

# The short reign of King Cotton

The outbreak of Civil War in America in 1861 had a surprisingly extensive influence on the history of south-east Queensland, affecting both its population and its agriculture. The effect in directing Irish immigration to Australia rather than America has already been mentioned. (see Early Settlement)

With war raging across the countryside, the American South virtually ceased supplying cotton and within a short time, English cotton mills were slowing to a halt. Mill workers were thrown out of work, particularly in Manchester, and their situation soon became desperate. At the same time, the price of cotton jumped from 4½ pence per pound to 26 pence per pound.

The Queensland response was a mixture of opportunism and sympathy. While some Manchester firms saw India as the natural alternative source of cotton,<sup>1</sup> the Queensland government hoped to fill this role and offered incentives to encourage both wealthy capitalists and small farmers into the industry.

Even before the Civil War, the Government had encouraged cotton growing. The Crown Land Act of 1860 offered any farmer a cotton bonus – a grant of land valued at £10 for each bale of fine cotton exported.

In 1861, the Government published regulations that allowed investors to take up blocks of 320 to 1280 acres on a small deposit of 2 shillings per acre. If they spent £5000 on clearing and cultivation, the deposit was returned and the land was granted free. With these incentives, cotton farms and cotton companies were quickly set up in south-east Queensland.

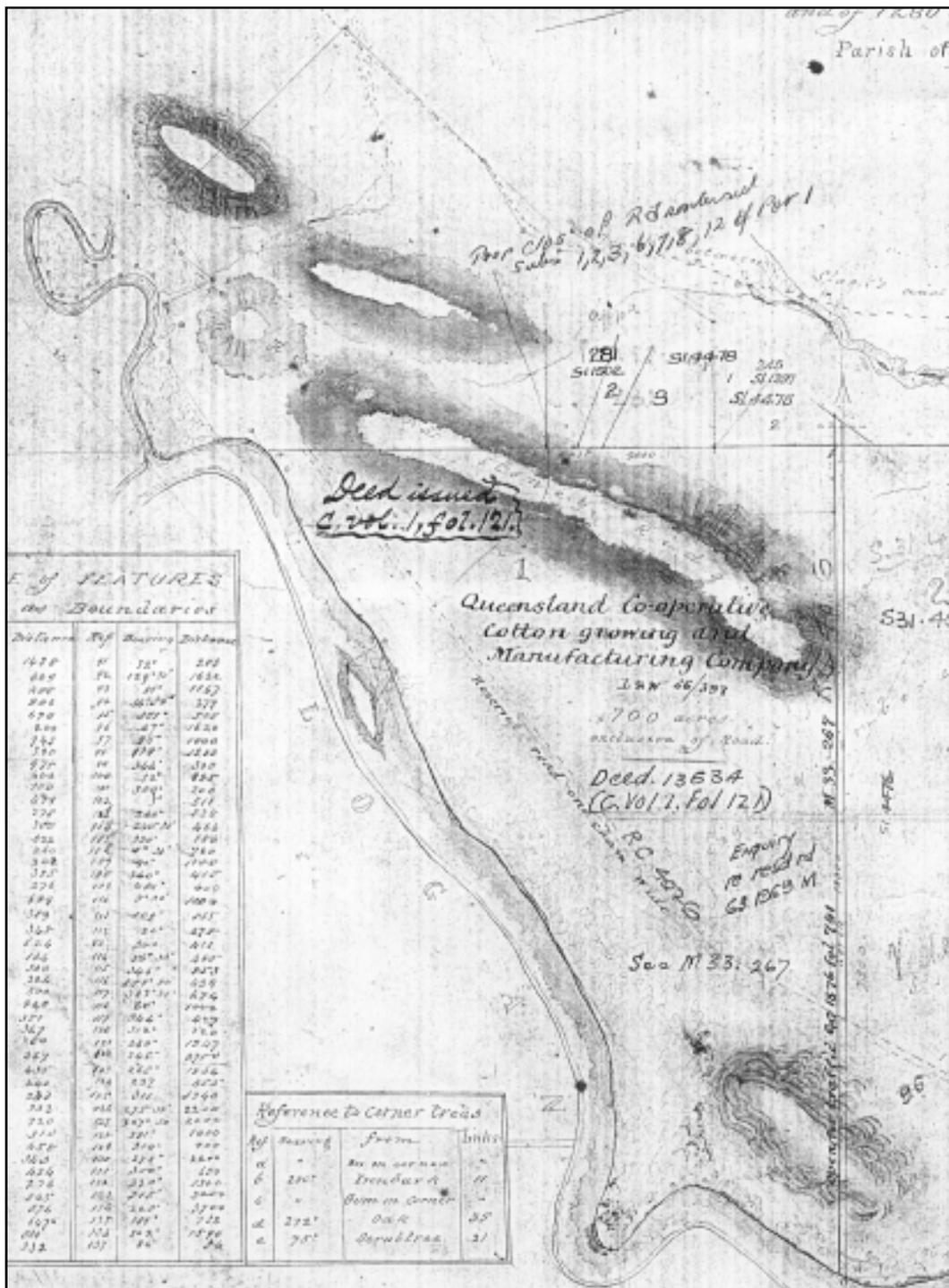
In Ipswich, a group of investors formed the Ipswich Cotton Company in 1861 and established a plantation at Booval. The first four bales of cotton were shipped to England from the smaller farm of one of its individual investors John Panton on 17 April 1862. Panton immediately claimed his Government land order. The Company exported its first 30 bales from Booval shortly afterwards.<sup>2</sup>

