

**A Tributary But A Highway:  
The Significance of the Bremer River during the  
Settlement and Development of Ipswich 1823-1900**



*Source: Picture Ipswich, Ipswich City Council*

Erin Coster

*2007 Recipient of the*

*Ipswich Local History Sesqui-Centenary Scholarship*

*Ipswich City Council and The University of Queensland Ipswich Campus*

## Declaration

The work presented in this paper is, except where acknowledged in the text, my own work and is submitted to the Ipswich City Council as completion of the Ipswich City Council Sesqui-Centenary Scholarship 2007.

Erin Coster

7 October 2008

## Table of Contents

<b>Chapter One: Meandering Through Time – Situating the Bremer</b>	5-3
Limestone – The Foundations of a City 1823-1842	5-6
Exploring and Settling Moreton Bay	5-6
The Convict Outpost	5-10
<b>Chapter Two: The Highway Nature Built – Commercial Functions of the Bremer River 1842-1880</b>	5-13
River Trade	5-14
Coal: A Goldmine	5-18
Roads or Ruts?	5-20
Negotiating a Mine Field	5-23
The Iron Highway	5-27
Ports and Politics; Rocks and Whines	5-30
<b>Chapter Three: Shallow Water – The Diminished Commercial Function of the Bremer 1880-1900</b>	5-35
<b>Summary</b>	5-41
<b>Reference List</b>	5-43



**Chapter One**  
**Meandering Through Time – Situating the Bremer**



*View of the Town Reach looking west. The wharves are situated on the left hand bank, below the railway bridge. Source: John Oxley Library.*

Brisbane describes itself as the 'River City' and with the Brisbane River's meandering course surrounded by Queensland's state capital this claim is easily substantiated. The Brisbane's major tributary, the Bremer River, lays further inland and formed part of a vital trade and communications network in the nineteenth century. It also greatly influenced the site and development of Queensland's oldest provincial city, Ipswich. As sister cities, Ipswich and Brisbane have been linked physically, historically, economically and politically by the rivers. The Bremer River and City of Ipswich have however often been overshadowed by Brisbane mostly due to their close proximity. Highlighting the relationship between the Bremer River and the development of Ipswich and the surrounding region is therefore of great significance.

To understand the significance of the Bremer River to the settlement of Ipswich and its role in the development of South East Queensland, the river's geographical location and relation to its parent river, the Brisbane, requires examination. The reasons for and nature of the Moreton Bay colony also require consideration, as Ipswich was initially an outpost of this settlement.

Situated in what is now the southern region of Queensland, the Bremer River lies approximately thirty kilometres inland from Moreton Bay and is the largest tributary of the Brisbane River. Heading towards the ocean, the Bremer flows roughly northeast, converging with the Brisbane at 'The Junction'. Having made its way southeast from its headwaters near Kilcoy to about twenty kilometres south of the point it meets the ocean, the Brisbane curves to the northeast from The Junction. Continuing this course it meanders towards the coast, flowing into Moreton Bay. The cities of Brisbane and Ipswich have grown along and around these rivers.

As a tributary whose only outlet to sea is its parent stream, the story of the Bremer is thus inextricably tied to that of the Brisbane. In comparison with the latter, the Bremer is rather short, therefore most of the journey steamers, their passengers and cargoes made were on the Brisbane. The significances of the Bremer should not be understated however, as on its banks deposits of limestone caught the attention of

Moreton Bay Commandant Patrick Logan who then established the first settlement near the present city centre.

