Chapter Three
Shallow Water - The Diminished Commercial Function of the Bremer River 1880-1900

Looking along the Bremer from the Bridge, c.1900.
Source: Picture Ipswich, Ipswich City Council
Despite some of the dramatic and poetic statements describing the end of the river boat era on the Bremer, river trade did not altogether cease. A few cargo services still operated as did passenger runs. William Collins ran a service from Ipswich for cargo until the late 1920s. A publication from 1899 describing the industry of the West Moreton region stated “At the present time cargo boats ply regularly between the two ports, although most of the consignments both to and from Ipswich are now dispatched by rail.” Railway construction continued throughout the century, linking rural areas to the coastal ports through various networks of branch lines. The map on the previous page shows the spread of lines across Queensland. The inset at the top right shows South East Queensland and clearly displays the convergence of lines at Brisbane. Regarding railway construction, William Lines writes “Iron rails spread across Australia like cracks in glass” and this is a fitting description. As mentioned above, Ipswich continued to be important in the trade network in terms of the construction and maintenance of locomotives and rollingstock at the North Ipswich Railway Workshops. Improvements to road networks also followed the railway, resigning the commercial role of the river more firmly to the past.

As discussed earlier, coal mining was one of the largest industries in the Ipswich area and contributed a fair share to river trade. There was a twelve-fold increase in coal production in Queensland from 1875 to 1900 and, while these figures include the increased production in the central and northern regions, production in Ipswich also increased. The general economic climate of the 1880s was of prosperous growth owing to increases in primary and industrial production and the spread of rail links. This was followed by the Depression in the early 1890s. The second half of the decade saw a rapid economic recovery while export commodities changed in importance, with sheep and cattle decreasing and sugar increasing. Throughout this time coal was being used as fuel for various industries, and later also for generating electricity with coal barges conveying loads to riverside power stations.

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144 McLeod, Two Rivers, p.7; Buchanan Heritage Services, History Report, p.57.
145 The People, Products, and Industries of West Moreton, Queensland, 1899, Parkinson and Co., Ipswich, p.69.
147 Whitmore, Coal in Queensland, p.xvii.
148 Whitmore, Coal in Queensland, p.5.
and the wharves for interstate and overseas export\textsuperscript{149}. Even in the late twentieth century, Ipswich coal was travelling down the Bremer and Brisbane Rivers\textsuperscript{150}. The Bremer and Ipswich coal have enjoyed a long, mutually beneficial relationship.

The Bremer in the last two decades of the nineteenth century could not be forgotten, despite no longer being a busy highway of trade. Floods continued to periodically interrupt life along the river, the largest occurring in 1893. A resident of Ipswich and Brisbane during the nineteenth century, and frequent river user George Harris remarked “I have been a resident of the Brisbane River upwards of 68 years and assert my knowledge that the 1893 flood was the highest, and most disastrous I have ever experienced”\textsuperscript{151}. Henry Forbes stated that Ipswich “may have suffered to some extent from the floods; but it is chiefly placed on hills rising considerably above the reach, we believe, of even very great inundations”\textsuperscript{152}. From the photos taken during the flood from Denmark Hill, a considerable part of Ipswich, particularly, the town centre, was affected. Taking into consideration that the Bremer is a much smaller waterway than the Brisbane, and the comparative size of Ipswich to Brisbane at the time, the floods were quite devastating to the settlement in many places quite close to the river. The other major environmental hazard on the Bremer was water hyacinth. This aquatic weed choked the river in 1900 and periodically throughout the twentieth century\textsuperscript{153}. With the reduction of commercial river traffic, the Bremer was open to more recreational uses such as hosting annual swimming races that were held until the middle of the twentieth century\textsuperscript{154}.

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\textsuperscript{149} McLeod, \textit{Two Rivers}, n.p.n.

\textsuperscript{150} O’Flynn & Thornton, ‘Sand, Gravel, and Coal Resources of the Brisbane River and Adjacent Areas’ p.29.

\textsuperscript{151} George Harris, 1923, \textit{Reminiscences of My Early Days in Ipswich}, Fryer Library Manuscript, University of Queensland, Brisbane, p.15.


\textsuperscript{153} Brier-Mills, \textit{The Romance of the Bremer}, p.44, 60.

\textsuperscript{154} Gregory, \textit{The Brisbane River Story}, p.135.
The floodwaters at One Mile 1893, Source: Picture Ipswich, Ipswich City Council.

East Street during the 1893 floods. Source: Whitehead Studios, Picture Ipswich, Ipswich City Council.
Swimming in the Bremer. Source: Picture Ipswich, Ipswich City Council.

A cruise along the river during the 1920s. Source: Picture Ipswich, Ipswich City Council.
Summary

This study has shown how the Bremer River was an influential factor in many aspects of the settlement and development of Ipswich during the nineteenth century. Initially, it was the presence of limestone that prompted settlement on the banks of the Bremer in 1827. The limestone was found when the rivers were used as a means for exploring and assessing the surrounding landscape for potential use or resources as well as being examined themselves. Throughout the period from 1823 to 1842, the rivers were used to convey produce, supplies and people between the main settlement at Brisbane and its outposts. The early settlement and exploration patterns show the importance of waterways to the development of the region. The various sections of the Limestone settlement were established along the river banks. Ultimately a number of factors converged, resulting in the site now surrounded by the City of Ipswich having grown from a convict operated quarry and agricultural station. Trends established during this time were to continue through much of the nineteenth century.

While convict history was largely ignored before a revival of interest in the second half of the twentieth century, it left a significant legacy for the pattern of trade and transportation networks in Queensland. The area that is now Queensland was originally the northern district of New South Wales. The decision to settle at Moreton Bay was in part made as it was thought to be far enough away to deter escape attempts, but still close enough to the administrative centre of Sydney to not greatly hinder communication. There were even calls for a separation of the central and northern sections of Queensland, due largely to the distance between Brisbane and the areas it was governing. Along with the major roads, and later the railway, the Bremer conveyed the produce of the Darling Downs to port, and supplies back to Ipswich. This made Ipswich a busy commercial town at the centre of southern Queensland’s trade network.

After nearly a decade of Ipswich being the eastern terminus of the southern railway, the turning point came when the rail link from the hinterland via Ipswich was made
continuous to Brisbane in 1875. This caused a dramatic reduction in the use of the river for cargo and passenger conveyance, though it was still significantly used by the coal industry. Despite the vast reduction in the Bremer’s commercial use, Ipswich still played a significant role in the trading of the region, the focus of which were the North Ipswich Railway Workshops. It is somewhat ironic that all the construction materials required for the railway were conveyed to Ipswich along the Bremer. Thus the river played a significant and symbolic part in its own commercial demise as its significance dramatically reduced following the establishment of railway transportation in the region and was never to regain its high profile role in the commercial sector of the state. In all, the Bremer River was a major artery in the workings of colonial Queensland prior to railway construction and to which Ipswich, Brisbane and the Darling Downs owe a great deal. While Ipswich was often viewed as subordinate to Brisbane, it was able to exercise a fair amount of political influence during the middle of the century due to the importance it gained as the head of navigation. Overall, the obstacles and engineering work required to make the rivers easier to negotiate were a continuous concern and became a major factor in the decisions surrounding railway construction and port location, as well as significantly affecting Ipswich’s capacity for political influence.
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