Also in 1861, the Manchester Queensland Cotton Company established a plantation on the Nerang River and the Caboolture Cotton Company applied for land.

In April 1862, Robert Towns applied for land on the Logan River under the cotton regulations, followed by John Campbell, T. Oldham and the Queensland Co-Operative Cotton Company.<sup>3</sup> Campbell seems to have started farming cotton even before this time as in June 1861, he had advertised for fencers and for bullock teams for ploughing at “Logan Cotton Plantation”. The site supervisor was a Mr Jolly.<sup>4</sup>



A “Bill of Lading” noting that 38 bales of cotton had been sent to Sydney by R. Towns & Co May 1866  
(Source: Logan Local Studies Collection)



The survey of "700 acres applied for by Bushell and Babbage" for the Queensland Cooperative Cotton Growing and Manufacturing Company. The adjacent 1280 acres had been applied for by Thomas Oldham. The survey is dated April 1864 and is signed by surveyor William Fryar who was later part-owner of the Loganholme Sugar Mill. (Part of Survey M32 courtesy Dept of Natural Resources)

A major problem for large cotton growers, apart from weather, was labour. The crop was labour-intensive and everywhere in Queensland, labour was in short supply. The Ipswich company used children as pickers, while Aboriginal people worked on Normanby Station and at the Bremer Junction. The problem was tackled in other ways on the Logan.

## Jordan and the “distressed operatives”

Probably because of its heightened awareness of the cotton situation, the Queensland public showed considerable sympathy for the English unemployed. Public meetings were held in Brisbane and Ipswich to raise money for the mill workers who were referred to as the “distressed operatives”.<sup>5</sup>

It did not take long to make the connection that in Queensland, there was a shortage of labour to produce cotton while in England, there were unemployed cotton mill operators looking for work. Solving a Queensland problem could therefore be combined with charitable works.

Charles Bushell and Benjamin Babbage established The Queensland Co-Operative Cotton Growing and Manufacturing Company and in December 1862, published its prospectus in the English Guardian newspaper, calling for 1000 families to emigrate. In 1863, the company was allocated 700 acres of land on the river at Loganholme.

The Queensland Agent-General Henry Jordan also became involved. In October 1862, he was asked to disperse the money raised in south-east Queensland for the distressed Manchester mill workers. As a result, Jordan arranged for 1376 adults to be sent out on ships including *Light Brigade*, *Young Australia* and *Fiery Star*. The ships left England between January and September 1863.<sup>6</sup>

The immigrants were eager to try the new venture, saying that they were “just as willing to grow cotton as to manufacture it,” but the reality was somewhat different. The story of what actually happened is told eloquently by William Hanlon, the son of one of the emigrants.<sup>7</sup>

In 1863, I came out to the Colony in the ship “Fiery Star” with my parents, who were members of the self-styled “Manchester Cotton Company”. Upon arrival, they were apportioned blocks of land on the north bank of the Logan river, about mid-way between the present hamlets of Waterford and Loganholme. After a brief stay in Brisbane, they proceeded to the scene of their future activities and found that their holdings were dense vine-matted scrubland.