There have been a small number of publications with the Bremer as the focus. Along with scientific studies on the geology, mineralogy and overall health of the catchment, the two most significant cultural and social studies are *The Romance of the Bremer* by Margery Brier-Mills in 1982 and the more recent *History Report: The Bremer River Catchment* compiled by Robyn Buchanan of Buchanan Heritage Services for the Environmental Protection Agency. While the latter study also offers an assessment of the catchment's health, the majority of the document is devoted to a detailed account of the river's life. It is organised using the same headings as those in *The Brisbane River Story*, breaking the content into chronological order and the dominant theme of each era, and making a good companion for understanding the individual and combined river stories. More has been written about the Brisbane River of which Helen Gregory has compiled the most comprehensive history. In *The Brisbane River Story* she covers all major aspects of the river's life from its original inhabitants, to European settlement, intervention, exploitation and attempts to heal the river and is complemented by a range of photographs.

Situating the Bremer within the colonial landscape also requires an examination of broader settlement and development patterns, offering explanations of how and why the Bremer was significant and related to wider developmental trends. To do this, the works of Lionel Frost, Clive Forster, Geoffrey Blainey and William Lines will be used. These writers provide a range of discussions on city and urban development, the development of transport and trading networks and European worldviews and how they brought about environmental impact. In all, concepts and explanation from these theoretical works will be applied to the Bremer and the development of Ipswich to illustrate their place in the development of colonial Queensland.

## Limestone – The Foundations of a City 1823-1842

### *Exploring and Settling Moreton Bay*

By the 1820s, the penal establishments of New South Wales were overcrowded and working inefficiently. This prompted an investigation and the subsequent report compiled by Commissioner John Thomas Bigge made a number of suggestions for improvement. Forming of a new settlement would allow both an improvement of the convict system's efficiency and would separate convicts from civilian settlements<sup>1</sup>. An expedition to assess potential sites in the northern region of the colony was embarked upon in October 1823 and headed by the Surveyor-General John Oxley. Three potential sites, Port Bowen, Port Curtis and Moreton Bay, were to be examined.

After examining Port Curtis and deeming it unsuitable, Oxley decided not to travel further north. Instead, he turned back to Moreton Bay and arrived on November 29 1823. Oxley noted that the western shore of the Bay had already been "cursorily examined" by Flinders and set out to complete a more thorough examination "in the hope to find in such an extensive Inlet some opening which would render an apparently fine surrounding country of more utility and value"<sup>2</sup>. On December 2 he commenced his exploration of the Brisbane River, travelling as far as Termination Hill, now Goodna, before returning to the Bay two days later. During the expedition, Oxley noted the features of the river and gave suggestions for its use. He turned back only a few kilometres short of the mouth of the Bremer, a then unnamed tributary.

As noted by historian W. Ross Johnston, the early nineteenth century was "a time when rivers and river transport dominated European thinking on the question of development"<sup>3</sup>. Oxley's enthusiastic reaction to the Brisbane, which he "waxed almost lyrical" about "as the site of a potentially prosperous settlement" in his end

---

<sup>1</sup> W. Ross Johnston, 1983, 'Not a Capital Idea: The Birth of Brisbane', *The Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol.29, no.2, p.23.

<sup>2</sup> Oxley in George Mackness, 1979, *The Discovery and Exploration of Moreton Bay and the Brisbane River (1799-1823)*, Review Publications, Dubbo, p.11.

<sup>3</sup> Johnston, 'Not a Capital Idea', p.238.

of voyage report is evidence of this thinking<sup>4</sup>. He thought the “river should be the essence of the settlement”, by stating he was “amply gratified in the discovery of this important river, as we sanguinely anticipated the most beneficial consequences as likely to result to the Colony by the formation of a Settlement on its Banks”<sup>5</sup>. While he thought the banks of the Brisbane would be the best site for a permanent settlement, he also noted Redcliffe to be the best “in the first instance”, but in his opinion was better suited as a military post or stores<sup>6</sup>. The governing authority initially chose Redcliffe however, the river soon proved a more suitable option, though not without its shortcomings.

