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The Sugar Industry on Buderim

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'Buderim Mountain is but little known. It lies directly between the Mooloolah and Maroochy Rivers only about three miles from the harbour of the former. It is a tableland, upon which is heavily timbered scrub, with a rich chocolate soil, somewhat stony in places, but of excellent quality. There are some ten or twelve settlers, sturdy pioneers, busy at work, and many a noble tree, the growth of ages, is brought low. They have about 50 acres down, and several more comfortable houses built. It is a most favoured locality, the cane grows all winter, and is beautifully green, forming a great contrast to the dead look of the cane crops in other places. The Government are about to have a cutting made down the eastern edge of the mountain, which is very abrupt, and, when done, will give the selectors easy access to the coast.'

So reported the *Brisbane Courier* on 3 October 1872 on page 2. And what were these busy selectors doing? They were growing sugar cane. In addition, of course, they were cutting the timber on their blocks, clearing the land, growing food crops and running animals to provide for their day to day needs and hopefully provide an income.

Today the community of Buderim Mountain considers that its birth date was in 1862 when Tom Petrie felled the first red cedar trees on the eastern end of the plateau. For the next ten or so years timber harvesting, mostly of red cedar and white beech, was virtually the only activity with little or no farming taking place initially. The timber cutters, wagon drivers and vessel loaders all lived in timber camps and in and around the small settlement of Mooloolah Heads. Most were on the payroll of William Pettigrew.

Up to this time the area we now know as the Sunshine Coast was occupied by a small number of huge cattle runs. The situation was changed radically by the passing of the *Crown Lands Alienation Act of 1868*. This enabled selectors to apply for small agricultural blocks once blocks were surveyed by the Government Surveyor. The owners of these blocks were subject to conditions which included the construction of improvements within a specified time limit. If this was achieved the blocks could be freeholded after five years. The Mooloolah Plains (now known as 'Meridan

Plains') were surveyed and thrown open in 1869. Among the early settlers were the Westaway brothers, Charles Ballinger and a group of Quakers who established a sugar plantation not far from the current reservoir on the south bank of the Mooloolah River. This small group of Quakers (or 'Friends') from Sydney and Brisbane set out to make a utopian community with sugar growing as their means of support. This land proved to be fertile and some good sugar was produced from their small horse-powered mill.

Associated with these cane farmers was Joseph Chapman Dixon who had a separate farm. He was to play a major role in the development of a sugar industry on Buderim. The Quaker's mill was the first sugar mill north of Caboolture. Joseph Dixon at this stage explored the nearby Buderim Plateau, guided by William Grigor and was impressed with the potential of the land. However his farm was washed out by the flooding Mooloolah River on more than one occasion in a short time period, and he abandoned it in 1870. After this disaster Dixon and Tom Ridley briefly operated a sugar farm at Doughboy Creek near Brisbane. The original Quakers on the Mooloolah River did not last much longer, giving up in 1873 after repeated flooding.

When Buderim was finally surveyed and the early leases were issued in 1870, so competitive was the market for the rich volcanic soil that existing leaseholders were known to report any who had made insufficient attempt to improve their land. Speaking of his visit to Buderim Dixon said:

'I never forgot the old man's remarks on Buderim Mtn and shortly after selected a homestead on it and spent 25 years there. It was a lovely place with no settlement – the land was the best volcanic and eventually when the scrub was felled gave a beautiful view of the ocean and Mooloolah bay. I also took up grass land on the mountain flat – for some cattle and they did very well. The bullocks got fat and I killed them for beef and my neighbours took a quarter of the carcase each and they worked for me as payment. I increased my team of bullocks and got a man to drive them timber hauling to Mooloolah bay. In this way I was able to keep things going. I had a slab house and it was comfortable enough with its big fireplace ... and in the lonely days and evenings I made furniture ... not having any training as a carpenter I made many mistakes but found that it was wonderful what one can do when one tries.'



In fact Joseph Dixon was the first settler to obtain blocks on Buderim. He took up adjoining portions 44 (80 acres) and 53 (30 acres), parish of Mooloolah, the first on 13 June 1870. Dixon's land was on the eastern part of Buderim Mountain. He built a slab hut on portion 44. Others who obtained land at about the same time included William Guy, William Grigor, Charles Ballinger, John Caton, Tom Ridley and Donald Cogill.

