

Commercial Fishing in Mandurah: The Early Years

The rich fishing grounds of the Peel-Harvey estuary and its tributaries have always been one of the main drawcards for people living in the area. Humans have exploited these resources since they first inhabited the region over 60,000 years ago, and have continued to do so up until the present day, with licensed fishermen still plying their trade on the estuary's waters.

It all began with the Aboriginal Mungah, or fish trap, situated on the lower reaches of the Serpentine River, close to the place where the present day Pinjarra road bridge crosses. The Mungah took the form of a palisade, or fence, of closely spaced sticks across the river with a "race" in the centre where the fish coming down stream were channelled, being easily caught by hand and thrown up onto the bank. When the fish were running, large gatherings of tribes from other parts of the South West took place to enjoy the abundance of fish caught with the Mungah. These gatherings formed the origin of the term Mandjar, meaning "meeting place", which was later to form the basis for the name Mandurah.

In the early years of European settlement, little use was made by the newcomers of fish as a food source. One of the few early references to Europeans fishing is of Henry Edward Hall being taught to fish on the estuary by Aboriginals. Some early attempts to send fresh fish to market in Fremantle by boat are recorded, but hot weather and light winds often conspired to ensure that the produce was well past its prime on arrival. Sea transport for fresh fish was not a viable option. It was not until the last quarter of the 19th century that a solution was found.

The canning of fish for export in Mandurah was begun by Charles Broadhurst in 1878, with an enterprise situated in what is now Smart Street. The factory was named the Mandurah Fish Canning and Preserving Works. Broadhurst was a colonial entrepreneur, who was involved in trade with the islands to the north of Australia. Using the money that he made he purchased the equipment necessary to open the factory. This enterprise, however, was not a consistent performer and it variously changed hands or sat idle for periods of time over the next 20 years. At one time its owners were the Smart brothers, who gave their name to street that the cannery was situated in.



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1880 saw the entry of a second enterprise into the canning market, the Tuckey brother's Peel Inlet Preserving Works. The impetus behind this impressive two story limestone factory lay, like Broadhurst's, in the contact that the Tuckey brothers had with the new nor' west pearling industry. The brother's contacts amongst the Japanese community allowed them to bring Japanese fishermen to Mandurah to supply the cannery with fish. The migrant workers were housed in a barracks at the back of the cannery lot, one wall of which can still be seen behind the post office in Sholl Street. At its peak, the Peel Inlet Preserving Works was producing 5,000 cans of fish a day, mainly for supply to the Kalgoorlie goldfields and for export to India.

A third enterprise came onto the scene in 1897, lead by another set of enterprising business men, Messers Grant and Gerloff. Their West Murray Freezing Works brought the new technology of refrigeration to the fish preserving business. Situated in Furnissdale, the plant was serviced by the paddle steamer Coolanup, which could transport produce to either Mandurah for transhipment to Fremantle, or when the ocean bar was closed, to Pinjarra for carriage by train to Perth. The persistence of the bars, both at the estuary mouth and the Murray mouth, along with the Coolanup's deep draught, contributed to the closing of the freezing works by 1902. Thus Gerloff's plans, which included a multi-story hotel on Culeenup Island, at the Murray's mouth, came to an end.

Louis Dawe, a name that rings down the years to us when we think of canning in Mandurah, began his association with the town as a tinsmith to the Tuckey brothers in the mid-1890s. It was not long before he set out on his own, establishing the Pleasant Grove Preserving Works on the southern estuary, a smaller scale operation, which was better able to cope with the fluctuating fish stocks, which became an increasing reality in the late 1890s. Overfishing and disease lead to the first fisheries inspector in WA being appointed to Mandurah in 1897 to enforce new restrictions on licenses and netting at river mouths. Stocks renewed for 1898, but again crashed in 1900. This saw the Tuckey brothers dismiss their contract labour and move their operations to the shores of the southern estuary, at Carabungup, as the only way to keep their business profitable. The Smart Street cannery closed for good during this period, shutting down in 1905.

The Dawes, with their more flexible and self-sufficient system, continued canning until just before the Second World War. The war itself saw a brief resurgence in their business, as canned fish for soldier's rations was in demand, but as that conflict came to an end, commercial canning ceased in Mandurah. The post-war period was to see refrigeration and road transport remove the last barriers to fresh fish being sent to Perth, Fremantle, and points beyond, consigning the era of canning to another chapter in the rich pages of Mandurah's history.

References: Ronald Richards, *Murray and Mandurah*.

