

BLACK ROCKS: A NEW PORT FOR THE WEST KIMBERLEY

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Dear Colleen,

As requested, I am forwarding a copy of my Honours dissertation Black Rocks: A New Port for the West Kimberley. I would be pleased if you could defray production costs and postage of \$20.00.

I am still awaiting advice on my Honours course and whether I will be accepted for post-graduate research. If I am successful I will, if the topic is not already taken up, look at policies and proposals for tropical agriculture in the Kimberley in the period 1838 to pre-Ord River Scheme - with comparisons to the Territory where applicable. I will keep you posted on this.

Thanks for your help.

Yours faithfully,



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This dissertation is presented to satisfy  
the requirements for a Bachelor of Arts Degree  
with Honours in History and I certify that it is  
all my own work

.....

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## INTRODUCTION

At the end of World War II, the Government of Western Australia formulated a policy to relocate the port of Derby to a deep water site at Black Rocks, thirty kilometres north. Moving the port would allow shipping to avoid navigational hazards, first identified in 1883, and facilitate overseas vessels trading through the port. The policy included construction of a new town and jetty and a meatworks to serve the West Kimberley pastoral industry.

Despite widespread industry support for the Black Rocks port/meatworks policy, the Government later imposed significant modifications and eventually cancelled it. As an alternative to Black Rocks, a new jetty was built at the old site at Derby, ignoring known hazards and limiting usage to ships capable of sitting on the bottom at low tide. The new berth proved unsuitable for the area's one regular private shipping line and it boycotted the port.

In November 1981, I watched from the jetty as the State Shipping Service vessel, M.V. Pilbara, attempted to come about in the harbour's small turning basin, hampered by a six knot tide and a strong easterly wind. While side-on to

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....1

Chapter 1 1883, A Port for the Kimberley.....5

Chapter 2 Compromise: The Port of Derby.....17

Chapter 3 The Black Rocks Port Policy.....25

Chapter 4 Black Rocks Abandoned.....42

Chapter 5 1983, The Port of Derby Abandoned.....50

Chapter 6 Port Limitations and the Economic Base...60

Conclusion.....75

Bibliography.....78

Appendices .....83

both wind and tide the ship lost way and drifted to the edge of the basin where it grounded on a shoal. Attempts to free the ship under its own power failed and a tug was called in to haul it off several days later - severely damaged. This accident prompted Stateships to abandon its service to Derby and the loss of trade contributed to the closure of the jetty in 1983.

To identify factors contributing to the loss of port services to the West Kimberley, I will examine the history of the port to establish why the Government modified and then abandoned the Black Rocks policy, and determine the extent to which political and business rivalry contributed to policy changes. Following this, I will assess the impact the loss of port services had on local industry.

Existing literature does not examine the circumstances surrounding the Black Rocks port/meatworks policy, although the Kimberley pastoral industry to 1953 has been detailed by Bolton (1) and State-owned trading concerns examined by Robertson (2) and Rielly (3). Graham-Taylor examined the Ord River Scheme, which ultimately absorbed funds intended for Black Rocks, using incremental decision-making models (4). These models were a valid methodological tool because the Liberal/Country Party Coalition held office at both State and National levels during the period the Ord River policy

was being implemented. Consequently, the political complexion and ideology of the decision-makers did not change.

Although the Government of Western Australia devised, suspended, amended, reinstated and ultimately cancelled the Black Rocks policy, these modifications coincided with changes in Government in the State. Policy changes affecting Black Rocks were therefore successive rather than incremental, as each Party tried to impose its own ideology on development of the Kimberley. Because of this, the analytical model used by Graham-Taylor is inappropriate for this dissertation and I will focus on an analysis of the changes that occurred.

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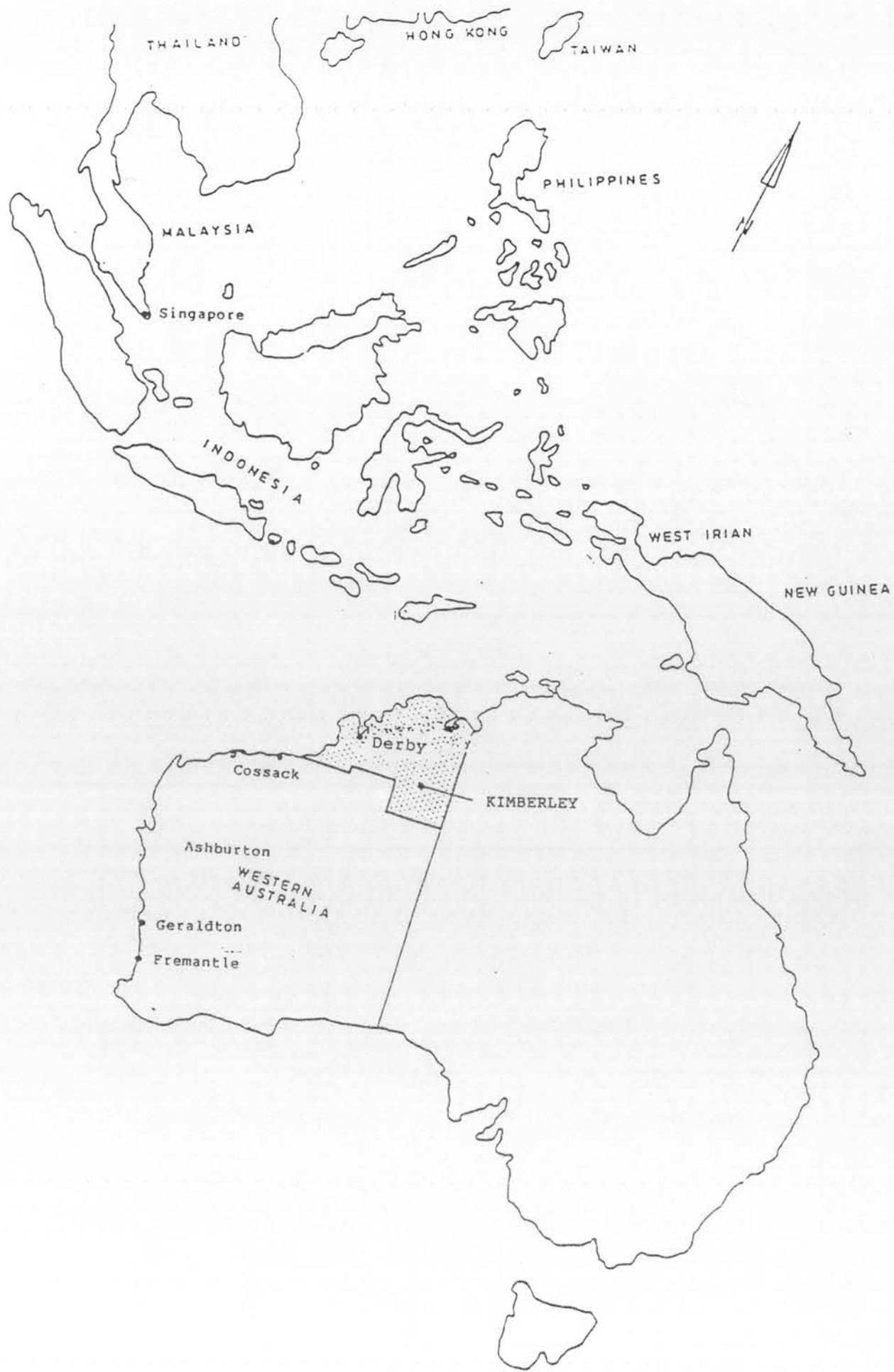


Figure 1. Map of Australia showing the Kimberley Region and its position relative to South East Asia.

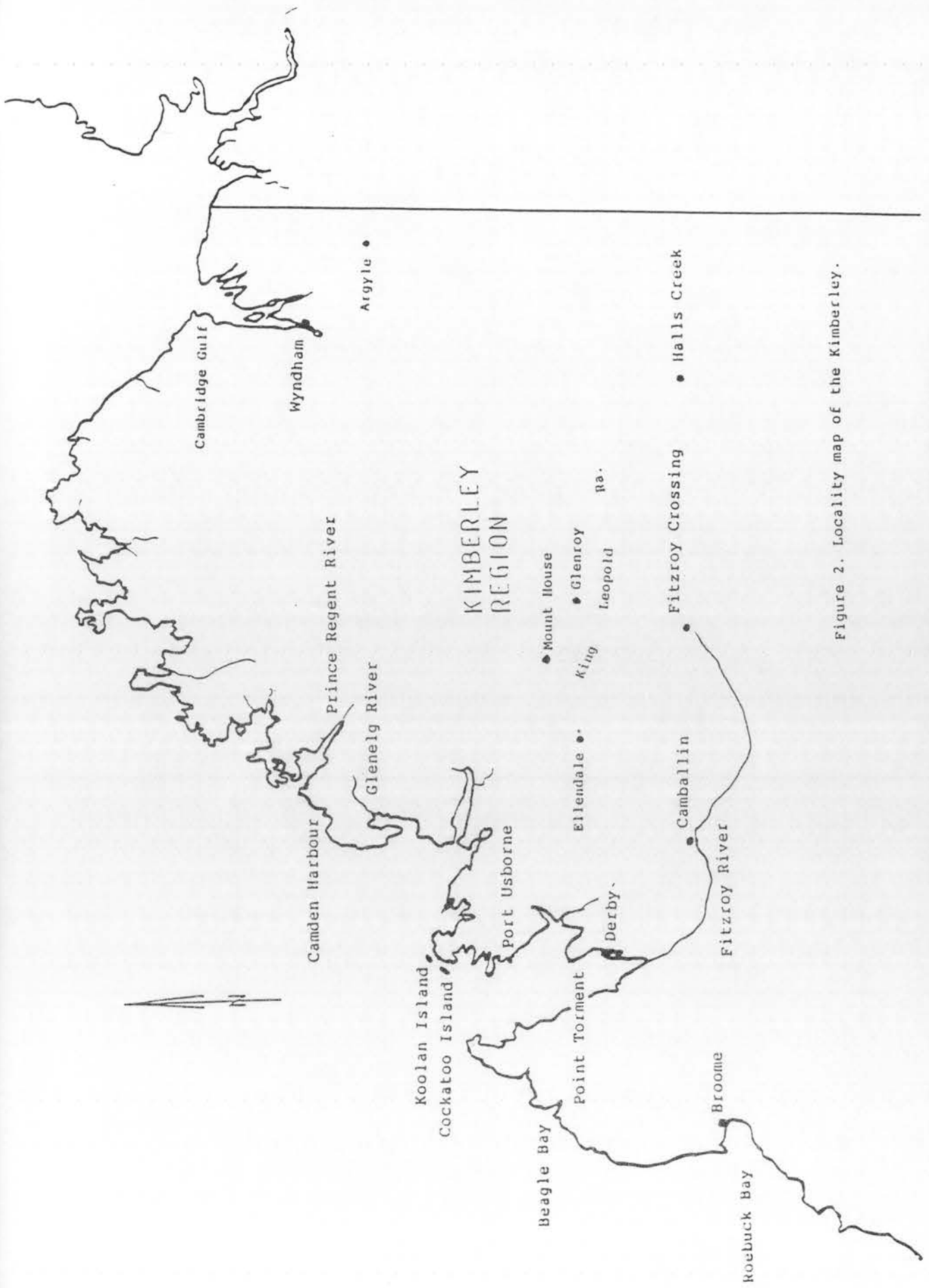


Figure 2. Locality map of the Kimberley.

## CHAPTER I

### 1883, A PORT FOR THE WEST KIMBERLEY

To counter a perceived threat that other nations might be interested in establishing settlements in the area, Sir John Barrow of the British Admiralty suggested that Britain 'create a "second Singapore" on the exposed north coast of Australia for Strategic reasons' (1). This suggestion ties in with Bolton's observation that Dutch merchants had considered establishing a commercial shipping centre in northern Australia (2). These concerns contributed to Captain George Grey, who had already expressed interest in exploring the Australian continent, undertaking an exploration of parts of Kimberley in 1837/38.

The Glenelg and Prince Regent Rivers on the north-west Kimberley coast impressed Grey and he proclaimed the area suitable for the cultivation of 'cotton, sugar, indigo and rice'. In this locality, Grey believed Great Britain would possess

... a colony standing in the same relation to her manufacturers for cotton, that her colonies in the south do to her wool market (3).

His impression of the agricultural potential of the district is not supported by subsequent experience, but can be explained by the timing of the visit. Grey explored the West

Kimberley during the "wet" season when the countryside, although hot, is usually lush with abundant fresh water in pools and streams. Like other early Australian explorers, he failed to understand how this apparent fertility could easily be misinterpreted. Consequently, his observations raised expectations that the Kimberley would accept the imposition of European agricultural systems (4). Despite his favourable report, white settlement did not follow. Little demand existed for new land in remote areas at the time and a commercial depression limited the availability of finance for settlement of new territories. (5).

The first concerted attempt to settle the area described by Grey took place in 1864 when the Camden Harbour Pastoral Association promoted the district. The Association issued a prospectus containing edited sections of Grey's report and did not warn settlers of 'the nature of the terrain, the climate and the unsuitability of the area for sheep husbandry' (6). One hundred and twenty people joined the scheme but it soon failed (7). An attempt by Western Australian colonists to settle the Roebuck Bay area during the same period also failed (8).