Being all new chums, whose lives (and occupations in the cotton mills of Manchester) had been confined to the big city, they were entirely ignorant of axe work or any form of agriculture. They, however, did manage to fell a small area of their ground and burn off such of the fallen timber as was susceptible to the firestick. Their first planting was of maize in patches between the prone logs of unconsumed timber. In due course, this seed sprouted and promised a good return to the farmers. No doubt their expectations would have been realised, had not the bandicoots and scrub paddymelons taken heavy toll of the succulent young corn. Only a small proportion of the crop was saved from their ravages. When this eventually reached the cobbing stages, hordes of white cockatoos came along and finished off what the marsupials had left, and not a single cob was harvested. Pumpkins suffered a similar fate, and the whole season’s work went for naught.

As a result of the experience gained, the second season’s crop was a greater success, and sufficient corn was garnered for a small shipment by cutter to the town. But the returns were so meagre that it became imperative for the men folk to seek employment in other avenues of industry. The “cotton growers” were forced to leave their homes, temporarily desert their families and find work on the cattle stations or at other occupations in the bush, such as splitting fencing stuff or shingles.

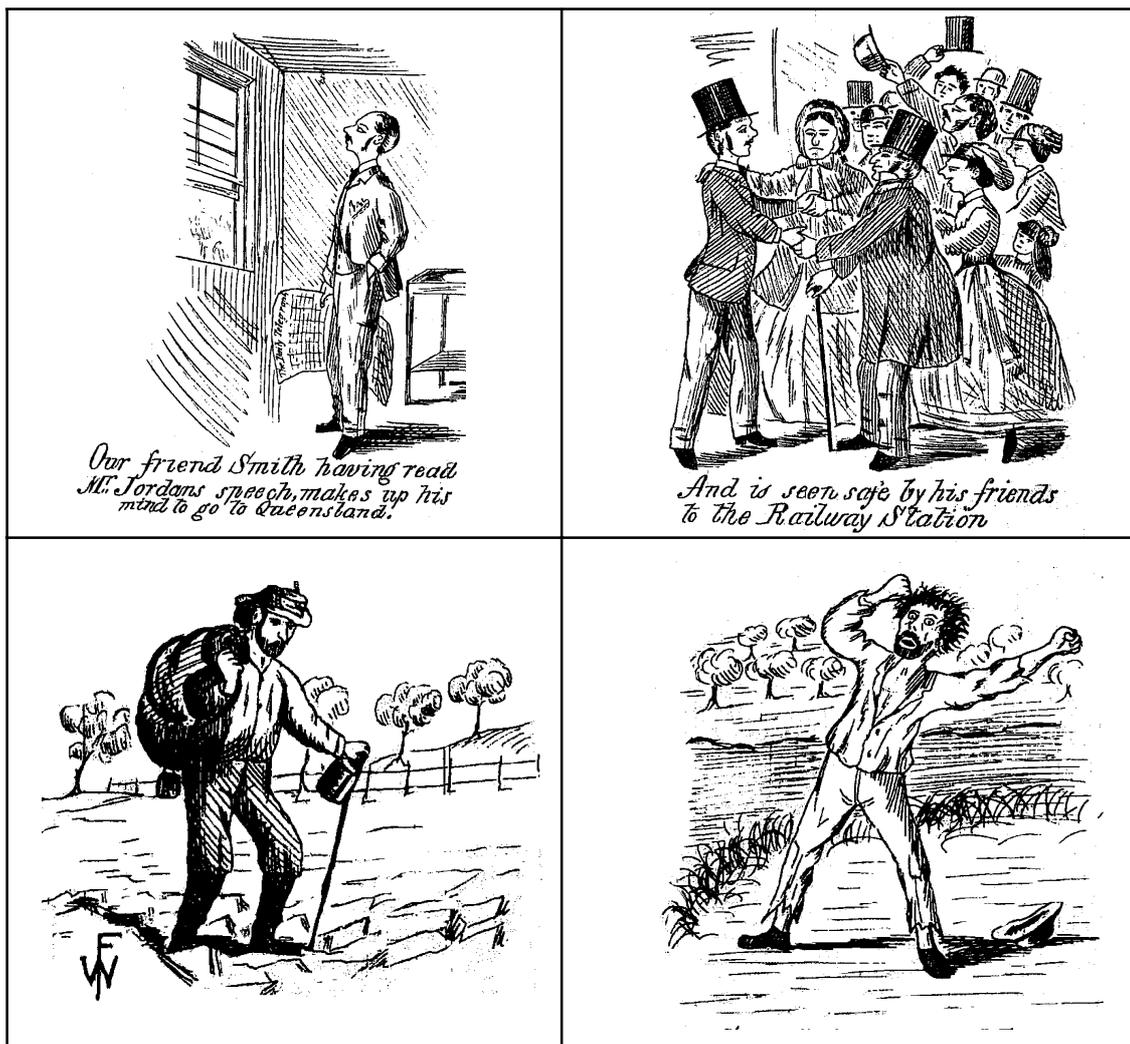
For months at a stretch, the women and their children were the sole occupants of the homes, which were built of axe-trimmed timber with stringy bark roofs, the bare ground sufficing for the floor. They must have been a brave lot of women to live as they did in such utter isolation.....