The newest penal settlement of New South Wales was to be a place of secondary punishment for re-offenders. The official dispatches read that Moreton Bay was to house runaways from Port Macquarie, as escape from there “had become too easy and Norfolk Island could not take all minor offenders”<sup>7</sup>. Governor Brisbane stated “on account of its distance and almost impossibility of escape” Moreton Bay would fulfil its intended purpose well<sup>8</sup>. An Exclusion Zone was also set around the settlement with the purpose of providing security<sup>9</sup>. Regarding this zone, Colin Sheehan explains that there were really three exclusions; one by sea, another by land and the third “to prevent exploitation of an area of cultural significance to the Aborigines, known as the Bunya Country”<sup>10</sup>. The first mention of these exclusions was an Act of Council for transportation on August 16 1826, banning contact with Moreton Bay without written permission from the governor<sup>11</sup>. In May 1840,

---

<sup>4</sup> Helen Gregory 1996, *The Brisbane River Story: Meanders through Time*, Australia Marine Conservation Society, Yeronga, 1996, p.18.

<sup>5</sup> Johnston, ‘Not a Capital Idea’, p.238; Oxley cited in Mackaness, *The Discovery and Exploration of Moreton Bay*, p.14.

<sup>6</sup> Mackaness, *The Discovery and Exploration of Moreton Bay*, p.14.

<sup>7</sup> *Historical Records of Australia: Series I: Governor’s Dispatches to and from England*. (HRA), 1917, “Sir Thomas Brisbane to Under Secretary Horton, 24<sup>th</sup> March, 1825”, Volume XI, Library Committee of the Commonwealth Parliament, Sydney, p.553; Margaret Weidenhofer, 1973, *The Convict Years: Transportation and the Penal System 1788-1868*. Lansdowne Press, Melbourne, p.102.

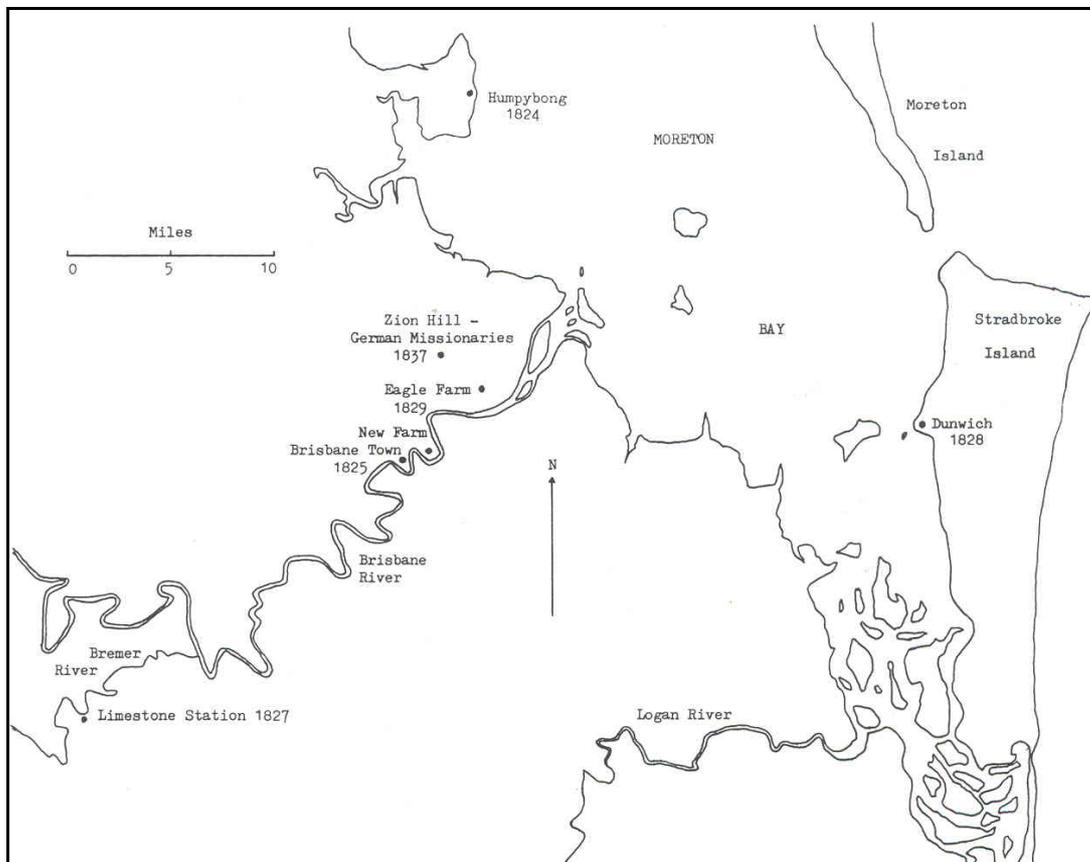
<sup>8</sup> *Historical Records of Australia: Series I: Governor’s Dispatches to and from England* 1917, “Sir Thomas Brisbane to Earl Bathurst, 21 May, 1825”, Volume XI, Library Committee of the Commonwealth Parliament, Sydney, p.604.