These disappointments, and the lack demand for pastoral land deterred further settlement until 1878, when Alexander Forrest, a government surveyor, offered to lead an

expedition to the area. He argued that earlier failed attempts should not prevent settlement of the district. His submission echoed Grey's assessment of the area's agricultural potential by suggesting that 'tea, coffee, sugar, rice, tobacco or any other tropical or semi-tropical product' could be grown (9). The Legislative Council approved Forrest's expedition but Maitland Brown, the Member for Geraldton, who had visited the Camden Harbour area fifteen years earlier, prophesied that the area did not suit 'agricultural pursuits of any kind' (10).

Forrest subsequently described the country he saw favourably, conjuring up a vista of 'pools ... covered with thousands of ducks ... splendid grassy plains ... the magnificent Fitzroy River ... well grassed flats ... twenty miles wide'; and he reported large tracts of land along the Ord and Fitzroy Rivers, each capable of supporting 'a million of sheep' (11). The Western Australian Government, now keen to promote expansion of the colony, welcomed Forrest's report and it appealed

... to the Western Australian sheepfarmer, nursing scab-infested flocks in the stagnant South-West; to the battling Queensland cattleman, worried by adverse seasons, and by the encroachments of the banks and the sheepmasters' fences; and to the Sydney and Melbourne capitalists who, in a time of prosperity, sought new avenues of investment (12).

Like Grey, Forrest visited parts of the Kimberley during the monsoon season when heavy rains promote lush plant growth; throughout the rest of the year, the vegetation is withered by hot, dry winds (13). Unaware of the limitations these climatic extremes placed on the agricultural potential of the area, prospective settlers created a demand for Kimberley land and this encouraged the Government to call for applications to 'purchase or lease ... waste lands in Kimberley ' (14). Alexander Forrest subsequently became involved in Kimberley land dealings, contributing to the euphoria that developed around one of the last available virgin pastoral areas in Australia (15). After some debate on his eligibility, Forrest received a grant of 5,000 acres near Derby as a reward for his 1879 expedition (16).

In 1882, rents for Kimberley leases amounted to four thousand pounds and in 1883, when a total of 51,289,080 acres had been allocated, the Government collected ten thousand pounds (17). In these first years of pastoral development, the Government avoided committing much direct support to the district and land rents became a valuable source of revenue (18). However, a conflict between pastoralists and Aborigines in the Ashburton District contributed to concerns about the security of pastoralists in the Kimberley. Anxious to avoid a similar situation in the new, revenue-rich district of Kimberley, the Government

appointed a Government Resident, supported by a detachment of police. In its haste to establish an official presence in the area, the Government sent these officials to the district before selecting a townsite (19). To overcome this difficulty, the Government directed both Robert Fairbairn, the Government Resident, and the Deputy Surveyor General, John Forrest, to select a site for the new settlement (20).

The Colonial Government had received conflicting advice about suitable sites for a port settlement from people claiming special knowledge of the area (21). In March 1882, an unofficial meeting of members of the Legislative Council had called for the establishment of a 'suitable port in King Sound where stock and goods could be loaded and discharged with safety' (22). They had rejected Beagle Bay, used by early settlers as an entry point, because of its distance from the Fitzroy River pastoral area and the rough terrain between the two areas (23). For reasons of economy, the Colonial Secretary, Lord Gifford, preferred a single police detachment stationed at Roebuck Bay to service both the local pearling industry and pastoralists in the Fitzroy River area (24). He ignored Members' concern about distance and terrain and advised the Governor, W.C.F. Robinson, that

from the report of the Inspector of Pearl Fisheries it must be concluded ... that Roebuck Bay will be the port of the district (25).

Despite Gifford's recommendation, support for Roebuck Bay weakened when a Kimberley leaseholder, A.R. Richardson, reported a landing site near Mary Island in King Sound,

... opposite to which our party have erected a pole. There can be no question about it that if a townsite is selected to be anywhere central to the pastoral district it will be in the neighbourhood of the landing. For there is no other place as yet known where it would not be a simple farce to think of establishing a residency (26).

The Surveyor General, Malcolm Fraser, supported this suggestion, stating that 'unless railway communication [is established] with Roebuck Bay or Beagle Bay ... neither of them will be useful to the settlers of the Fitzroy Valley' (27). Initially, Gifford ignored this advice and directed the Commissioner of Police to establish a police station at Roebuck Bay to service both areas. But the Commissioner questioned the practicability of this plan and recommended basing the police detachment closer to the Fitzroy River (28). Gifford capitulated and the police detachment travelled with Fairbairn to King Sound aboard the Barque Amur, while John Forrest, Alexander Forrest's brother, sailed to Roebuck Bay in the Cutter Rob Roy (29).

Forrest, accompanied by a survey party, traversed the country from Roebuck Bay to the mouth of the Fitzroy River on horseback. He inspected a site on the May River that had been used by the Cutter May to land supplies for settlers, but described it as unsuitable for larger vessels and



therefore 'useless as a harbour for the district' (30). The pole landing recommended by Richardson did not impress Forrest either. A kilometre of marsh separates dry land from the normal water line at the site and, although firm and trafficable when dry, the area becomes a quagmire when flooded by high tides. Forrest assessed it as 'not a pretty situation, nor a place that on first seeing one would desire to make their residence' (31). He recorded prolific mosquitoes and a lack of potable water in the area (32). Captain O'Grady, master of the Amur, at first refused to bring his ship closer than ten kilometres north of Mary Island because of strong tides and uncharted shoals, but Forrest persuaded him to anchor in four fathoms of water in a basin less than two kilometres from the pole landing (33).

Forrest rejected Point Torment, thirty kilometres north of the pole landing. Although a suitable landing site and free of mud flats, it had no fresh water. He also rejected Port Usborne, a good anchorage on the north shore of King Sound because it could not be accessed from land. He described the area as 'barren and rough, and altogether unsuitable and impracticable for a townsite' (34). Disappointed after a month of fruitless searching for a site, Fairbairn wanted to abandon King Sound and move to Roebuck Bay, but Forrest persuaded him to accept the pole landing as the site for the new settlement (35).

In selecting the pole landing, Forrest put aside both his earlier assessment of the area's shortcomings and Captain O'Grady's concerns about the seaward approaches. The primary influence for this deviation was the Government's resolution to locate the settlement close to the pastoral industry. Of all the sites available, the pole landing seemed the best choice but, as subsequent events show, it proved a poor choice for a port and town.

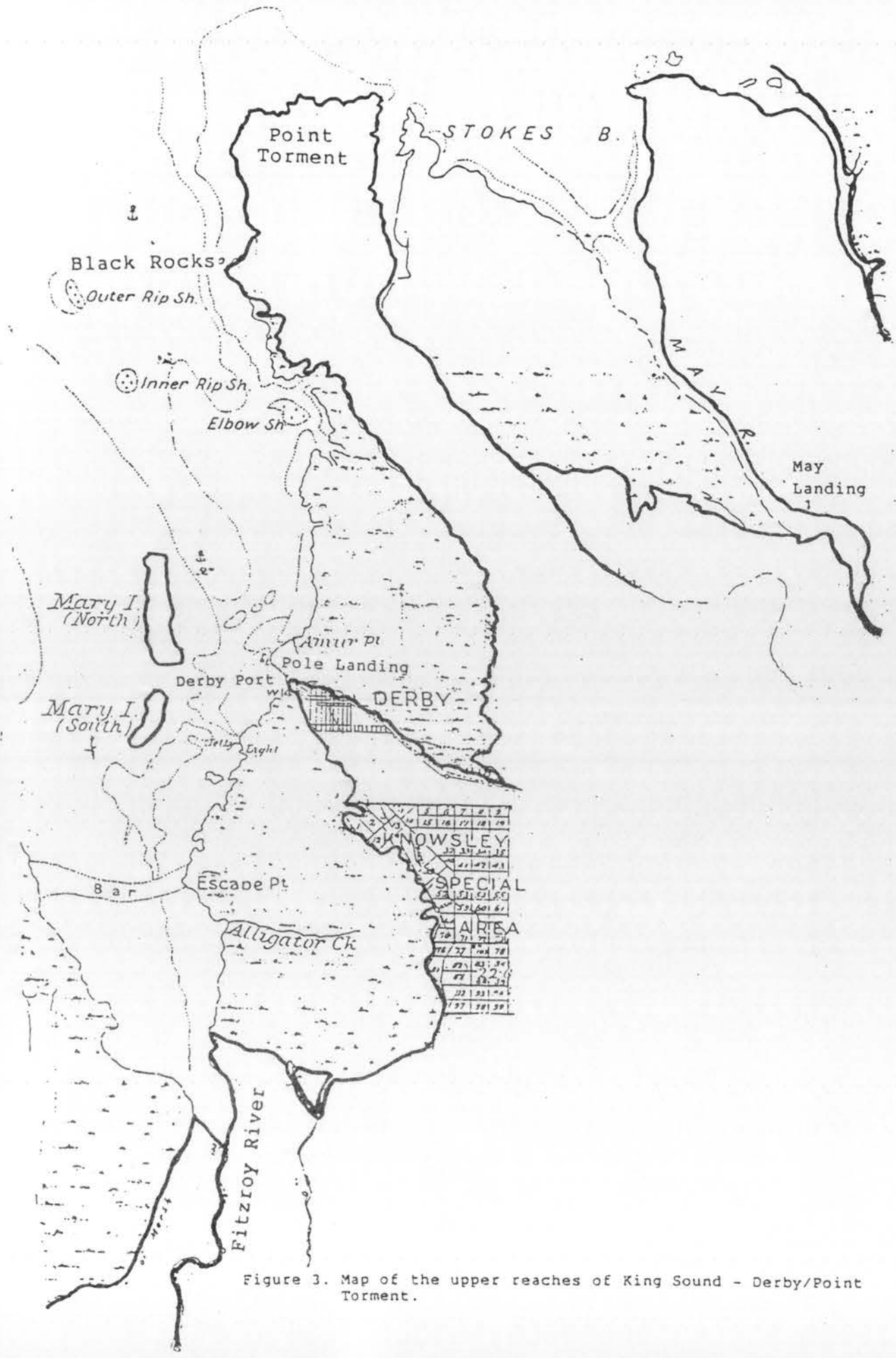


Figure 3. Map of the upper reaches of King Sound - Derby/Point Torment.

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University, 1986, pp.7-11; Fairbairn, although  
criticised by pastoralists for his report on the  
Ashburton conflict, had been publicly praised by the  
Colonial Secretary for his ability to defuse trouble  
between pastoralists and Aborigines.
21. C.S.O., file 1080.
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death of a local pastoralist, Anthony Cornish, at the  
hands of Aborigines in December 1882. Police protection  
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## CHAPTER 2

### COMPROMISE: THE PORT OF DERBY

Problems at the new port site became apparent during the unloading of stores and building materials from the Amur. The ship had to stand off in deep water and high tides damaged or washed away building materials landed on the mud bank (1). Fairbairn calculated it would take three months to unload the Amur using the longboat as a ferry and he ordered Captain O'Grady to take the remaining cargo south to Cossack, the port for the North District (2). The Colonial Government criticised this decision, but Fairbairn pointed out that he had not been supplied with a lighter to unload the ship as he had requested (3). He claimed to have been at the mercy of the ship's captain,

... to whom it mattered little whether his crew worked or played so long as his vessel was earning eight pounds per day. Although the whole responsibility of finding a landing space and of landing the timber etc was thrown upon my shoulders, I was never consulted in Perth about the chartering of the ship (4).

Captains of large ships shared O'Grady's concerns about the pole landing and refused to risk the tidal rips, mud banks, inadequate anchorage and lack of a landing; instead, they broached the steep shoreline at Point Torment to unload cargo (5). Goods landed at both sites were vulnerable to

damage, pilferage and exposure to weather and tide, but more so at the pole landing (6). Pastoralists, concerned about the unsuitability of this site, recommended that the Government shift the settlement to Point Torment. Their complaints were ignored and the Government sent Works Foreman, P.E. Dunne, to Derby to construct a tramway across the marsh. Despite his best efforts, a lack of understanding of the effect of the tides on the marsh, inadequate planning, lack of materials, and washaways at high tide prevented him from achieving his objective (7). Criticism about the mounting cost of the project caused the Government to cancel it (8).

Under the conditions prevailing at the port, pastoralists objected to paying customs duty and called a public meeting to protest the lack of facilities (9). Surveyor H.F. Johnston gave them hope when he laid out a townsite at Point Torment 'in the event of that place being selected as a settlement' (10). However, the Government continued to ignore their complaints and called for tenders to construct a bond store at Derby, giving the revenue-generating aspects of the port a higher priority than the need for an adequate landing to serve the new settlement (11). Pastoralists held regular meetings to apply pressure on the Government. Whether having John Forrest in a position of growing political influence, and his brother Alexander heavily



involved in sales of Kimberley leases, gave pastoralists an advantage is unclear (12). In 1885, the Government allocated five thousand pounds for construction of a landing platform at Derby but made no provision for a tramway (13). Although pastoralists believed that no reasonable sized ships could use the landing and that it should be built at Point Torment, the Government persisted (14).

Early Lands and Surveys maps show a landing approximately two kilometres south of the present jetty site and I believe this to be the site of the first landing platform. The absence of mangroves, vertical banks and a narrow channel of deep water near the bank made it suitable for small ships and satisfies the description of the basin in which the Amur anchored (15). Although welcome, the small landing, equipped only with a seven metre square shed, did not satisfy needs. An un-named correspondent to the Inquirer reported on-going concern about the lack of a tramway - the only means of traversing the marsh when it remained boggy for several days after each high tide.

