN'S WATERHOLE AND FIRST NATIONS PEOPLES

Recent reading reveals that the "waterhole" site is within an area of cultural significance to the Wallumedegal peoples. As an historian for this area, I have found very little reference to its original indigenous inhabitants, but exposed rocks on the edges of Lane Cove plateau once bore numerous examples of native carvings before subdivision. For these peoples, the Lane Cove River could also be considered to as an important source of water, and most easily accessed at Brown's Waterhole via a track possibly created by them over many years, and ultimately developed as a vehicle road in colonial times. I have only two personal instances of records of aboriginal presence in Lane Cove. In the 1820's, early settlers grew corn (maize), and there were nocturnal visits from an indigenous origin, to harvest this resource, much to the annoyance of the settlers who did not understand the philosophy of communal ownership! The Pymble family occupied its (Pymble) grant in the early 1820's, and the family historian told me in 1967 that it received regular visits from an aboriginal tribe, (which came from the East). So embedded was this in the family traditions that the said historian – one Fred Pymble, who made violins from natural timbers, crafted an instrument where the back was decorated with an image of an aboriginal corroboree. I have seen this instrument - and played on it.



Author's Collection

The substance of this previous paragraph therefore demonstrates that there appears to have been no indigenous presence in old Lane Cove after about 1850, and possibly earlier.

A POPULATION OF BARK HUTS

Lane Cove from its earliest decades was occupied by a few grant-holders, and a substantial force of sawyers and other timber workers such as tree-fellers, squarers and shingle splitters. The nature of their occupation obliged them to follow the stands of timber, which they did by building bark huts near their areas of work, and almost always close to a source of water. The favoured species was Blackbutt, (*eucalyptus pilularis*). Great-grandfather John Brown is credited with “buying every acre on which Blackbutts grew”. They were regarded as “itinerants” and were not included in the 1841 Census. And when the Rev. William Branwhite Clarke came into parsonic oversight of Lane Cove in the 1850’s, he found to his dismay that he had acquired a congregation living in bark huts!

Bark Huts

There would be no doubt that there would have been a group of bark huts, possibly a large one, at Brown’s Waterhole, used by bullock drivers and possibly sawyers and other timber-workers, and this could have existed for many decades. Wives and families may also have been included. But why bark huts? When His Majesty’s representatives attempted to establish housing at Sydney Cove for its convict charges, they elected to use “wattle and daub”, which had been the practice in English villages going back to the Stone Age. It didn’t work very well and often the daub (local clay), was washed out by southerly and sou-easterly storms. But by about 1800, notice was taken of native housing, which consisted of a sheet of bark erected as an inverted “V” – and for this purpose was quite satisfactory. Consequently, the pioneer’s bark hut came into existence, and a rather good illustration has been found for inclusion in this work. For the sawyer, it was ideal in that it could be built quickly with available materials, and could be dismantled for transfer elsewhere. It must also be mentioned that settlers who had permanent land ownership, built homes with split slab walls, but still with a bark roof. The bark hut was almost always rectangular and was rarely wider than about 12 feet, with a sapling frame set into the ground, and with roof rafters of the same light sapling timbers. Bark was stripped from the “barrel” of suitable trees and stringybark was popular. There was a time of the year when bark stripped more easily, usually summer. Six feet was cut as a standard length, by a width



*Typical Bark
Hut*



Slab Hut

determined by the girth of the tree. It was laid out flat on level ground to season and to assume a flat shape. Some communities added a further sophistication by laying the flat bark over beds of coals to season it. Fixing to walls could be done with nails, but more frequently with rawhide strips. The roof of bark was supported by sapling rafters, and the ridge was capped with a “V” strip of bark. The whole of the covered roof structure was anchored by transverse saplings of heavier weight, and held in place with suitably-placed upward facing round-timbers secured at point of contact with tapered pegs known as trenails. Sheets of bark (and trenails), could be purchased from Sydney timber-merchants, certainly up until the 1860’s.

Furniture in a bark hut would be primitive with bedding often consisting of corn bags stretched between saplings. Reject sawn timber could have been obtained at the sawpit, to construct a table-top and a simple cupboard for food such as flour. The 1841 census reveals that even as early as that year there were storekeepers in the district from whom basic supplies could be purchased.