<sup>9</sup> Colin Sheehan, 2000, ‘The Fifty-Mile Limit’, in Rod Fisher & Jennifer Harrison (eds.), *Brisbane: Squatters, Settlers and Surveyors*, Brisbane History Group, Kelvin Grove, p.41.

<sup>10</sup> Sheehan, ‘The Fifty-Mile Limit’, p.40.

<sup>11</sup> Sheehan, ‘The Fifty-Mile Limit’, p.40.

Governor Gipps indicated that no stations were allowed “for the present within fifty miles of Moreton Bay”, though no explanation was given for this choice of distance<sup>12</sup>. There was also confusion as to where the distance measured from as the Moreton Bay settlement was rather spread out (see the map on the next page); Limestone was twenty-four miles inland from Brisbane. This point was clarified in October the following year, Brisbane Town named the nucleus around which the zone applied<sup>13</sup>. Sheehan states that these decisions were never made official policies, but were known by the general population and are significant, as pastoral expansion in New South Wales had been pushing west and north by that time.



*Moreton Bay Convict Settlement 1824-1842.*

*Source: Chris Pearce, Through the Eyes of Thomas Pamphlett – Convict and Castaway.*

<sup>12</sup> Sheehan, ‘The Fifty-Mile Limit’ p.42. Fifty miles is equal to eighty kilometres.

<sup>13</sup> Sheehan, ‘The Fifty-Mile Limit’, p.44.

The first convicts arrived in Moreton Bay, landing on the Redcliffe Peninsula, in September 1824. The settlement was moved the following year due to a variety of problems. The fresh water supplies were inadequate and the failure of introduced plants was a major concern for the settlers, along with local Indigenous groups making known their displeasure at the intrusion<sup>14</sup>. The colony was relocated to the banks of the Brisbane River, about twenty-seven kilometres upstream from its mouth<sup>15</sup>. Oxley had returned to Moreton Bay in 1824 to help establish the original settlement and, along with botanist Allan Cunningham, set out to further explore the region. It was on this expedition that the Bremer was located.

Making their way along the Brisbane, Oxley and Cunningham saw the mouth of “a considerable creek or stream” on September 19<sup>th</sup> and named it Bremer, before continuing upstream<sup>16</sup>. On their return journey they camped near the Bremer on the 25<sup>th</sup>. Oxley wrote in his journal “This place will be desirable and convenient for an establishment” when the settlement expanded due to the large stands of pines in the vicinity. He also remarked that it was navigable for large vessels and “The country on both sides of the river fit for cultivation”<sup>17</sup>. Historian Helen Gregory points out that road technology in the nineteenth century “was in its infancy and England was being steadily criss-crossed by canals used” for transporting resources and industrial goods<sup>18</sup>. Therefore, the rivers were subject to examination themselves, as “It appeared that this essential form of communication had been provided by nature in Moreton Bay”<sup>19</sup>.

---

<sup>14</sup> Gregory, *The Brisbane River Story*, p.23.