We now have a good jetty instead of landing our goods below the high water mark; but the great drawback we have now is the [lack of a] tramline across the marsh ... this is a serious obstacle to the welfare of the district at large (16).

Dissatisfied with the lack of Government action, pastoralists offered to finance construction of a tramway themselves (17).

Nothing came of this and the tramway became an issue again in May 1886 when Derby residents petitioned the Commissioner Of Lands, John Forrest, during a visit to Derby. He advised the Government that he considered a tramway to be 'absolutely necessary for the ... existence of this place of shipment' (18). In December 1887 Parliament approved expenditure of 35,000 pounds for the construction of a jetty and tramway at Derby (19). Jetty construction was underway twelve months later, but without plans for a tramway (20). Nearly five years after its founding, the port served the district poorly.

The discovery of gold at Halls Creek in the East Kimberley in 1886, gave a fillip to the port of Derby and created a local market for meat (21). The goldrush also brought the first threat to Derby's status as the centre for the West Kimberley when the Government received a proposal to construct a direct overland road and telegraph link between Roebuck Bay and Halls Creek (22). Despite rejection of the proposal, Derby lost much of the goldfield traffic when the route from Halls Creek to the new port of Wyndham, in Cambridge Gulf, became popular (23).

A wool price slump in the late 1880s influenced West Kimberley pastoralists to introduce a greater proportion of cattle to their leases and this change exacerbated marketing

and transport problems through the Derby port (24). Cattle were slung aboard ship by rope, 'a slow and tedious process, in which it took two days to handle a mob of three or four hundred bullocks' (25). Conditions did not improve until a cattle race was built at Derby in 1894 but, even then, navigation problems in the harbour and its approaches limited access to a few vessels capable of sitting on the bottom at low tide (26). Consequently, available 'shipping space [proved] inadequate to cope with the entire turnoff of the Kimberley' (27).

The Derby jetty, shown pictorially in Appendix 5, is 100 kilometers from the ocean at the head of King Sound and subject to 10 metre tides. At high water spring tides the berth had 5 metres of water, but at low water springs the sea bed at the end of the jetty was 5 metres above water level (28). Ships with reinforced hulls could settle on the bottom at low tide using fenders to stabilise against the jetty but, because the jetty "dries", vessels had only a short time to negotiate the approaches (29).

In 1926, the Commonwealth Government tabled a report from Sir George Buchanan, a British engineer specialising in ports and transport systems (30). The Government had commissioned the report to investigate the ways improved transport systems could stimulate development in northern

Australia (31). Although he focused primarily on the Northern Territory, Buchanan also commented on the Kimberley (32). Even so, Buchanan did not visit the district and relied on secondary evidence from local engineers and William Easton's report of his 1921 Kimberley expedition (33). Buchanan suggested better sites for a port than Derby could be found in the West Kimberley, but concluded that these would be useless without supporting road or railway facilities. He commented that government had the responsibility to decide whether new facilities should be built, but observed that available traffic did not justify the cost of a new port (34). The report contained no new information and the Western Australian Government took no action. Indeed, port deficiencies were not addressed for two decades.

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### CHAPTER 3

#### THE BLACK ROCKS PORT POLICY

Between 1916 and 1942, East Kimberley pastoralists were better placed to market cattle than their counterparts in the west because of access to the Government-owned meatworks in Wyndham. This changed during World War II when the risk of invasion by Japanese forces forced the Government to close it down until hostilities ceased. For this period, East Kimberley pastoralists had a choice of droving cattle to Wave Hill in the Northern Territory to supply the Armed Forces or using the Canning Stock Route to overland cattle to the Wiluna railhead for transport to southern markets (3).

The War also caused suspension of live shipments from Derby because coastal ships would not venture further north than Broome. The port of Broome thus became the only outlet for the West Kimberley. Cattle could be exported through that port or processed at the nearby meatworks built by the Farrell family in 1940 (4). After hostilities in the islands to the north of Australia abated, the Wyndham meatworks again took cattle from the East Kimberley, while the Farrell meatworks at Broome continued accepting cattle from the West Kimberley (5). Although live shipments through Derby resumed, pastoralists located away from these three centres still suffered a disadvantaged; cattle had to be at least

five years old to withstand long drives to outlets (8).

In the post-War period, cattle delivered to Kimberley meatworks in reasonable condition fetched 8 pounds 15 shillings a head. Cattle shipped live from Derby realised twelve pounds, but exporters risked high losses during the sea voyage (6). In the first three years after the war, West Kimberley properties turned off 14,000 head of cattle. The Broome meatworks took 6,000 of these and the rest were shipped live through the port of Derby for slaughter at abattoirs near Fremantle (7).

In 1945, in an attempt to reform the industry, the Labor Government proposed relocating the Broome meatworks near King Sound where it would be more central to the industry. The proposal included a new deep water berth that would allow shipping to avoid navigational restrictions at the port of Derby (10). Improvements included: location of the port in a more spacious area on firm ground away from the marsh; a 24 hour berth accessible by overseas vessels at all tides; improved port turn-around; and expansion of the Asian export trade. Pastoralists would benefit from a shorter turnoff period for their cattle, reduced shipping costs, better prices for younger beef and improved access to markets, while consumers could expect greater quantities of better quality meat at similar prices. The State Shipping



Service would benefit from access to more cargo (9). In some respects, the proposal reflected Labor's pre-World War I meat price and State Steamer policies which were designed to improved market access as a means of reforming the meat industry.

As the first step formuiating a policy, the Premier, F.J. Wise, instructed the Minister of Works and Member for Kimberley, F. Coverley, to find a site for a deep water port near Derby (12). The task was given to Public Works Department District Engineer, C. Dimond, who, after rejecting Port Usborne, nominated Point Torment as the most suitable location for the port (13). The Department found underground water near the point, dispelling John Forrest's objections to the site, and hydrographic surveys by HMAS Lachlan confirmed the suitability of Black Rocks on the western shore of Point Torment for a deep-water port (14). The Derby Road Board supported the proposal by agreeing to relocate the town of Derby to Black Rocks if 'a deep water jetty could be established, suitable for vessels of big tonnage' (15). At the time, Derby had fewer than forty houses, two hotels (both condemned), no power supply and few public buildings (16). The prospect of moving the town to a better location seemed attractive and logistically simple, but neither the Western Australian or Commonwealth Governments had funds available to implement the new policy

because of commitments to post-War reconstruction (17).

After winning Government in April 1947, the Liberal/Country Party Coalition refused to continue support for this Labor-sponsored policy which was designed to benefit a Labor electorate. The Director of Works, Russell Dumas, recorded the Government's new emphasis when he told the Under Secretary for the North West that the cost estimate of 795,000 pounds would

... only be warranted by some development of great importance ... It was for this possible contingency that the investigation was initiated (18).

The pastoral industry refused to accept the Coalition's rejection of Black Rocks, forcing it to consider a compromise. The Government achieved this by separating the meatworks from the port proposal and seeking industry support through meetings with major stock firms - Emanuel Bros., Elder Smith & Co., and Dalgety & Company Limited. These stock firms rationalised the modified policy by agreeing that the

... need for the meatworks in Derby seems to lie in the better use which could be made of the West Kimberley production ... [that Derby was a] more suitable site for a meatworks than Broome, on account of the droving that would be saved (19).

The companies informed the Government that a meatworks at Derby had the potential to lift Kimberley beef production by thirty percent (20). Faced with an alternative of no reform, the industry accepted relocation of the meatworks as a

separate policy issue. Dimond, now Principal Assistant North West, supported the relocation with a cost analysis of both the Broome and Derby sites. Dumas again recorded the Government's policy when he noted that 'if the town of Derby is not to be moved, then consideration will be given to the transfer of the Meatworks from Broome to Derby' (21).

The Coalition's decision to truncate the Black Rocks policy overlooked the main stimulus for the Black Rocks port/meatworks policy - long-standing navigational restrictions and hazards at Derby. The modified policy left transport dependent upon ships with specially reinforced hulls capable of sitting on the bottom at low tide at Derby. In addition, an opportunity to improve the export trade would be lost and consumers would lose access to high quality produce. The contest for control of meat marketing in the Kimberley began to shape up in much the same way as Labor's attempts to reform the industry in the 1910s (22).

Control of the Black Rocks meatworks had been promised to the Farrell family by the Labor Government, but the Coalition's modified policy threw this into doubt. To clarify the situation, Farrell lobbied the Premier, Ross McLarty, on behalf of his family and, in return for an undertaking to construct it from family resources, were given preference to operate the Derby meatworks (23).

However, Kimberley pastoralist L.G. Blythe, who owned Glenroy and Mt. House pastoral leases in the central Kimberley, announced the formation of Air Beef Ltd, giving rise to doubts that a meatworks would ever be built at either Derby or Black Rocks. Ownership of the new company rested with Australian National Airways, MacRobertson Miller Aviation, and the Blythe family; Robert Rowell, Chairman of the West Kimberley Road Board, assisted in its formation (24). Air Beef, as it was commonly known, built an abattoir at Glenroy Station, north of the King Leopold Range, and airfreighted chilled carcasses to Wyndham for processing and shipment (25). Both State and Federal Governments supported the scheme with fuel subsidies for aircraft and interest free loans (26). The scheme benefitted Central Kimberley pastoralists who had otherwise to overland cattle to Wyndham, but threatened to reduce turnover at the State-owned meatworks at Wyndham and the Farrell meatworks at Broome. The Glenroy meatworks also had the potential to syphon cattle from properties that would otherwise supply the proposed Derby meatworks (27). In an attempt to preserve the viability of the Derby meatworks, Dimond suggested that Air Beef output be flown there instead of Wyndham. He proposed that aircraft carrying carcasses from Glenroy use the old air-strip, next to the meatworks site and the Derby jetty (28). Although a sound idea, given that the Government had chosen to ignore port limitations at Derby, Air Beef

adhered to its original plan and shipped through Wyndham (29).

While publicly supporting the Derby meatworks and agreeing with Farrell's request, the Coalition had negotiated with Air Beef and the Commonwealth on subsidies. Rejecting Dimond's suggestion confirmed the Coalition's unwillingness to support any aspect of Black Rocks, including its own policy modifications.

Although the Coalition expected the Glenroy meatworks would provide the additional outlet needed in the Central and West Kimberley, pastoralists south of the King Leopold Range were no better off and lobbying for Black Rocks continued. In another attempt to divert attention from Black Rocks, the Coalition appointed a committee consisting of the Assistant Under Treasurer, the Manager of the State Shipping Service, the General Manager of the Wyndham Meatworks (Farrell), the Under Secretary for Agriculture, the President and Secretary of the Pastoralists Association, and the Director of Works. Broadly based, the committee included Farrell and pastoral industry representatives who would support either Black Rocks or the Derby meatworks. However, the Government took steps to control the agenda by directing the Committee to report on two questions which contained no direct reference to the Black Rocks proposal - 'Should a deep sea port be established at Broome?' and 'Should the Meatworks be

transferred from Broome to Derby?' (30) In the original minute signed by Premier McLarty, the first question had read 'Should a deep sea port be established at Derby?', but 'Derby' had been crossed out and 'Broome' hand written by the Premier (31). The original minute would not have been submitted to, or accepted by, the Premier with such a significant error, and the alteration was clearly an after-thought. If considered in conjunction with McLarty's pre-War support for a meatworks in the West Kimberley to stimulate exports, this minute indicates some support still existed within the Coalition for Black Rocks (32). I have concluded that the most likely explanation for the alteration is Coalition concern about the committee's findings - that it might favour Black Rocks. The terms of reference steered the committee away from arriving at this conclusion.

As it turned out, the committee ignored the narrow terms of reference and delivered a rebuff to the Coalition. They reported that both Derby and Broome were tidal ports and inaccessible to overseas ships. The Committee also found that Broome had little "back country" to support the local meatworks and recommended that it be moved to Derby - in conjunction with a new port and town. The Committee advised that pastoralists were willing to contribute a levy of six shillings per head of cattle processed at the meatworks toward the cost of relocation (33). Finally, the Committee

recommended a delay of two years before a final decision was made - to facilitate an assessment of market potential for Kimberley beef (34). No doubt about the market for Kimberley beef had previously been raised and the delay can be construed as offering a consolation for the Coalition - and for Air Beef which could ill-afford the competition.

Further support for the Derby meatworks emanated from the Main Roads Department which forecast that, if the meatworks remained at Broome, the Derby-Broome road would have to be upgraded at considerable cost to cope with anticipated growth in road transport (35). Dalgety & Company Limited provided unexpected support for Labor's original Black Rocks policy with advice that the Blue Funnel Line would provide a full service to a deep water port in the West Kimberley. The Company's overseas vessels from the China and Malayan trade would connect with 'Point Torment, Wyndham and Darwin, and thus ... enable a large deficit on the State steamers to be materially reduced' (36).

In 1950, the Kimberley Development Committee attempted to rationalise competing facets of the pastoral industry in the West Kimberley by recommending

...that the Black Rocks port should be developed ... the Broome meatworks transferred to the new port site at Black Rocks ... the new meatworks will be the outlet for Air Beef Ltd (37).