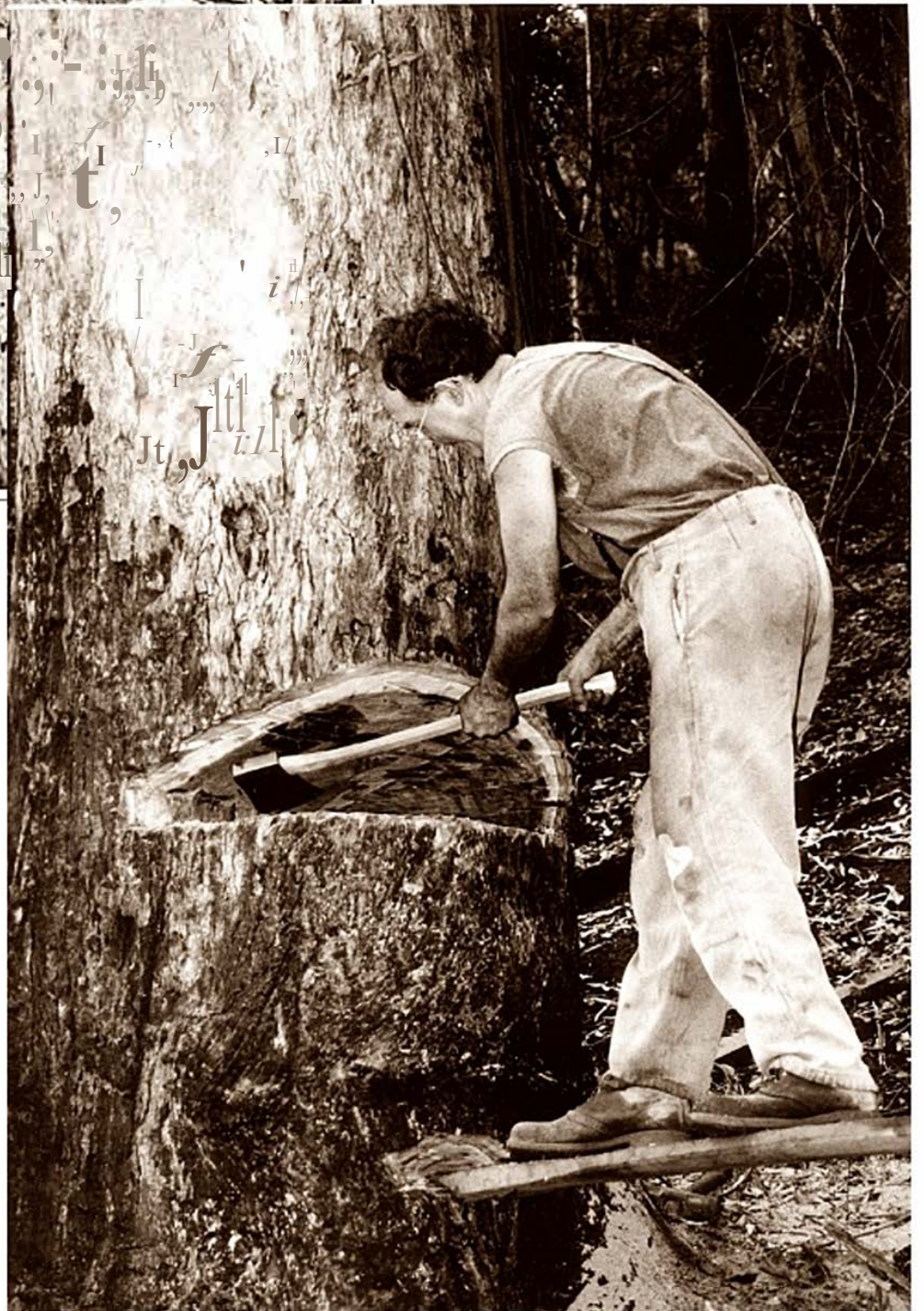
BROWN’S WATERHOLE – HUMAN AND ANIMAL POPULATIONS