<sup>15</sup> W. Ross Johnston, 1986, *Brisbane The First Thirty Years*, Boolarong, Bowen Hills, p.22.

<sup>16</sup> Oxley’s field book cited in JG Steele, 1972, *The Explorers of the Moreton Bay District, 1770-1830*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, p.135; Gregory, *The Brisbane River Story*, p.20.

<sup>17</sup> Steele, *The Explorers of the Moreton Bay District*, p.146.

<sup>18</sup> Gregory, *The Brisbane River Story*, p.22.

<sup>19</sup> Gregory, *The Brisbane River Story*, p.22.

### *The Convict Outpost*

In 1825, Captain Patrick Logan was appointed Commandant of Moreton Bay and explored much of the area that is now South East Queensland. His travels were facilitated primarily by the ready built passageways of the region's rivers. On an expedition in 1826, he came across large limestone deposits along the banks of the Bremer. In light of his building program, the deposits piqued his interest. According to J.G. Steele, Logan had chosen "to build in brick and stone, not because he saw any enduring future for the penal settlement, nor to perpetuate his own memory, but simply for the sake of economy. Slab huts required too much maintenance"<sup>20</sup>. Prior to this discovery, mortar was produced in Moreton Bay by burning sea shells. This task however required a large number of shells to produce a rather small amount of quicklime<sup>21</sup>. Logan subsequently sent a small group of convicts and guards to establish a quarry and lime burning kilns on the southern bank of the Bremer River around June/July 1827<sup>22</sup>. The settlement was named Limestone and was one of a group of locations charged with the task of producing building materials for Logan's building scheme. Other locations included a porphyry quarry at Gardens Point, a sandstone quarry at Oxley and a brick kiln at Wheat Creek<sup>23</sup>.

Allan Cunningham visited Moreton Bay again in 1828, accompanied by botanist Charles Fraser. At this time, approximately 300-350 bushels of "excellent lime" was being transported by boat from Limestone to Brisbane a week<sup>24</sup>. The outpost also comprised a sheep station at Limestone and cattle station at what is now Redbank<sup>25</sup>. By the late 1830s, the Limestone settlement consisted of a brick overseer's cottage, accommodation for soldiers, the lime kiln, yards for sheep and cattle and a convict

---

<sup>20</sup> J.G. Steele, "Foundations of Brisbane" in *Brisbane Retrospect: Eight Aspects of Brisbane History*, Library of Queensland Board, Brisbane, 1978, p.10.

<sup>21</sup> Chris Pearce, 1993, *Through the Eyes of Thomas Pamphlett – Convict and Castaway*. Boolarong, Bowen Hills, p.142; J.G. Steele, 1975, *Brisbane Town in Convict Days 1824-1842*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, p.73.

<sup>22</sup> The actual date is not recorded in Logan's journal or other government records.

<sup>23</sup> J.G. Steele, "Foundations of Brisbane", p.10.

<sup>24</sup> Allan Cunningham's Journal, 13-17 August 1828, cited in Steele, *The Explorers*, p.281.

<sup>25</sup> Mamie O'Keefe, 1974, *A Brief Account of the Moreton Bay Penal Settlement 1824-1839*, Oxley Memorial Library of Queensland, Brisbane, p.6.

stockade<sup>26</sup>. The accommodation was similar at the Plough Station, now the suburb of Eastern Heights<sup>27</sup>.

Few details of the specific convict workings at Limestone remain today. The extent of the works, including lime quarrying and burning, and raising sheep, cattle and crops cannot be accurately ascertained. It is unclear if events at Limestone were ever officially recorded at all, beyond the mentions in the Moreton Bay records, as no separate records exist today. For example, the *Book of Trials*; a record of judicial proceedings held at the main settlement during the second half of its penal life; records four cases of neglect of duty by convicts from Limestone<sup>28</sup>. The first three trials related to neglect while shepherding sheep. These prisoners either left their flock unattended or lost or allowed animals under their supervision to be injured. The fourth trial concerned neglect while watching a crop of corn.