The Committee made several comments which, in view of developments over the next four decades, were quite prophetic: a port could not operate successfully from the existing site; if the existing port remained, overseas exports would have to be trans-shipped; relocating the port at a later date would be a major project; a new port at Black Rocks would reduce State Shipping Service losses; and private shipping companies were no longer willing to build special ships capable of sitting on the bottom at Kimberley ports (38). The West Kimberley Road Board supported the Committee's recommendations but, understandably, the Broome Road Board opposed the recommendations (39).

By this time, the pastoral lobby had tired of Government inaction. The prospect of significant savings in time and money through the elimination of existing transport problems, as well as a longer killing season, attracted the industry. In October 1950, the West Kimberley District Committee of the Pastoralists Association announced total support for Labor's Black Rocks policy (40). The Pastoralists Association of Western Australia backed them with a comment directed at both State and Federal Governments when they expressed 'extreme ... disappointed at the lack of interest in West Kimberley' (41). This overwhelming support from the industry forced the Government to withdraw its opposition and reinstate the Black Rocks policy. Premier



McLarty advised the Prime Minister, R.G. Menzies, that

... failing the discovery of oil or other valuable mineral deposits, the development of the Kimberley must commence with the pastoral industry ... the correct outlet for the Kimberley is in the vicinity of Derby (42).

However, McLarty advised the Minister for Lands that the project would only go ahead if the Commonwealth provided funds (43). The Federal Government responded by deferring consideration of funding until a joint State/Commonwealth committee reported on this and other northern development schemes across Australia (44). Despite widespread support, the Black Rocks policy and the separate meatworks proposal remained suspended with responsibility effectively transferred to the Federal Government (45). Vacillation over the policy delayed decisions on related issues - construction of a new hotel and additional housing for either Derby or Black Rocks, an inland abattoir at Fitzroy Crossing, and a new State ship (46).

A few months later, I.H. Grabowsky, Operations Manager of Australian National Airways and a director of Air Beef, proposed that a chiller be built at Fitzroy Crossing with refrigerated lighterage provided at Derby. This would facilitate 'the transfer of the carcasses ... to an overseas ship, which could be anchored in a suitable channel' near Point Torment (47). The proposal threatened both Black Rocks and the Derby meatworks because, firstly, slaughter

facilities at Fitzroy Crossing would remove any likelihood of a meatworks being built in Derby and, secondly, the barge proposal weakened industry pressure for a new port. In addition, Grabowsky's plan created an opportunity for Air Beef to salvage its profitability by both taking control of marketing south of the King Leopold Range and competing more effectively against the Broome meatworks. The State Government, still dependent upon the Commonwealth for funds for capital works, could not finance the proposal and Air Beef's low, subsidy-dependent profitability prevented it from meeting the cost. Despite the attractiveness of Grabowsky's proposal, because of the lower capital cost, it did not succeed.

The policy situation changed again in 1953 when Labor resumed Government and revived Black Rocks. The Minister for Works, John Tonkin, called for 'early action to meet the growing requirements of this part of the State' (48). By now, the projected cost of the new port had risen to 1.6 million pounds, but Dimond expressed the opinion that

... to retain the existing unsatisfactory Derby jetty would act as a severe brake on the development of the Central and West Kimberleys (sic) and that, if the Black Rocks scheme is not to be proceeded with, very expensive remodeling of the Derby jetty is considered imperative (49).

Animosity arising from delays to the port/meatworks policy surfaced soon after the election. Air Beef applied for renewal of its Commonwealth-funded air freight subsidy and the Labor Premier, A.R.G. Hawke, sent a copy of Grabowsky's application to Wyndham for Farrell's comments. In his reply, Farrell accused Grabowsky of making false statements about the profitability of Glenroy, claiming that Air Beef had misrepresented comparisons between the relative costs of droving cattle to Wyndham and airfreighting carcasses. Farrell's letters to Hawke suggest considerable hostility toward Grabowsky and Air Beef (50). Hawke would not have taken the debate out of the political arena to Farrell unless confident of his support. He counted on Farrell seeing the Air Beef application as a continuing threat to his family business and a reminder of Air Beef's role in the failure of the Derby meatworks project. If the Farrells formed a business link with Air Beef it would create a monopoly in the Central and West Kimberley that would remove any hope of Labor being able to implement Black Rocks. Farrell's continued antagonism toward Air Beef ensured little risk of this happening.

Using Farrell's accusations as justification, the State Government refused to support renewal of the joint State/Commonwealth subsidy. Acting Prime Minister, Arthur Fadden, suggested that Hawke reconsider his decision and, in the

face of a further refusal, remitted a special grant to the State to cover the total cost of renewing the subsidy (51). Even so, Hawke refused to have anything to do with it, directing all claims from Air Beef to the Commonwealth (52). Although unable to cripple Air Beef by refusing to support the subsidy, Hawke moved to protect Black Rocks by sealing off any opportunity for that company to operate in the Fitzroy Crossing area. He achieved this by giving the Farrell family permission to slaughter at Fitzroy Crossing and transport carcasses to Broome (53).

In 1955, ten years after being formulated, implementation of the Black Rocks policy seemed unlikely. Dumas advised the Under Secretary for Lands that the Government would make no early attempt to relocate the Broome meatworks to Derby (54).

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4. *ibid*, p.291.
5. *ibid*, pp.291,301.
6. PWD, file 923/45.
7. PWD, file 923/48.
8. PWD, file 923/45.
9. PWD, file 1377/24.
10. *ibid*.
11. Baker, R.E., 'The State Steamship Service versus the Wyndham Meatworks: Meat Price Policies in Western Australia, 1911-1915', Independent Study Contract, Murdoch University, 1989.
12. PWD, file 1377/24.
13. PWD, files 1591/30, 393/36.
14. *ibid*; see Appendix 2 for plans of the Black Rocks site.
15. PWD, file 1372/45.
16. PWD, file 923/48.
17. PWD, file 1377/24.
18. PWD, file 923/45; Dumas, (later Sir Russell Dumas), had a high profile in decision-making in development projects in the State while Director of Works and his minutes are an accurate reflection of government policy.
19. *ibid*.

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43. *ibid.*

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45. West Australian, 15 May 1953.
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47. PWD, file 1372/45.
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## CHAPTER 4

### BLACK ROCKS ABANDONED

Although Black Rocks remained stalled because of the lack of funds, the State continued to promote development of the Kimberley. In 1955, the Commonwealth refused a State request for 11.5 million pounds to develop the Ord River Scheme because of its unwillingness to become involved in any large, long-term development projects (1). Two years later, an all-party delegation from the Western Australian Parliament unsuccessfully submitted a list of development projects worth 25 million pounds for the North West and Kimberley. The Ord River scheme accounted for 20 million with the balance for other projects that included Black Rocks (2). In the face of mounting criticism of his Government's recalcitrance on northern development, Menzies offered Western Australia a five year grant of 2.5 million pounds 'to promote the development of that area of your State north of the 20th parallel of latitude' (3).

The Western Australian Leader of the Opposition, David Brand, praised the grant which would 'obviate international criticism for holding such fertile and potentially rich land undeveloped and unpopulated' (4). But Premier Hawke criticised the amount offered, because it 'fell far short of the needs of that part of the State' (5). As the State



expected no additional funding, the Minister for Works, John Tonkin, nominated Black Rocks as a priority for the grant with the balance being allocated to up-grading the Broome and Wyndham jetties (6). In September 1958, Menzies approved Black Rocks' inclusion for funds under the grant, clearing the way for implementation of the project (7).

Graham-Taylor suggested that the State Government had

... no well defined projects for development in the North West ... suggested by the fact that Premier Hawke did not submit proposals to the Commonwealth for three months (8).

Ten years had passed since Black Rocks had been formulated and the State needed time to revise and up-date costings for projects to be considered under this spontaneous grant. In these circumstances, three months is not a long period for government to make a reassessment.

Not satisfied with the level of funding, the West Australian embarked on a campaign to wring more money out of the Commonwealth (9). In editorials and articles during 1957 and 1958, the newspaper suggested that the level of the grant showed Federal Government intention to see northern development continue 'more or less as impoverished State Governments have been doing for over half a century' (10). One editorial described the 2.5 million pound grant as 'merely playing with the problem' saying that the Federal

Coalition should attempt to match Labor's Snowy River Scheme by supporting the Ord River development proposal (11). The Federal Opposition Leader, H.V. Evatt, reacted by promising that a Labor Government would fund the Ord proposal (12). Menzies, pressured by impending elections, responded to the growing public criticism by doubling the original grant to 5 million pounds (13). The West Australian, still unimpressed, described the Prime Minister's response as 'extremely disappointing' arguing that the additional grant would 'not alter the face of the North or solve any of its basic problems' (14). Unprepared to commit itself to any further expenditure in the north of Western Australia, the Commonwealth rejected a suggestion that the second grant be spent on the Ord scheme (15). With no other significant project available in the designated area - north of the 20th parallel - the State Government decided to spend the additional improving other Kimberley ports (16).

The Commonwealth made the second grant in response to media pressure during an election campaign, knowing that the State had no individual project - other than the Ord - to justify funding of this magnitude. With a State election pending and the State Coalition likely to win government in Western Australia, I believe that the Federal Coalition attempted to satisfy media pressure and enhance Liberal/Country Party standing while making additional funds readily available for

an incoming State Coalition Government.

During the ensuing State election campaign, Premier Hawke received advice that

... very strong views had been expressed [by Derby residents] that the [existing] Port should be developed by dredging so that the present site could be used instead of the proposed one at Black Rocks (17).

This change in local attitude to Black Rocks can be attributed to growth that had occurred in Derby since the initial announcement of the policy. The number of houses had doubled, a power supply had been installed and new buildings erected, including quarters for the District Medical Officer, additions to the Junior Technical School, a new primary school, Public Works and Main Roads Department offices, and a fuel depot (18).

After the election, State and Federal politicians who visited Derby advised the new Coalition Premier, David Brand, that

... there has been considerable local controversy regarding the merits of Black Rocks. The people of Derby naturally feel a little perturbed at the prospect of their town languishing if a port were developed at Black Rocks ... approximately thirty road miles away from the present townsite ... there would be a tendency for a new settlement to establish at the new port (19).

Although there is no indication of the source of the complaints, local rumour in the late 1960s and 1970s suggested that the West Kimberley Road Board played a

significant part (20). Rowell, the Board Chairman, later became prominent as a senior strategist for Liberal Party in Western Australia and undoubtedly local opposition to Black Rocks enhanced the prospect of the Coalition being able to cancel the policy (21). The Parliamentary party relayed a suggestion that the approaches to the Derby jetty be dredged as an alternative to Black Rocks. The new Director of Works, J.M. Young, costed the proposal at 2.5 million pounds. He reported that 5 million tons of material would have to be dredged to create a channel 13,000 feet long and a turning basin 2,000 feet in diameter to cater for vessels of 28 feet draught. The cost of maintenance dredging in the basin would be very high and, even then, it would not be a 24 hour port. Vessels of around 28 feet draught would have to anchor off Black Rocks during tides of less than low water neaps (22).

During this period, criticism of the Commonwealth Government's failure to support major development in the north continued. This prompted the State Coalition to step up the campaign to terminate Black Rocks and divert the grant money to a project identifiable with their Parties. Although Labor had made a similar unsuccessful request, Premier Brand obtained Commonwealth approval to include the Ord River diversion dam in the list of projects to be included in the grants (23). The Brand Government needed an excuse to abandon Black Rocks and, to achieve this, commissioned a report from a consortium

of construction engineers, Maunsell and Partners, who were asked to report

... not necessarily ... on the respective merits of Derby and Black Rocks, but more on the question of where is the best place in the West Kimberleys (sic) to build a deep water port (24).

The parameters included a minimum depth of 35 feet of water at low tide, although all previous studies - including the proposal to dredge the Derby port - were based upon a minimum depth of 28 feet (25). Surveys by HMAS Lachlan had confirmed that Black Rocks had thirty feet of water available at the deep berth (26). This parameter placed an unreasonable restriction on the outcome, particularly in view of Blue Funnel Line's specifications for a new ship with a loaded draught of 28 feet for the Fremantle-Singapore route (27). The report prejudiced any chance of Black Rocks being accepted and the West Kimberley Road Board wrote to the Minister for North West, Charles Court, protesting the consultant's report, without effect (28). Greater potential for political reward, at a time of national interest in development of the north, could be generated by focusing on projects with wider voter appeal (29).

In December 1960, Premier Brand advised the Prime Minister that the Black Rocks project had been suspended,

... as the balance of the 5 million grant will be insufficient to finance the construction of a deep water port (30).

The validity of this statement is questionable. The Ord River scheme absorbed four million pounds from the grants - more than enough to establish the Black Rocks port/meatworks project (31).

A list of proposals compiled in July 1962 for 'Development of the North West' confirmed the fate of Black Rocks. It included a proposal for 'Replacement of Derby Jetty' - at the existing site - at a cost of 800,000 pounds (32). In March 1963, Derby's claim to the West Kimberley shrunk further when the State Government submitted a request for a Commonwealth grant of 1.2 million pounds over three years for 'replacement of Broome Jetty in deep water (30 feet) to serve West Kimberleys (sic) area' (33). The depth of water specified was less than that recommended by Maunsell and Partners - and the same as available at the Black Rocks deep berth.