Joseph Chapman Dixon ca. 1880. *Photo BHS.*

All these early settlers planted some sugar cane on their partially cleared blocks, as mentioned in the opening quote, along with other crops. At this time sugar was seen as a profitable crop although the price was not high. An example of what was needed in these early days to eke out a living, was William Grigor who planted three acres under pumpkins, while Dixon and others grew maize and it was common practice to plant bananas in partially cleared land. Several had pigs and, where there was grass, cattle. Once the cane was harvested the only option available was to send it south

to Brisbane on one of Pettigrew's ships for crushing. This proved unreliable and it became clear that a local mill to crush the cane was highly desirable.

Farmers on Buderim had an advantage not only in the fertile soil, but also in being near the only port on the coast at Mooloolah Heads, with a rough but trafficable road to the harbour. William Pettigrew had built a store beside the harbour and the settlers had access to supplies from Pettigrew's regular steamships. To survive they needed to help each other with goods and services. Dixon had cattle and ran a butchery and also a bullock wagon to Mooloolah Heads. Tom Ridley, who had selected a block within a short distance of Dixon, ran a primitive post office.

Dixon and Fielding
Mill ca 1880. Photo
BHS



In 1873 Dixon married Alice Fielding of Eagle Farm. Alice must have wondered what she was in for when she travelled by horse to Buderim to live in a rough slab hut on Dixon's land. In 1875 Dixon and his father in law John Fielding, formed a partnership to build a sugar mill on Buderim. The site was on portion 47 on what is now Mill Road where there was a small, but adequate, spring supplying fresh water. Fielding and Dixon purchased an evaporating-pan sugar plant from Stephen Fountain of Burpengary, who had imported it from Scotland. The plant was sent by boat down Coochin Creek to Pumicestone Passage and on to Mooloolah Heads, then by bullock wagon to Buderim.



An evaporating pan from the Dixon/Fielding Mill,
on display at Pioneer Cottage, Buderim.
Photo Bev Lavarack

The growth of cane from the virgin land was remarkable, but the early mills such as the Dixon/Fielding mill were inefficient as the cane was put through one set of rollers as opposed to three sets in later days. The growers received 10/- per ton at the rollers.

Among those providing the labour at the mill were early settlers John Caton, William Guy and John Burnett. The mill was operating in 1876 with the first crushing in October of that year. In December 1876 the outlook was optimistic and the *Queenslander* reported:

CABOOLTURE AND MOOLOOLAH Messrs. Dickson and Co.'s mill is busy crushing, and the affair promises to be a success, Messrs. Dickson and Co. have just crushed a patch of eight acres of their own cane, which yielded about twenty tons of sugar. Cane grows splendidly on the magnificent scrub land on Buderim Mountain, and is free from rust, and I believe all the selectors will go in for cane planting.

On 24 November 1877 the *Brisbane Courier* reported as follows:

MOOLOOLAH. A correspondent, writing from this district November 15, says: The sugar mill on Buderim Mountain finished for the season on the 3rd, and had then crushed about forty acres. Most of the cane was three years old, and had been down a long time. It was untrashed, and much grown at the joints, consequently was not at its best. The average density was 7°. The ratoons are kept back by the dry weather, and will affect the next season's return considerably. There will be about ninety acres of cane on the mountain in a couple of months.

On 18 January 1883 the *Brisbane Courier* reported optimistically as follows:

MOOLOOLAH. FROM OUR CORRESPONDENT. The crushing in this district was concluded before Christmas, and the return was very satisfactory. Messrs Fielding and Dickson, of Buderim Mountain, turned out 260 tons sugar, and the Cooperative Sugar Mill about 160 tons. Both mills are now fitted with vacuum pans, and manufacture a first rate article. The yield of sugar is always high on Buderim Mountain. I believe I am within the mark when I put the average yield per acre at over 2 tons of sugar during the whole of the time (six years) since that industry was started.

For part of the year at least the growing and harvesting of sugar cane was a labour-intensive business and finding men of European origin willing to work in the cane fields was difficult. This labour problem was solved by Joseph Dixon in 1877 by importing indentured workers from the Pacific Islands. While this has been described as ‘kidnapping’ and even ‘slavery’ by modern writers, it was a scheme which worked well by the standards of the day as long as the employer was a sympathetic master. This seems to have been the case with Dixon and Fielding at Buderim.

The first group were landed in Brisbane and were brought to Buderim. Dixon organised a second group to be landed at Maryborough and then on to Gympie by train from where they walked to Buderim a distance of some 40 miles. Dixon reports that, much to his surprise, this group included a mother and baby. Dixon loaded these two on his horse and walked with the men.



The workers received 8/- per week and rations, which consisted of 10 lb. of flour, 10 lb. of beef, 2 lb. sugar and 1 lb. tea. Later it was found better to bake the bread at the mill, and issue it, as the Islanders made a poor job of their baking. Details of these workers and what was required of them and their relations with the local community are well presented in Buderim Historical Society's 1995 publication *South Sea Islanders came to Buderim*.