The nature of the convict system at Limestone seems to have been less strict than at Moreton Bay. While there is no actual recorded evidence stating this, a number of suppositions can be made using the surviving documents and critical imagination. The original settling party of five convicts and an overseer were not accompanied by a military guard. Local historian Robyn Buchanan suggests that those “men were considered trustworthy” or at least more so than those who remained at Moreton Bay<sup>29</sup>. The name ‘Plough Station’ is one of the only indications that ploughing was allowed. This is significant as the penal regulations of 1829 clearly stated convicts were to engage in as much manual and agricultural labour as possible. Regulation No.2 stated “the Convicts are to be employed exclusively in Agricultural operations, when the Public Buildings or other Works of the Settlement do not absolutely require their Labour”<sup>30</sup>. Also, the ‘spade and hoe’ policy of Regulation No.3

---

<sup>26</sup> JG Steele, 1975, *Brisbane Town in Convict Days 1824-1842*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, p.244.

<sup>27</sup> O’Keefe, *A Brief Account of the Moreton Bay Penal Settlement 1824-1839*, p.6.

<sup>28</sup> *Book of Trials* 1 July 1835 to 28 February 1842, Z7857, Queensland State Archives, trials held on 21 December 1838, 14 February 1839, 23 October 1841 and 24 December 1841.

<sup>29</sup> Robyn Buchanan, 1993, *Ipswich Heritage Education Kit*, Ipswich City Council, Ipswich, p.10.

<sup>30</sup> *Historical Records of Australia: Series I: Governor’s Dispatches to and from England 1922*, “Enclosure No.1: Regulations for Penal Settlements, New South Wales, 1<sup>st</sup> July, 1829”, Volume XV, Library Committee of the Commonwealth Parliament, Sydney, p.105.

prohibited the use of working animals and machinery when a task could be completed by manual labour<sup>31</sup>. These restrictions would have been more pronounced at Moreton Bay than at other Australian settlements due to labour and punishment being its focus. Buchanan claims that working bullocks were sent to Limestone “reinforcing the idea that it was run more efficiently using a bullock and plough”<sup>32</sup>. Archibald Meston mentions three times in his *Geographic History of Queensland* that a plough was used at the Plough Station, though never how it was operated<sup>33</sup>. Therefore, while assumptions can be made about the nature of work at Limestone, some of these conclusions are still only speculation.

The convict period at Moreton Bay ended officially in 1842, though it had been winding down since 1839. With Cunningham’s discovery of the Darling Downs and a passable overland route to Moreton Bay via a gap in the Range, pastoralists started to take up land in the northern regions for grazing. The first were the Leslie brothers in 1840. Within four years of their settling on the Darling Downs, another twenty-four stations surrounded them, such was the rapid rate of expansion<sup>34</sup>. The rivers would become major transport and communication lines for the settlement, as overland travel beyond the region was rather slow. Ultimately, the Bremer River was an integral element in the ‘discovery’ and settlement of the site of Ipswich and the establishment of the new free settlement.

---

<sup>31</sup> HRA, Vol.XV “Enclosure No.1: Regulations for Penal Settlements, New South Wales, 1<sup>st</sup> July, 1829”, p.105, “In these operations, the use of the Hoe and Spade shall be as much as possible adopted, and where the Number of Men who can be employed in Agriculture is sufficient to raise Food for the Settlement with these Implements, the use of the Plough shall be given up and no Working Cattle are to be employed in operations, which can be effected by Men and Hand Carts”.

<sup>32</sup> Buchanan, *Ipswich Heritage Education Kit*, p.5.

<sup>33</sup> Archibald Meston, 1895, *Geographic History of Queensland*, Government Printer, Brisbane, p.9, 53, 67.

<sup>34</sup> William Lines, 1991, *Taming the Great South Land: A History of the Conquest of Nature in Australia*, Allen and Unwin, North Sydney, p.81