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## CHAPTER 5

### 1983, THE PORT OF DERBY ABANDONED

The new Liberal/Country Party Government rejected the opportunity to solve long-standing navigational problems of the port. Indeed, by replacing the Black Rocks policy, the Brand Government further entrenched port deficiencies. Construction of the new steel and concrete jetty, next to the old wooden structure was completed in November 1964 (1). That same month a fuel tanker, the M.V. Tanea, collided with the old jetty while attempting to berth - a common event for ships attempting to manoeuvre the small turning basin in six knot tides (2). The Government immediately opened the new jetty to save the cost of temporary repairs to the old structure (3).

Less than twelve months later, the Blue Funnel Line threatened to boycott the port. Their ship, the M.V. Centaur, plied coastal ports between Fremantle and Singapore. The threat worried the Government because this ship formed the main link in livestock and frozen meat exports to South East Asia (4). The Blue Funnel Line claimed that the condition of the seabed at the new jetty placed the Centaur at risk. The ship had a narrow keel entry and was trimmed to be two feet down at the stern. On a falling tide,

it had a tendency to sink unevenly into the mud, allowing the bow to lift clear of the bottom. When this happened, most of the ship's weight concentrated in the mid-section (5). For the ship to rest without undue stress on the hull, the seabed needed to be firm, and graded to suit the slope of the keel (6).

Aware of the impact a boycott would have on the district, the Blue Funnel Line engaged a firm of marine engineers and architects, Crooks, Mitchell, Peacock and Stewart, to investigate the problem. The consultants were advised that

... pressures existed to see that if possible Derby was to be an export port for the Kimberleys (sic), commensurate in capacity with the large sum expended on the wharf structure and cattle facilities (7).

Their report substantiated the owner's concern that, although the Centaur had a heavily reinforced hull, an unacceptable risk of damage existed. They suggested

... that the Derby wharf was located without sufficient investigation of the likely effect on the seabed by the grounding of the Centaur (8).

The consultants recommended that the ship not make any further calls at Derby until 'extensive work had been carried out on the sea bottom' (9).

In an attempt to provide a solution to the problem, Harbours and Rivers Engineer, D. Gillespie, sandbagged the seabed at the berth, expecting this would prevent the ship's stern

from sinking (10). The experiment did not succeed because the weight of the ship displaced the sandbags in the soft mud (11). Gillespie then suggested replacing the mud and clay bottom with sandy shale from the Fitzroy River, but the Blue Funnel Line refused to accept this proposal and struck Derby from the Centaur's schedule (12).

Cancellation of the service caused problems for the newly commissioned Derby meatworks. Construction of a network of 'beef roads' in the Kimberley removed justification for air freight subsidies to Air Beef, leading to closure of the Glenroy meatworks at the end of 1964 killing season (13). When this happened, Blythe obtained a Commonwealth Development Bank Loan and built a meat processing plant at Derby to package pet food for the local and overseas markets (14). Withdrawal of the Centaur's overseas service through Derby disadvantaged Blythe's company and he had to absorb the extra cost of trans-shipping his meat products through another port (15). In an attempt to minimise costs, he asked the Government to reconsider Grabowsky's plan which called for lighters to service ships anchored in deep water off Point Torment (16). The Government, still smarting from the rapid failure of its alternative to Black Rocks, refused.

Concerned about the loss of trade and its effect on the district, the Shire of West Kimberley applied for a grant of

\$200,000 to cover the cost of dredging and filling the new berth, as recommended by Gillespie. The Government refused this application because the Blue Funnel Line would not guarantee to accept the dredge and fill operation as a permanent solution (17). The only acceptable outcome for the company was a concrete platform built into the seabed and fitted with shaped blocks to match the Centaur's hull (18). Because of the Centaur's unusual contour, these blocks would not suit any other vessel (19). The Government refused to consider this proposal and the Minister for Industrial Development and the North West, Charles Court, advised the Minister for Works, Ross Hutchinson, that

It is unfortunate that the Centaur cannot call at Derby but, in the absence of a substantial contribution from the company, one has to accept the inevitable. The position is all the more regretted because of the way the Derby people have tried very hard in recent years to help themselves (20).

The Government shipping line and a small tanker that brought fuel direct from Singapore to North West ports remained the only continuing users of the port (21). These vessels were modified to enable them to sit on the bottom at Derby. Over a period, the Public Works Department built up a pad of coarse sand at the berth to reduce the likelihood of ships settling unevenly at low tide, but the overseas trade through Derby had been lost (22).

Air Beef, the Blue Funnel Line and local business people expected the Government to continue the long-standing custom of providing basic facilities for private developers. But, by the 1960s, large-scale development projects increasingly competed for resources. In addition, Western Australia lost its status as a 'Claimant State' and was therefore no longer entitled to special consideration from the Grants Commission (23). Developers now had to meet the cost of essential capital works themselves. Given the low level of trade in the area, Derby was fortunate to have any money spent of the port. That it did is attributable to a program by the Liberal Party to wrest the Legislative Assembly seat of Kimberley away from Labor. The Party won the seat in 1968 with the election of K.A. Ridge, the Derby Shire Clerk. Shire President, Robert Rowell managed his election campaign (25).

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the State Shipping Service continued to service the port of Derby. When the new jetty opened, the State Shipping Service operated a fleet of seven small vessels, the largest being 4,100 dwt. By 1973 these had been replaced with four vessels of 7,000 dwt and the passenger service, eroded by expanding airline traffic, had been abandoned (26). However, State Shipping Service cargo continued to dwindle in the face of competition from road transport on the upgraded Perth-Derby coastal highway. Road

trains offered a faster turnaround, eventually absorbing most of the cargo on offer, leaving only bulky and heavy-lift items to the ships (27).

In an attempt to improve the viability of the fleet in the face of this erosion of business, Stateships adopted a new name and revamped its operation to include a service to Papua/New Guinea and the Eastern States (28). A further policy change embraced a world-wide trend in shipping of employing the 'largest ship sizes capable of being employed in each trade, in order to achieve economies of scale' (29). This policy led to the Stateships fleet being equipped with three even larger ships - the Pilbara and Koolinda, each 12,780 dwt, and the Kimberley, 22,000 dwt (30). The Pilbara and Koolinda were both modified to enable them to berth at Derby but, because of their size, had difficulty negotiating the turning basin (31).

In November 1981, as mentioned in the introduction, strong winds and a fast flowing tide hampered the Pilbara's attempt to come about in the Derby harbour and it lost 'way'. Uncontrollable, the ship ran aground on a shoal and all the crew's attempts to free it on successive tides failed. A tug hauled it off the shoal several days later but the Pilbara suffered major structural damage and did not return to service for months (32). As a direct result of this

accident, Stateships reduced the level of service to Derby while the Public Works Department undertook a hydrographic survey of the jetty approaches.

The survey showed that shoaling had reduced the available depth of water in some critical areas by one metre, reducing the port safety rating from 17,000 dwt to 12,000 dwt (33). The new safety limit excluded all Stateships vessels from the port, leaving the 3,000 dwt fuel tanker as the only regular user of the jetty (34). The Public Works Department estimated the cost of dredging the approaches by one metre at 1.6 million dollars (36). Not satisfied with this, Stateships refused to resume servicing the port without provision of a 9.1 metre channel - at a cost of 3 million dollars (37). A report in the West Australian, probably based on Transport Strategy Committee findings, suggested that it would cost 5 million dollars to make the Derby port accessible to ships of 25,000 tonnes and consequently, 'the port of Derby should be abandoned and a new port be built at Black Rocks' (38). The Department of Marine and Harbours closed the port in 1983 - one hundred years after John Forrest and Robert Fairbairn selected the site (39).

Reservations about the suitability of the port of Derby had been expressed throughout its life by: Captain O'Grady in 1883, Sir George Buchanan in 1926, the West Kimberley Road

Board and the people of Derby in the 1940s, Western Australian Governments in the 1940s and 1950s, the West Kimberley District Committee of the Pastoralists Association and the Kimberley Development Committee in 1950, and the Blue Funnel Line in the 1950s and 1960s. The events of the 1980s vindicated their concern and gave credence to the belief that a new port should have been built at Black Rocks.



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## CHAPTER SIX

### PORT LIMITATIONS AND THE ECONOMIC BASE

My analysis in Chapters Three to Five have shown that Labor followed a long standing principle of government responsibility for provision of capital works in remote areas. This explains why Grabowsky approached the Government to finance lighters to service large ships anchored in King Sound. Although a more economically valid proposition than either Black Rocks or the new Derby jetty, it carried no suggestion of private funding, despite the monopolistic advantages the owner of these facilities would have. Construction of a Royal Australian Air Force airstrip near Derby reinforced the perception of Government responsibility for infrastructure costs. Although built for military purposes, the RAAF accommodates airlines traffic because the domestic airstrip is unsafe for large jet aircraft.

At the ceremony to open its new passenger terminal at the air base, Ansett used the slogan "Before Derby could take off, it needed a place to land" (1). While conveying corporate concern for transport problems facing the town, the slogan played on, and perhaps reinforced, local perceptions of government responsibility for capital works (2). It ignored current policy that a new port would be

built only after economic justification could be proven (3). In order to assess the likelihood of this justification occurring, I will look at the pastoral, agriculture, mining and tourism industries in the West Kimberley and evaluate their potential to create a demand for new port facilities.

#### The Pastoral Industry

Cattle populations in the Shire of Derby/West Kimberley increased from 150,000 in the 1940s and 1950s to 270,000 in the 1980s and, during the same period, 34,000 to 50,000 in the Shire of Broome (4). On the basis of cattle populations alone, Labor's policy of providing a centralised meatworks at Black Rocks appears to have been sound. Nevertheless, transport difficulties, isolation from markets, low production levels, and the low quality of meat produced by range cattle have been restrictive factors since the Kimberley pastoral industry began. The industry never expected to meet the cost of establishing facilities and now, after a century of development, substantial market improvement would be needed to warrant a new port in King Sound.

#### Agriculture

A belief that European agricultural systems could be superimposed on the Kimberley has persisted since Grey and Forrest advanced the idea in the nineteenth century. Since

then, prospective developers have ignored contrary opinions and indicators of the district's poor agricultural potential.

The earliest attempt to introduce exotic crops on a scale sufficient to increase port usage occurred in the 1920s. A Queensland cotton grower, Dan Jones, suggested that Derby could grow cotton - despite unsatisfactory experiments in 1914 (6). Resultant publicity created a widespread public demand for seed (7). Initially, the Government encouraged public interest and created small agricultural blocks at Knowsley, thirty kilometres south of Derby, allocating some under the Soldier Settlement Scheme (8).

In January 1932, the Western Australian Government arranged for Colonel Geoffrey Evans of the Empire Cotton Growing Corporation to evaluate cotton growing prospects in the area (9). Evans' telegraphic report said

Derby cotton prospects very disappointing ... am of opinion that pindan soils too light and naturally inferior to ever produce heavy cotton crop (10).

In his final report, Evans said that Derby's rainfall, which occurred mainly in short, heavy rainstorms during the hot summer, did not cool the air. In the light, sandy soils at Knowsley, plants had 'a very trying time ... and are inclined to be scorched' (11). Tropical Adviser, F.J. Wise, supported this view, echoing Maitland Brown's 1878

assessment - 'a doubt exists if any crops can be profitably grown in this class of country' (12). The Government heeded this advice and withdrew its support for cotton growing. Agriculture in the Kimberley then remained dormant until the 1940s when suggestions that the Kimberley could supply South East Asian markets after World War II focused attention on populating the northern part of the State.

Wise, now Premier of the State, asked for a report on the feasibility of irrigation farming, suggesting that comparisons be made with irrigation projects at similar latitudes in the Sudan (13). Dr. L.H. Teakle, an agricultural scientist with the Department of Agriculture, reported that in a comparison between the Kimberley and the Western Sudan

... the quantity of rainfall and the length of the rainy period are similar, [but] the reliability and the distribution of the rainfall throughout the wet period is very much in favour of the Western Sudan. It is this difference that enables intensive agriculture to be carried out on a large scale in the Western Sudan while the Kimberleys (sic) and Northern Territory are predominantly pastoral where irrigation cannot be practiced (14).

Wise accepted this finding but Dumas overlooked it when he gave a radio talk in May 1947. He described the North as an area where little development had taken place and that the Kimberley had ample water supplies and large fertile areas suitable for irrigation farming. Dumas said

... it was well known from experience gained in a number of station gardens that tobacco, maize, millet, tomatoes, cabbage, potatoes, bananas, dates etc grow luxuriantly under irrigation while extensive trials with cotton in earlier years had given promising results, providing water was available when required. Experience in other parts of Australia had shown that under irrigation rice could be grown economically (15).

Dumas's statement was misleading. Past attempts to grow cotton had not succeeded and he had no evidence of the viability of rice or any other crop in the area. Davidson, who has written extensively about agricultural and pastoral development in northern Australia, demonstrated that, under normal farming conditions, 'farm yields were unlikely to be more than two-thirds of experimental yields' (16). Station gardens - an important source of fresh produce for isolated, outback kitchens - are well tended and not a valid comparator for large-scale agriculture. A competent and visionary engineer, Dumas wanted to stimulate activity in one of Australia's last undeveloped areas and, in his radio session, can be seen to be soliciting support.