Kanaka workers in the Buderim canefields.
ca. 1882. Photo BHS

The overall impression of the Islanders is that they were hard working, religious and caused few problems. From all accounts Dixon's workers were accepted as part of the community. He built a small school for them on Mill Road. When the sugar mills closed in the 1890s the Islanders moved to other work in citrus, banana and coffee plantations. In the early 1900s there was a move by a group of citizens to have Islander children banned from the local State

School, but after much discussion this was rejected and photographs of the school at that time reveal several coloured children.



Benny and Minnie Buka beating the Salvation Army drum. ca. 1904. Photo BHS.

The islanders took a liking to the Salvation Army and its music in particular. They seem to have been generally accepted by the Buderim population and over the years became respected members of the community, being involved in several sports, in particular cricket and rugby league, as well as in other community events. Mrs Kidd the Buderim Post Mistress recalled that ‘They were gentle people, all those coloured girls and boys.’ Dixon thought his crew were ‘reliable

workers... a jolly lot’, and treated them well by the standards of the time.

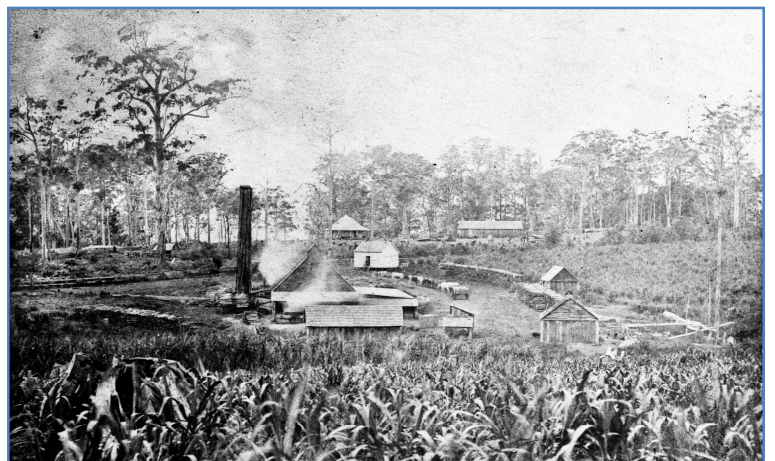
But there are always two sides to any story and historian of Indigenous Peoples, Ray Kerkove (pers. comm.) comments:

However their three-year contracts gave them limited pay which was rarely enough to return home. They faced lengthy, backbreaking work, limited diet, bare accommodation and being treated as servants – and several rebelled. However, the early Kanakas had weekends free. Many went fishing and swimming at Mooloolaba and Cotton Tree, where they also held feasts and built and raced outrigger canoes. Most were young men. Romances blossomed with Aboriginal (Gubbi Gubbi) girls from surrounding camps with the couples sometimes marrying beside the thundering surf at Maroochydoore.

In 1901 the *Pacific Island Labourers Act* directed that there were to be no new admissions of indentured labour after 1904 and that any Kanakas/South Sea Islanders who wished to be repatriated to their original island homes should be returned in 1906/7. Given the choice, many elected to remain in Queensland.

Over the late 1870s and early 1880s the sugar industry on Buderim continued at a reasonably steady level without booming, despite poor international prices. However in 1879 and 1880 there was increasing dissatisfaction with the price that Dixon and Fielding were paying and several growers grouped together to form a body named the Buderim Mountain Sugar Company with the aim of developing a new sugar mill. John Kerle Burnett, who had previously managed the Dixon and Fielding mill, was appointed as manager and land near Martin’s Creek where the current Post Office is located, was purchased. E.J. Burnett was the sugar boiler. Shareholders in the new company included well known names, such as J. Lindsay, Price Jones and W. Owen. The mill was financially backed by James Campbell and Sons, of Brisbane.

Buderim Mountain Sugar Company Mill ca. 1883. Note Pioneer Cottage almost dead centre background. Photo BHS



However things were not great with the sugar industry in general and this was reflected on Buderim as an article in the *Queenslander* on 16 May, 1885 says:

Sugar-cane is the principal crop of the Buderim farmers, and considering how gloomy the outlook

of the sugar market is I can't help saying, 'It is a pity !' For thirteen years have these men been struggling to clear this dense forest land, and just as they have mastered it and returns have come in the industry collapses.