Food was short and Hanlon recalled that there was no vehicular communication with Brisbane and supplies came by river cutter with an erratic time-table. "Sometimes it came once in six weeks, at other times – just when it arrived." The impoverished settlers could afford no luxuries and were fortunate to be able to barter with local Aboriginal people, exchanging flour, sugar and tobacco for fish, kangaroo tails, crabs and honey.

The entire experiment was a failure, Hanlon saying that the settlers dispersed and the land "reverted to its state of primeval bush and solitude." Hanlon himself opened the Ferry Hotel at Yatala and Hanlon's Family Hotel at Southport (later the Pacific Hotel).

It was a similar story at other cotton blocks in the Logan region. In 1866, the *Brisbane Courier* reported:

Things are in an awful plight on the great Manchester block. There is nobody working, there is nothing planted and there is nothing growing but weed. The ploughs are covered in it. The whole place, in fact, is at a stand-still. There are several other blocks further up the creek but nothing yet has been done save a little gardening and a few buildings.<sup>8</sup>



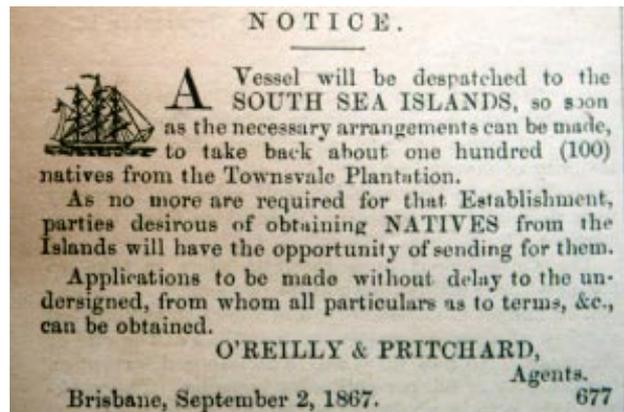
These sketches are from a long cartoon strip "Passages in the Life of Jeremiah Smith, the Deluded Emigrant" which criticised Jordan's scheme. The first sketches show a well-dressed Smith in England reading Jordan's speech; the final sketches show a desperate pauper. (Source: Ipswich Punch)

## Robert Towns and Kanaka labour

Robert Towns established his cotton plantation at “Townsvale” on the southern bank of the Logan River. Although just outside the present-day Logan City, his activities were watched closely by other growers and had considerable influence within the region.

When Towns faced problems in obtaining workers, he tried a radically new solution. In May 1863, he sent recruiter Henry Ross Lewin in the schooner *Don Juan* to the Pacific Islands to obtain labourers, soon to be known generally as “kanakas”. Lewin returned in August with 67 men who started work on the plantation. Other growers soon followed his example.