In 1950, Northern Development Pty Ltd set up irrigation trials on the Camballin flood plains, one hundred kilometres east of Derby (17). Although ambitious projections were issued each season, successive owners of the project did not produce a commercially viable crop during the next twenty years - even under experimental conditions. Crops included rice, safflower and grain sorghum, all of which

suffered from insect infestations, widespread pillage by native fauna and inadequate knowledge of the ecology (18). The Australian Land and Cattle Company abandoned the irrigation area in 1983 after floodwaters breached levee banks designed to control seasonal inundation from the Fitzroy River (19). Since then, noogarra burr, a noxious weed that is particularly damaging to pastures, has spread through the abandoned black soil flood plains, causing the area to be quarantined (20). The present owners of the property have abandoned their plans to redevelop the irrigation area and concentrated instead on increasing stocking levels on associated pastoral leases (21).

In the 1970s, the State Shipping Service landed large shipments of fertiliser at Derby for the Australian Land and Cattle Company (ALCO) but, because the port could not accommodate the overseas vessel carrying them, had to discharge agricultural machines at Broome (22). In 1982, shortly before the Camballin project closed, the State Government bypassed Derby and built a \$400,000 grain silo at the Broome jetty to handle expected sorghum exports from Camballin (23). The principle reason being the inability of Derby to accommodate conventionally hulled ships.

Hacker, an agricultural scientist employed by the Western Australian Department of Agriculture, suggested that the



district could not sustain a reliable agricultural industry, 'from either an economic or an ecological point of view' (24). His opinion was reinforced by Dr. Ritchie Howitt, a geographer and Research Fellow at the University of Sydney, with a comment that the West Kimberley had little, if any, agricultural potential (25). Both Evans and Teakle described rainfall patterns as a main factor in the low agricultural performance of the area. Fifty-seven percent of Camballin's rain falls in the hot months of January and February with a mean variability factor of three hundred percent. When an annual evaporation rate equal to five times rainfall is considered, shortage of sustainable surface moisture is clearly a serious problem for agriculture (26). Because of this, Camballin is classified as arid to semi-arid, despite its average annual rainfall of 515 mm (27). Soil type at Camballin presents another problem, it has a narrow friability range, 'hard and difficult to work when dry, and during the wet season ... plastic and impossible to cultivate (28).

The Department of Regional Development and the North West considers that horticulture would only become a major contributor to the economy of the Shire if water supplies were proven and markets confirmed. This potential, the report concluded, could only be realised in the long term because

the Ord Scheme with its adequate water supply and its substantial holdings of non-utilised irrigable land represents unquestionably the best short term alternative (29).

Despite the evidence of poor agricultural performance and minimal potential, George Savell, Chief Executive of the Association of Mining and Exploration Companies Ltd, said he believed that areas of the West Kimberley

... should be opened up on the same basis as much of the southern half of the state was in the 1960's. The area would produce grain for the Asian market (30).

#### Mining

Oil produced from wells east of Derby amounted to less than 1,000 barrels/day in 1983. The Home Energy Company pipes the oil to the Derby-Fitzroy Crossing Road, from where it is trucked to Broome. The oil is shipped from there to Kwinana for refining because of the inability of the Derby port to handle normal tankers (31). The Department of Regional Development and the North West suggested that

... if production levels exceed 5000 barrels/day consideration may be given to the development of a pipeline. Even then no guarantee can be given that the oil would be piped to deep water in King Sound (Black Rocks) ... it is extremely unlikely that any major refinery will be set up in the Kimberley even assuming major discoveries (32).

The only significant mines brought into production in the West Kimberley before 1983 were at Cockatoo Island in 1951 and Koolan Island in 1965. The Cockatoo Island iron ore mine

has since closed and the facilities are now used for tourism. Koolan Island is expected to continue production of iron ore until mid-1993 (33). Although Koolan Island produced over 2 million tonnes of iron ore in 1989/90, economic benefit to Derby is peripheral, the only direct benefit being the trans-shipment of personnel and air-freight through the airport (34). All other supplies for the mine are shipped directly to the island, either by the State Shipping Service, or by ore carriers that also carry fresh water as ballast from New South Wales (35).

Diamonds discovered at Ellendale in 1981 contain a greater percentage of gem quality stones than the kimberlite pipes at Argyle in the East Kimberley, but the deposit is much smaller and not being worked (36). The only other significant deposit - at Mt. Elizabeth - is uneconomic (37). A lead/zinc mine in the Napier Range north east of Derby produced 13,171 tonnes of lead and 45,877 tonnes of zinc in 1989/90 (38). The only other mineral production from the West Kimberley that year comprised 3,155 tonnes of aggregate and 1,239 tonnes of granite dimension stone for the building industry (39).

While the level of mineral production from the West Kimberley will be significant in any argument for a new port at Black Rocks, existing mining operations are viable using road

transport to other ports. A substantial increase in production levels would therefore be needed to warrant capital and running costs of a new port.

#### Tourism

Tourism forms a small but steadily growing component of the Kimberley economy but, because land and air transport dominate, it is unlikely to have an impact on port requirements. Shipping passenger services ceased in 1972 when the State Shipping Service replaced the fleet. Consequently, traffic demand does not warrant reintroduction of the passenger service, and tourism will not be a contributing factor in any justification for a new port.

#### Transport

The State Shipping Service has not serviced Derby since 1981 and transport of goods to Derby and the West Kimberley is now dependent upon road transport (40). An examination of cargo movement over the Derby and Broome jetties between 1978 and 1986 shows a significant increase in cargo through Broome immediately after the Derby jetty closed. Appendix 4 demonstrates that the increase was only partly due to its absorption of Derby cargo. Additional outward traffic at Broome originated mainly from Blina oil shipments and movement of mining machinery and equipment. Inward cargo increases can be attributed to materials and equipment for

the new RAAF base at Derby and mining activity in the West Kimberley. If Derby port had remained open, some of this cargo may have moved through it; although most private organisations now prefer the rapid turnaround and door-to-door delivery offered by road transport.

Loss of the shipping service has emphasised another transport problem. The Perth-Derby highway, the only road into the district from the rest of the State, is subject to the vagaries of monsoonal storms and in the wet season can be cut for days at a time. During flooding in 1983, some road transport diverted through Adelaide, Alice Springs and Kununurra to deliver urgently needed supplies and equipment. A small pleasure boat ferried goods across the flooded Fitzroy River and aircraft airlifted twelve tonnes of perishable cargo from Broome to Derby (41). Similar flooding occurred in March 1991 (42). When roads are cut, road transport of goods is suspended but experienced Kimberley residents and businesses anticipate these events and the effect is minimal (43).

The Department of Regional Development and the North West observed that

the port is very unlikely to ever re-open. This section of King Sound is perceived as being difficult to navigate. A combination of tides, siltation and previous experiences are responsible for this perception (44).

The report paralleled Sir Russell Dumas's 1948 advice that development of a deep water port in the area depended on a development that would produce sufficient cargo to justify the capital cost. It confirmed that the level of general cargo did not justify either reopening the existing jetty or building a new port (45).

The cost of constructing and servicing a new port in the West Kimberley cannot be justified, even by taking an aggregate of all production. Because of this, the Western Australian Government will not commit funds for development of facilities or infrastructure. However, both the Department of Regional Development and the North West and the Transport Strategy Committee agree that if a significant occurs in the level of cargo available, a new port should be built at Black Rocks (45).

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### CONCLUSION

Concerns about possible non-British occupation of the Kimberley and a belief that the district had significant agricultural potential emerge as common themes in a study of the port of Derby and Black Rocks. Security concerns were a factor in Grey's exploration and interest in the area's agricultural potential stimulated government sponsorship of Alexander Forrest's expedition. Unfounded beliefs in the potential of the Kimberley led to the first white settlements at Camden Harbour, Roebuck Bay and Derby, and to agricultural experiments at Knowsley, Camballin and the Ord River.

Despite both the inadequacies of the settlement at Derby and protests from pastoralists and ships' captains, the Colonial Government remained committed to it. Instead of heeding the advice proffered, the Government built a landing and later, a jetty and tramway that locked the shipping trade into the known hazards of that part of King Sound. In the closing stages of World War II the perceived vulnerability of the Kimberley and a belief in its potential to supply South East Asian markets provided a stimulus for the Black Rocks port/meatworks policy. However, a long-standing desire to reform the meat industry and the political benefit from

establishing capital works in the electorate were also motivating factors for the Labor Government.

This view provides an explanation for the Coalition's entrenched opposition to Black Rocks - despite McLarty's pre-War support for the idea. The Coalition's support of Air Beef offers another explanation for both its opposition to Black Rocks and disregard of port deficiencies when replacing the Derby jetty. Significantly, construction of the new jetty coincided with the closure of Air Beef and the opening of Blythe's new meat processing plant at Derby.

An examination of activity in the West Kimberley provides no evidence of economic support for Labor's Black Rocks policy. If the Derby port had remained open, navigational limitations would have precluded it handling either oil from Blina or lead/zinc ore from the Napier Range. However, Black Rocks could have accommodated both.

Closure of the Derby meatworks in favour of Broome, failure of the irrigation scheme at Camballin, closure of the Cockatoo Island iron ore mine, the impending closure of the Koolan Island mine, and mothballing the Ellendale diamond deposit are all negative factors acting against the possibility of an aggregate cargo being available to justify a new port. Compounding these losses, the by-passing Derby

for transport of oil from the Blina field and other minerals from the West Kimberley shows that these industries can operate without a nearby port.

Quantities of cargo available for Black Rocks certainly could not justify this site when first mooted, but Government policy toward maintaining existing ports would have ensured the port's survival over the intervening period of low cargo to benefit from current oil and mineral production. A political contest for policy space and economic resources and the intervention of business interests led to the cancellation of the Black Rocks policy. Politicians achieved short-term gain at the expense of the people of Derby.