The Agricultural Reporter in the *Queenslander* of 16 May 1885 wrote a lengthy report which is worth recording in detail:

Mount Buderim *There are two sugar-mills upon the mountain top; one (Yagilla) is the property of Messrs. Fielding and Dixon. It is a capital little mill, fitted with vacuum pan, steam clarifiers, juice heater, cane-carrier, and a good pair of rollers. All the machinery is from the well-known firm of Mirleea [actually Mirrlees] Watson and Co. and that is sufficient to say it is good. Indeed it was both a pleasure and a surprise to find such a complete and compact mill upon this mountain top. Its capacity is over 300 tons; that quantity was in fact turned out the season before last. The other mill is the property of the Buderim Mountain Sugar Company. The shareholders are principally the farmers of the mountain, and it was erected to crush the cane from the western half of the table-land. It possesses a good vacuum pan and turned out over 200 tons of sugar last season. I was curious to know how these mills were supplied with water, situated as they are upon a mountain higher than any other for miles around, so I was taken to see the springs, which burst out of the ground in the very centre of the plateau and soon develop into a creek sufficient to supply a 2000-ton mill. These springs never fail. The cause of them would be an interesting investigation.*

The cane looked splendid. I was quite astonished at its luxuriance and its healthy appearance. It was equal to any cane upon the Mackay scrubs. The climate of the mountain is mild, for frosts are unknown there; the growth is never checked, as it is on the Logan and other low-level fields. Abundance of rain falls, but how much I can't say, no one there having as yet kept a rain gauge. The soil is red, volcanic, and deep, of a sandy nature in so far that it does not, generally speaking, bind together but remains porous, and having originally been covered with a dense scrub is therefore exceedingly fertile. The cane ratoons upon it for six and seven years. The varieties grown are Rose-bamboo, Djong Djong, Large Green, Large Ribbon, Cheribon, and Meera. This last named is failing, and any poor looking fields were invariably Meera ratoons. The land is only stony in out-crops, so that the whole of the table top can be ploughed and worked once the stumps of the scrub have rotted—that is, in about four years. The advantage of this is untold; indeed there was plant cane on land which had been under cane for thirteen years looking as luxuriant as upon virgin soil. Scrub land of good depth, that is, free from stones, and that has a volcanic basis, is a veritable mine of fertility to any farmer.

In the 1880s there was a world-wide slump in sugar prices. The price received for raw sugar in those days was £10 per ton in Brisbane, and it cost the mill about a £1 per ton to land it. The price returned for sugar to Buderim growers was so low that it was sometimes below the cost of production and transport to Brisbane. In addition some reports suggested that the failure to add fertiliser to the soil was resulting in poor yields, although this is at odds with the report immediately above. In any case, farmers by the late 1880s, were looking seriously for different crops. Coffee and bananas were the immediate answer and sugar planting was reduced.

The 'Agricultural Reporter quoted above in the *Queenslander* in 1885, goes on to say:

Sugar may go to the wall, but if it does coffee is ready to step into its place. There are about a dozen farms on Buderim; their owners are Messrs. J. Dixon, J. Fielding, W. Burnett, H. Burnett, W. H. Guy, J. Caton, B. Short, J. Lindsay, G. A. Rich, J. Burnett. Hard work has been their lot and still is, and cane prospects are not very good, yet I heard no grumbling—a strange fact considering I was among a coterie of sugar-planters!

Along similar lines the *Brisbane Courier* on 21 August 1885 reported:

At Messrs. Fielding and Dixon's mill and the co-operative mill, on Buderim Mountain, crushing is also in full swing, and I expect the two mills will turn out about 600 ton between them. Had it not been for the bad state of the sugar market I should have had to report on the erection of two or three mills in the Maroochie district, and at least one on the Blackall Range this season; but under the present state of the market these projects have been abandoned.

In June 1887 at the shareholders request, the Buderim Mountain Sugar Company's mill operations were taken over by James Campbell and Sons, of Creek Street, Brisbane who had financed the mill in 1880. The new owners overhauled the plant and appointed a new manager, Thomas Moreton. However this did not work out well and the mill was closed in 1890. In 1895 the Moreton Central Sugar Mill was established in Nambour, drawing its cane from places such as Bli Bli where sugar was now well established.

In February 1886 the Dixon-Fielding partnership was dissolved and from that point onwards the mill was solely owned by Dixon. In 1896 Joseph Dixon closed down his mill and the machinery was dismantled and sold soon after. Coffee and bananas had virtually replaced sugar. Dixon himself later said that the mill had not been a financial success.

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This story includes several newspaper quotes. The reference to each is given in the text. In addition to these, the following newspaper articles were accessed through Trove:

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