This was not Towns’ only innovation. He worked the plantation on a large scale, using a steam engine, three bullock teams and two horse teams. In 1866, his crop was 200 bales of cotton, much of the crop having failed because of rain.<sup>9</sup> In 1867, he produced 400 bales and in 1868, sent a sample of cotton to the Paris Exhibition where it won a gold medal.<sup>10</sup>



*Cotton growing on Townsvale (Source: Keith Schmidt/Beaudesert Museum )*

## The end of cotton

In 1867, Fryar and Strachan established a cotton gin at Loganholme (later converted to a sugar mill).<sup>11</sup> Although cotton had been grown experimentally at Moreton Bay since convict times, people still did not fully understand how to grow it – should it be replanted every year, or left for a second year to harvest a second crop from it; how thickly should it be planted; should it be planted among other crops? They were unsure about which varieties to plant, but most decided on Sea Island or



*An 1870 cartoon emphasises the problems of wet weather which contributed to the end of the cotton era.  
(Source: Ipswich Punch)*

Upland. Besides this, cotton farming was a hard task – most work of planting, weeding and harvesting had to be done by hand, there were no dams to supply water if rain didn't come, no hoses to water crops, and no pesticides to fight the caterpillars that ate the crops year after year. Small farmers harvested only a few bales each, and would not have made a living except for the government subsidy.

Large companies which owned huge cotton plantations fared little better. Floods in 1863-64 ruined many plantations and 1867 was another bad year – following heavy rain, there were reports of disease and boll pest.<sup>12</sup>

The American Civil War ended in 1865 and cotton prices gradually returned to normal levels. Towns was £5744 in debt by 1868 and turned to other crops, retaining his Kananka labour. As described by Hanlon, the Manchester workers drifted away from their blocks. By 1869, cotton plantations on the Logan had mostly disappeared.<sup>13</sup>

By 1873, all of the cotton ginneries in Logan appear to have closed down as farmers were sending their crop by boat to Ipswich for processing – a long and no doubt expensive trip down the Logan, across the Bay and back up the Brisbane and Bremer Rivers.<sup>14</sup>

In 1874, a reporter who accompanied a Ministerial visit to the area commented:

Through the whole of the district which includes the lower portion of the Logan and Albert Rivers, cotton-growing appears to have been nearly abandoned. In Manchester, they used to say “cotton is king” but here the sugar cane occupies that regal position.

In 1891, a new Ipswich Cotton Company was formed to build and operate a cotton mill – the first and only one ever built in Queensland. Managing director William Haigh held meetings in the Logan region at Nerang, Coomera, Pimpama, Beenleigh and Waterford, urging farmers to grow cotton to supply the mill.<sup>15</sup> However not many seem to have responded to the invitation as the company's annual report for 1894 complained that it had made a loss, largely due to the failure of a local cotton supply. The mill had ceased production for two months and had then been forced to use inferior imported cotton. The mill converted to a woollen mill in 1918.

Until recently, the border of the original co-operative land was recognised by the name “Cotton Company Road” in Loganholme. This has now been obliterated by the Logan Motorway.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Qld Times (QT) 18.10.1861 - Report from Niell Bros, Manchester
- <sup>2</sup> QT 12.5.1861 and QSA Col/A33 62/1751
- <sup>3</sup> QPP 1864 Applications for Land under Cotton Regulations 19 May 1864
- <sup>4</sup> North Australian 28.6.1861
- <sup>5</sup> eg QT 15.8.1862
- <sup>6</sup> Jennifer Harrison "A Handful of Heroes" RHSQ Vol XIV No 5 Dec 1990 and QPP 1864 and Report of the emigration and outfitting of distressed operatives sent to Qld by Henry Jordan  
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- <sup>7</sup> W.E. Hanlon "The Early Settlement of the Logan and Albert Districts" HSQ Journal 1934
- <sup>8</sup> Brisbane Courier (BC) 23.2.1866
- <sup>9</sup> QT 7.9.1867
- <sup>10</sup> Aldine *History of Queensland* 1888
- <sup>11</sup> Logan History Notes June 1994
- <sup>12</sup> QT 11.6.67
- <sup>13</sup> Michael Jones *Country of Five Rivers*, p61-63. Allen & Unwin Sydney 1988
- <sup>14</sup> BC 16.8.1873
- <sup>15</sup> Logan Witness 13.12.1890