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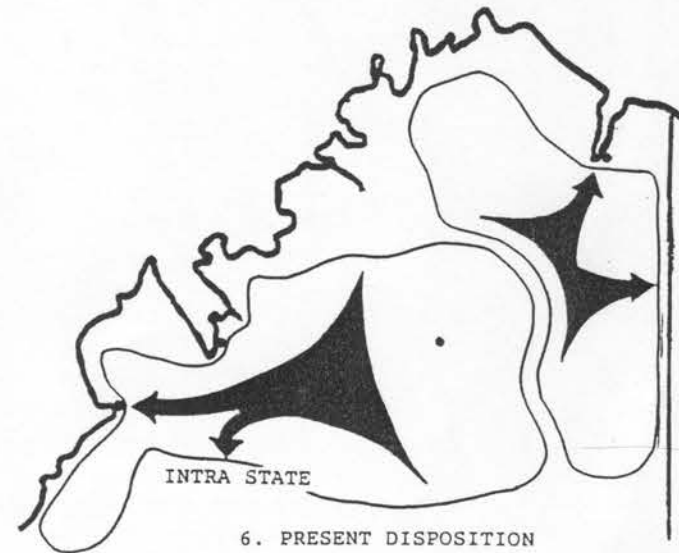
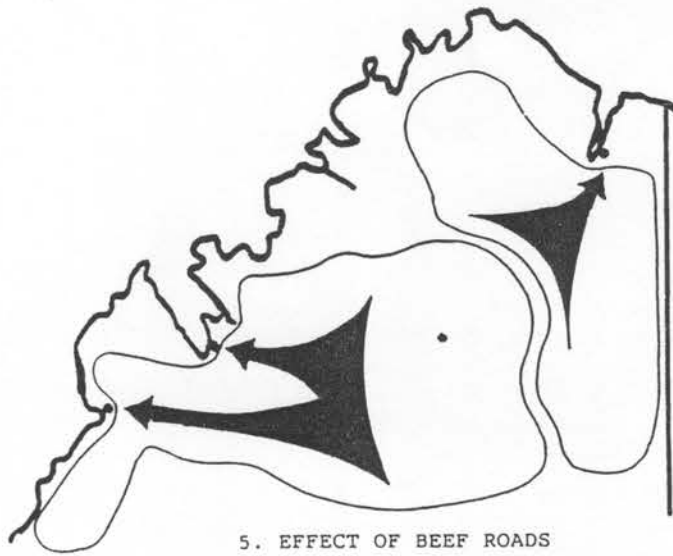
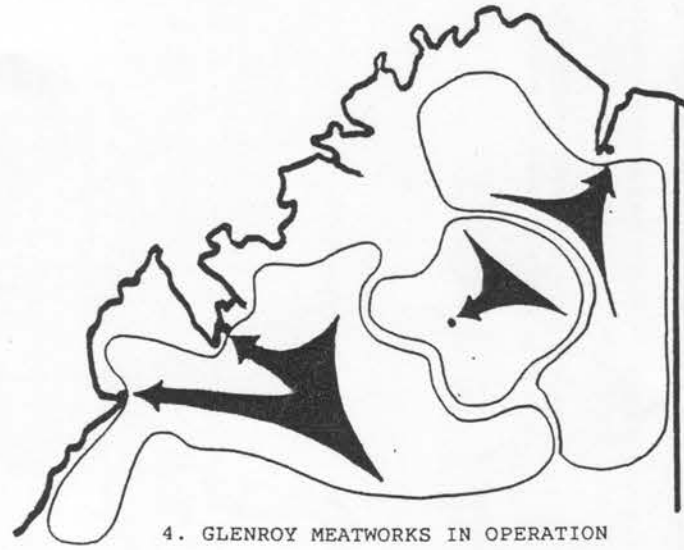
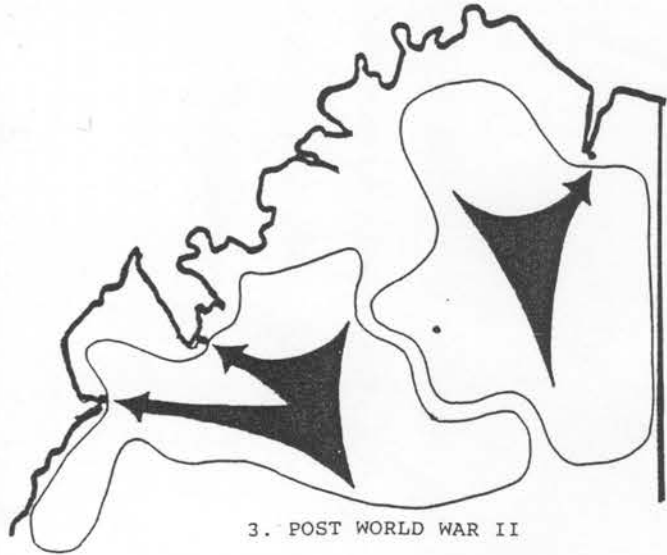
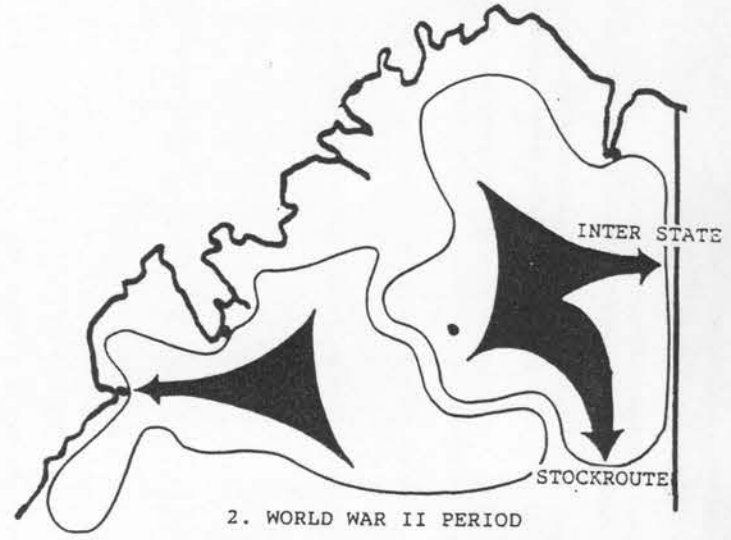
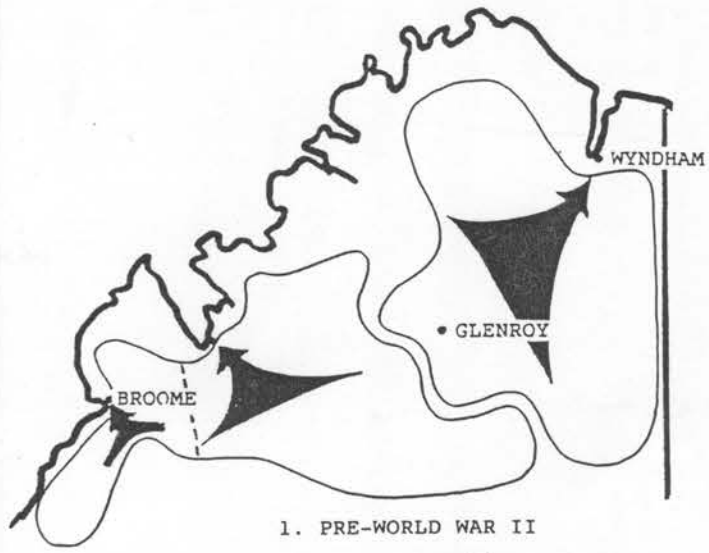
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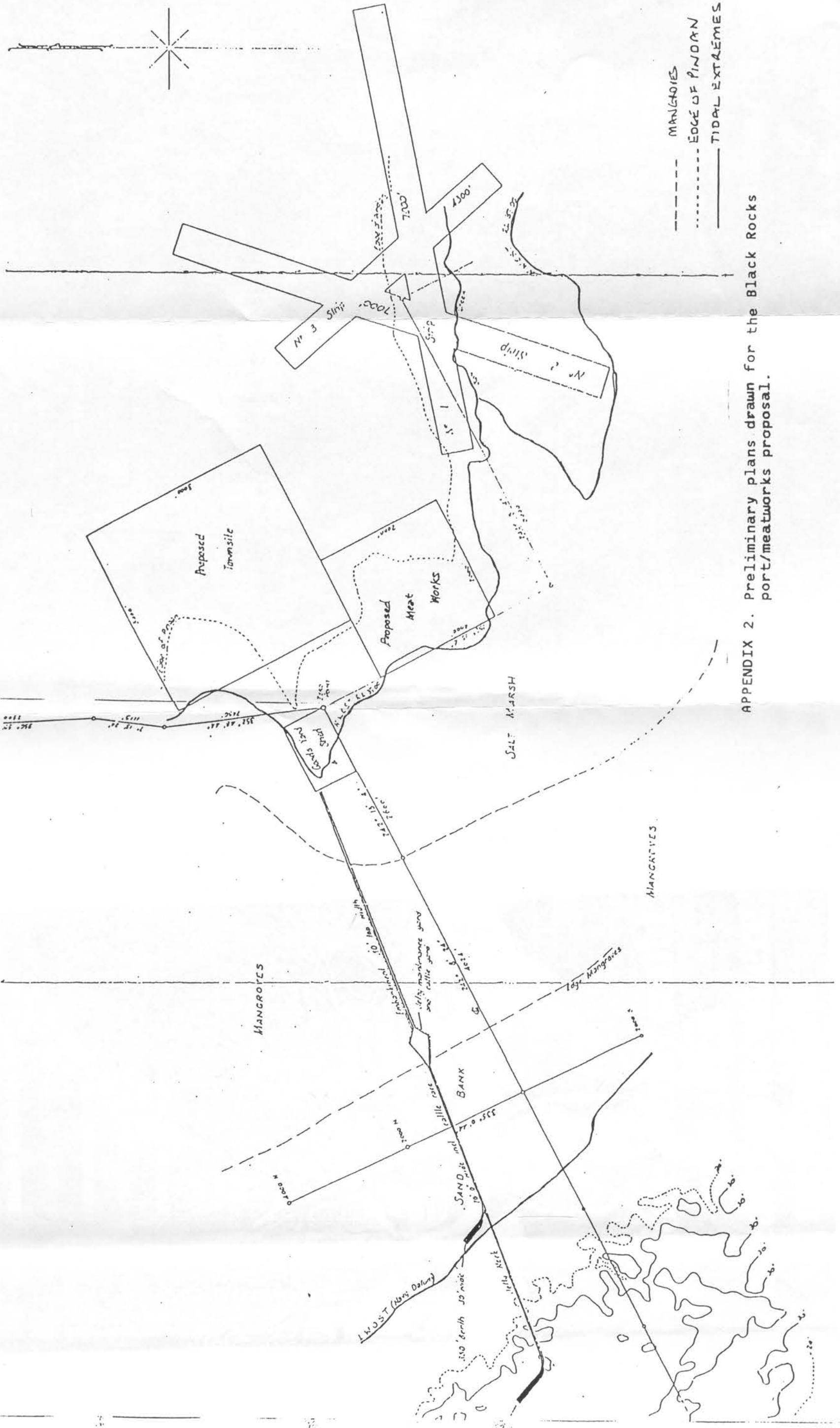
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APPENDIX 1. KIMBERLEY - AREAS SERVICED BY PORTS AND MEATWORKS SHOWING FLOW OF CATTLE.



APPENDIX 2. Preliminary plans drawn for the Black Rocks port/meatworks proposal.

# Ansett W.A. Timetable

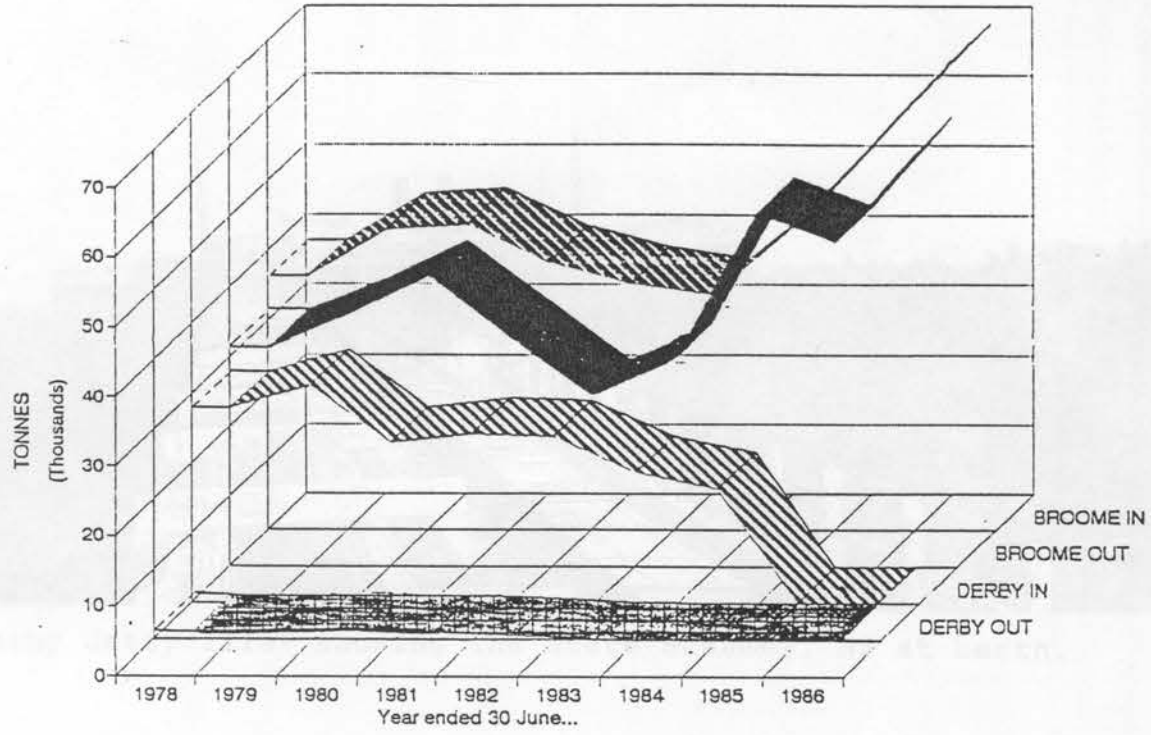
Effective date 2nd July, 1989.



**Before Derby could  
take off it  
needed somewhere  
new to land.**

APPENDIX 3. Cover of Ansett W.A. timetable showing the slogan used to promote the opening of the new terminal at the Derby RAAF airstrip.

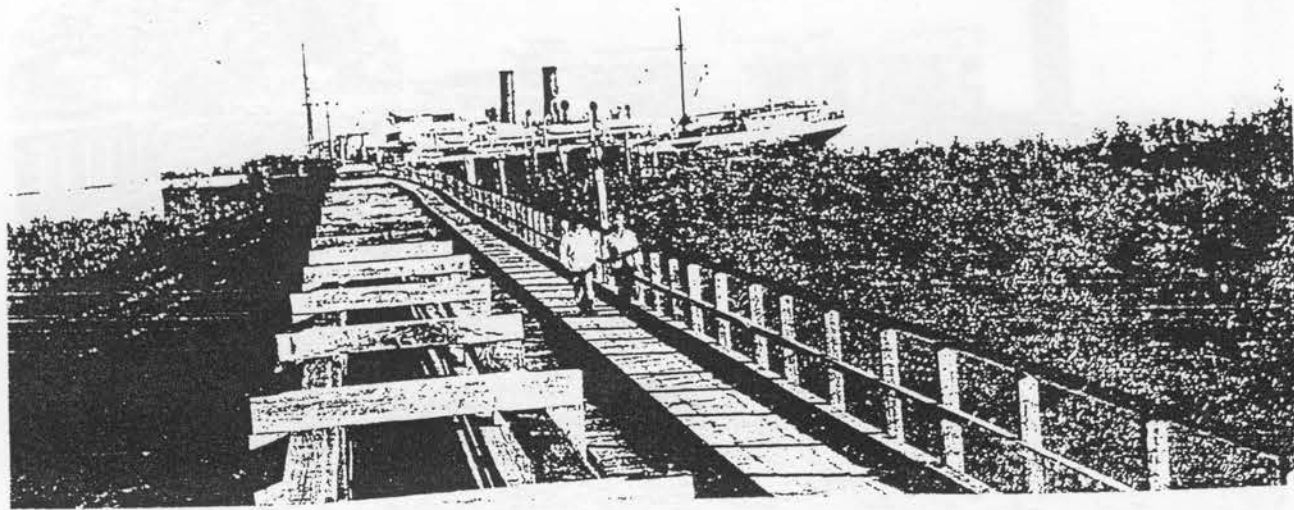
PORT TONNAGES - DERBY & BROOME  
Total Cargo Over the Jetty