The reason for the traditional use of Brown’s Waterhole by bullock drivers and their teams is simply logistical. A working bullock requires one substantial drink per day (and horses two). Bullock-teams consist traditionally of between twelve and eighteen animals. With numerous teams finishing the day at Brown’s Waterhole, the number of bullocks drinking at any one time, required a substantial body of water with a lengthy shoreline. Animals could also enter the water to drink. And water was also available to the bullock drivers for their personal use – consequently this site could have been in popular for a half-century or more. Bullocks were preferred for saw-log transport because of their capacity for heavy loads, and the simplicity of using timber yokes of blacksmith manufacture, against horse-harness, which was complicated, expensive and required frequent maintenance. Bullocks would also forage for themselves, while horses had to be fed from introduced chaff.

Food was simple. In early decades it would have consisted of salt beef, transported and maintained in casks, with damper mixed on top of the flour bag, and then placed over coals from the fire. Fresh meat dishes would have consisted mainly of parrot pie garnered from the thousands of birds



Blackbutt
E. pilularis



which gathered to feed in flowering gums. Almost all photos of bush workers and their bark domiciles (as in the illustration in this article), show a shotgun displayed as an important possession. *Mrs Beeton* of traditional recipes fame includes one for *Parrot Pie*.

We know from published sources that sawyers sat around their fire , discussing the affairs of the day or news from a newspaper that may have found its way into their possession. If money was available from the proceeds of accumulated work, a keg of rum could appear occasionally, and give an extra dimension to the night's proceedings. And we could easily conclude that the same circumstances could have occurred around the nightly fires at the bullockies' favoured waterhole on the Lane Cove River. And as previously mentioned, whole families could have lived at Brown's Waterhole. The traditional bark hut could be enlarged to suit any number of occupants, simply by extending its length. Sometimes the rear end of a bark hut could be extended to shelter a horse.

BROWN'S WATERHOLE AND THE BROWN FAMILY

While the Brown family in old Land Cove appears to have been represented by John and Thomas Brown and their own later families, the *Aldine Centennial History of 1888*, states in the words of Thomas Brown, that the whole family, formerly of Pennant Hills, came to Lane Cove in 1839. But no evidence of the family's existence can be found until the 1850's, and then in the persons of John and Thomas.

The family, starting afresh in Lane Cove would have to have found a place to live, near a source of water. We know from firm evidence that both John and Thomas had experience with bullocks. Bullock yokes lay for years under an ironbark tree on Thomas Brown's Mona Vale Road property, and John Brown in later life, took the whip to successfully extricate a bullock team and wagon, loaded with stone, from a boggy creek between North Sydney and Neutral Bay. It could be reasonable to assume that if John and Thomas, (although quite youthful), were working with bullocks when the family came to Lane Cove, that the location of their home could have been a bark hut at what would be later called Brown's Waterhole. But if in the terms of the entry in the *Aldine Centennial History* 'their parents' arrived in Lane Cove in 1839, this could only have been true of their mother, (Frances (Aiken) Brown), as the family's father William Brown, had died at Pennant Hills in 1837.



Going Home

John Brown climbed up in the financial world very quickly by means which have never been discovered; he was buying large swathes of land in Lane Cove in the 1850's and established his headquarters in a timber-getting business at downstream Fiddens Wharf in 1862, which was the year he would have started to employ bullock-drivers and sawyers further north. Much of Sydney's sawn timber came from Lane Cove. As early as 1857, while still a timber merchant at Market Wharf, John Brown organised 50 pairs of Lane Cove hand-sawyers to supply Ironbark timbers for the new Glebe Island Bridge. (See illustration). Therefore, the earliest that Brown's Waterhole could have gained its name appears to have been 1862, but with a timber industry starting decades earlier, it could have had previous use as of prior mention..

Little would those bullockies who resided on the upper Lane Cove River, have known that the location of their nightly encampment would retain its name for 150 years after its use was discontinued. They could not have known that it would now be recognised as a location of First Nations cultural importance, and the present site of a formed walking track in a National Park. Neither would they have realised it would probably carry the name of Browns Waterhole into perpetuity.

John R. E. Brown
January 2024



Glebe Island Bridge