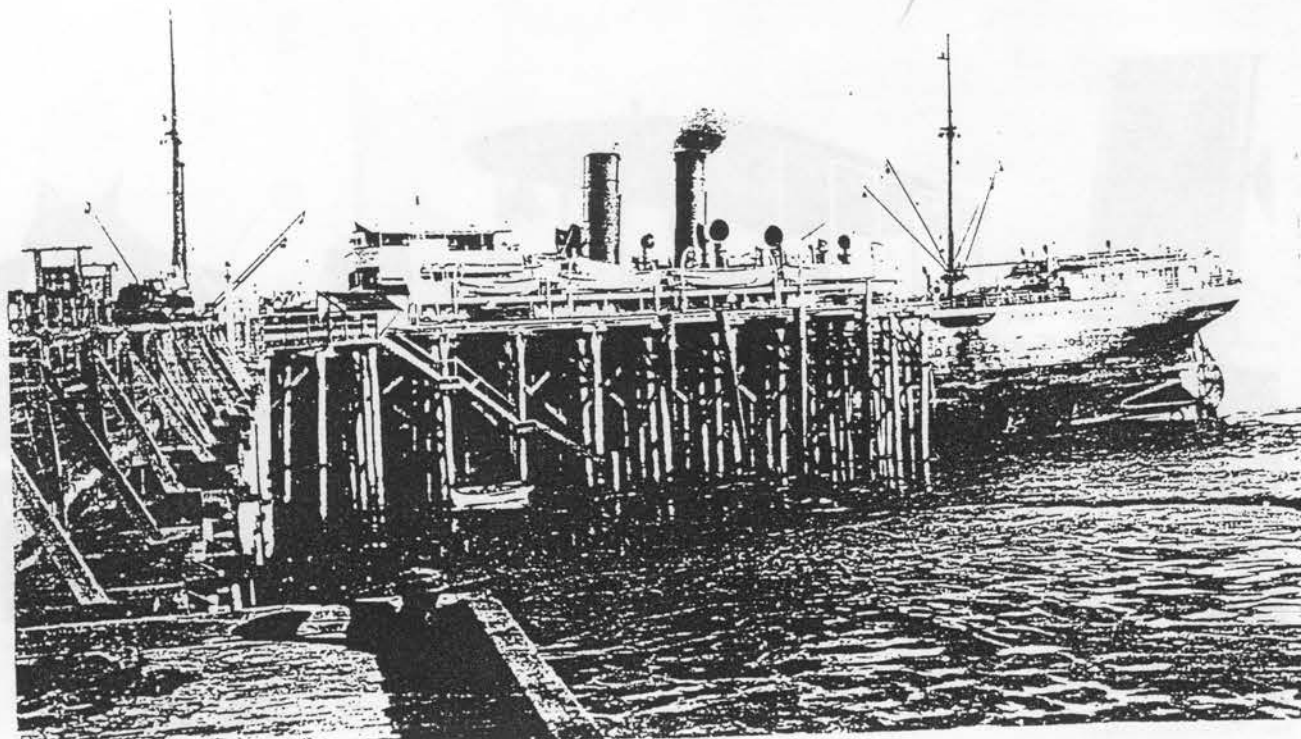
PORT TONNAGES - DERBY AND BROOME  
Financial year ended 30 June.....

	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986
<b>DERBY</b>									
BULK FUEL	16770	21508	18357	21406	21777	17819	16359	0	0
GENERAL	11252	9813	4623	2860	2154	918	0	0	0
TOTAL IN	28022	31321	22980	24266	23931	18737	16359	0	0
TOTAL OUT	1092	1186	1367	981	521	89	0	0	0
<b>BROOME</b>									
BULK FUEL	15666	20123	29075	23805	21942	15525	27292	44608	40999
GENERAL	20637	22968	14744	14661	13417	18284	16182	10770	26397
TOTAL IN	36303	43091	43819	38466	35359	33809	43474	55378	67396
FUEL OUT	7066	9166	15476	10943	7231	6868	6386	3448	1849
GENERAL	24448	27064	26067	21880	17332	23038	16131	7717	22030
BLINA OIL	0	0	0	0	0	0	28081	35406	35406
TOTAL OUT	31514	36230	41543	32823	24563	29906	50598	46571	59285

APPENDIX 4. Table and chart showing cargo through the ports of Derby and Broome.



Derby Jetty 1916: showing the State Steamer, N2 at berth.

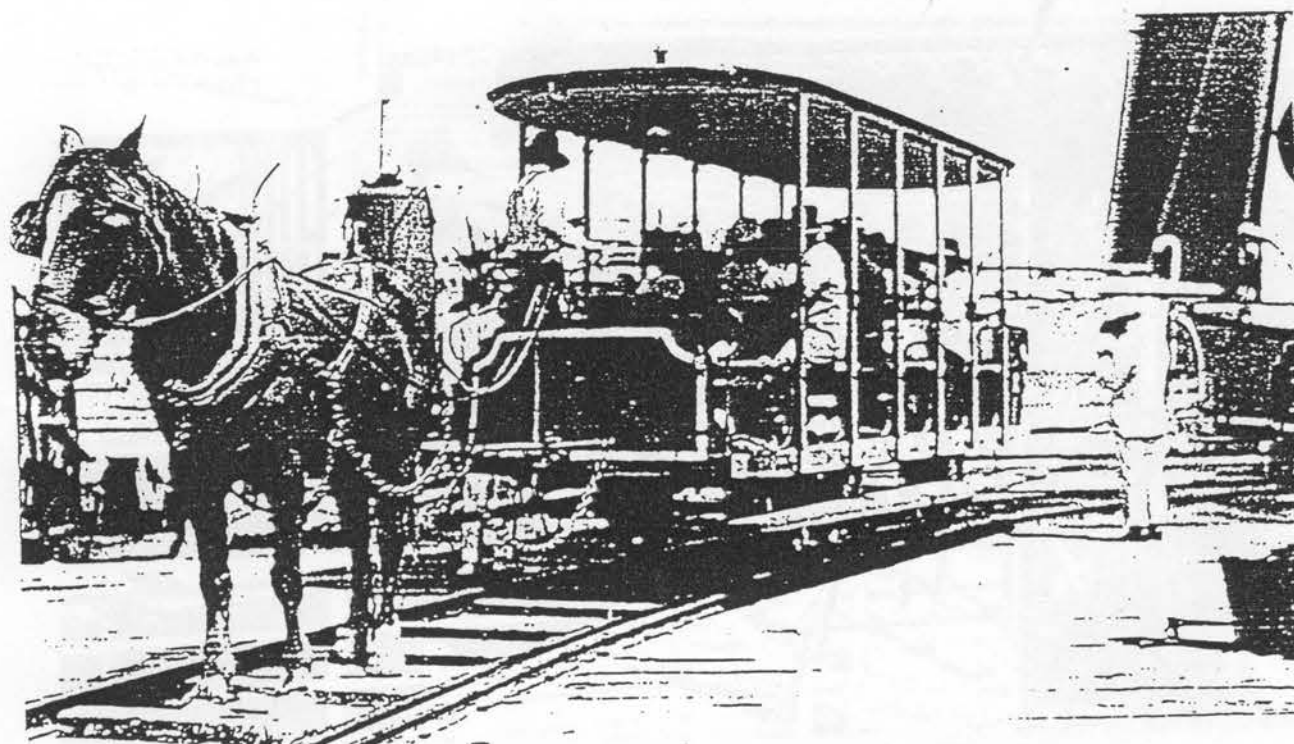


Derby Jetty 1916: showing the State Steamer N2  
sitting on the bottom at low tide.

Photos courtesy Battye Library, Perth.

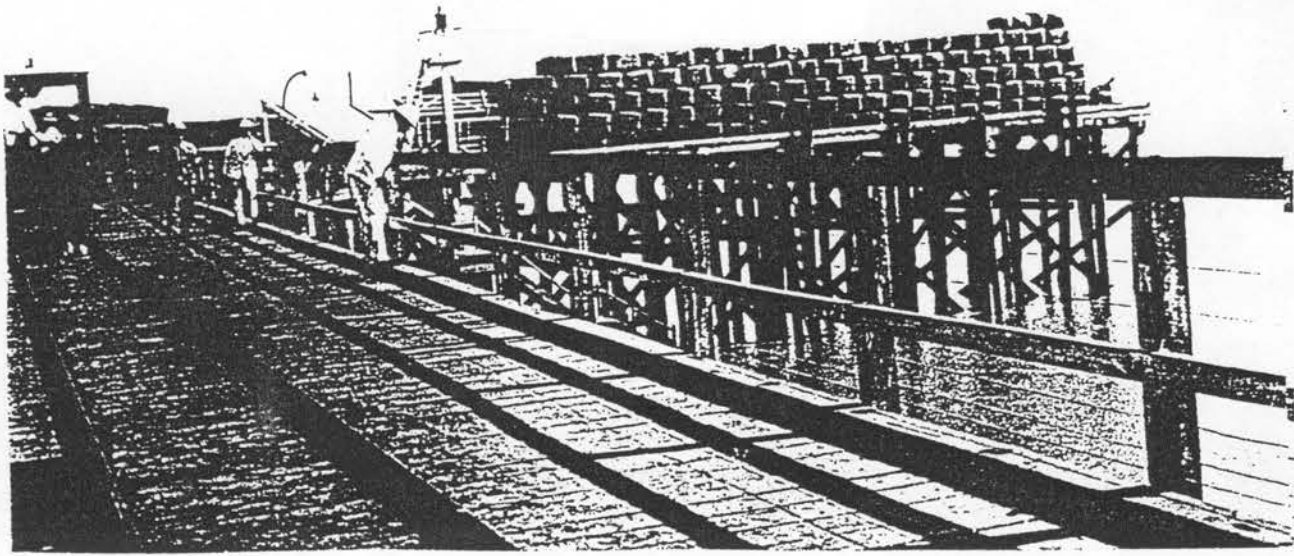


Derby circa 1890: bond store, tramway, and tram looking away from the jetty.

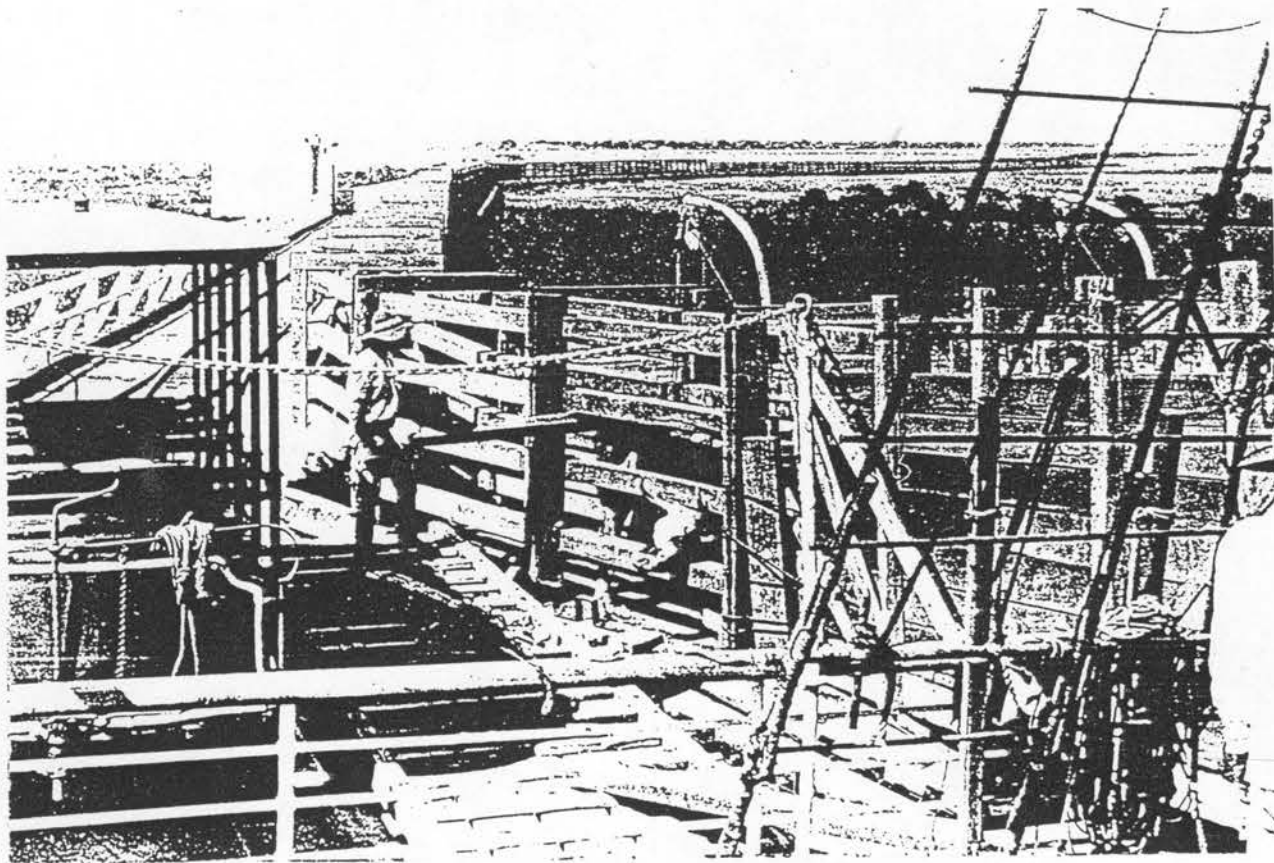


Derby: horse drawn tram on the jetty.

Photos courtesy Battye Library, Perth.



Derby 1890s: wool bales stacked ready for shipment.



Derby 1890s: loading cattle on the jetty.

Photos courtesy Battye Library, Perth.