

# **'THE RECORD OF THE VAN DIEMEN'S LAND COMPANY**

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The Van Diemen's Land Company was formed in London in 1824, the Act of Parliament granting its charter being passed in November, 1825. The purpose of the Company, according to the Act, was to "cultivate waste land" in Van Diemen's Land, mainly for sheep breeding, although circumstances soon forced them to turn to other types of farming as well. The Company was to be granted 250,000 acres of land in the North-Western part of Tasmania on which it could engage in farming by encouraging its own immigrants to come from England.

In March, 1826 the first party, consisting of the newly-appointed Colonial Agent (Edward Curr) and a group of surveyors arrived in Hobart, and shortly afterwards they left for the unexplored North-West to locate their grant. After considerable wrangling with the Colonial Government over the location of the grant, the land was finally selected in 1830, in seven different areas, although it was not actually granted until 1847.

Despite this, the Company had already begun clearing land at Circular Head, most of the men and supplies necessary for this work having come directly from England on ships chartered by the Company. Because of the difficulties of clearing the land, combined with what must have been a series of unusually severe winters, progress was very slow and at times the Agent despaired of ever becoming firmly established in the areas selected.

Although this slow progress was partly due to natural causes, one of the main reasons was the continual use, by the imported farmers, of unsuitable European farming methods. In this they were more or less encouraged by the Directors of the Company, who from their lack of experience of colonial conditions were unwilling to spend fairly large amounts of money on projects recommended by the Agent and instead they tried to save money by spending less than was necessary to keep the Company running efficiently.

In spite of this attitude large tracts of land were eventually cleared and brought under cultivation and it is mainly for this reason that the Company and its records are important as they provide a complete record of the exploration and opening up of the North-West of Tasmania.

Until the discovery of tin at Mt. Bischoff in 1871 the Company had made a profit in only a few of its 45 years but with the beginning of tin mining operations a great chance for securing prosperity for the Company was wasted because the Directors were unwilling to spend much money on a modern railway between Emu Bay and Mt. Bischoff. As this was the only practicable route by which freight could be carried to and from Mt. Bischoff, it is difficult to see why the Directors persisted in their old-fashioned ideas against the Agent's advice. The railway which was eventually constructed was out of date before it was completed and had to be almost entirely replaced within a few years with a resultant loss to the Company.

The Company also began to sell timber in large quantities in the 1880s and the sale of land in small lots was also encouraged until most of the Company's income derived from land sales, although they still carried out some pastoral activities, especially at Woolnorth.

The records of the Company, which are housed in the Archives Office of Tasmania, were received in three transfers from Burnie between August, 1959 and February, 1960 and in transfers from London between November, 1960 and January, 1965; the final sorting and arranging has been completed only recently. The records appear to have been produced in a rather inefficient and old-fashioned manner and clearly show the conservatism of the Director's policy, which was one of the main reasons for the failure of the Company, even extending to book-keeping. Two examples of this are the extreme detail and duplication of the financial records and the use of press-copies even as late as 1947.

Probably the most impressive physical feature of the records is their bulk, being about 185 running feet of records of which 150 feet are the records of the Van Diemen's Land Company (both London and Tasmanian sections). The remaining 35 feet are divided between the records of three subsidiary companies, the Burnie Timber and Brick Company (20 feet), the Emu Bay and Mt. Bischoff Railway Company (14 feet) and the Van Diemen's Land Mineral Company (1 foot). One of the reasons for this bulk is that both the head office in London and the Colonial section of the Company kept an extremely detailed record of all their activities and consequently there is a considerable amount of duplication.

The Colonial section however forms the greater part of the records probably because the Directors instructed the Agent to give a detailed account of how the Company's money was spent and also of the various sources of income. Because of this the financial records form about one-third (in bulk) of the records as much of the financial business of the Company is written up in cash books and journals and then transferred in a slightly different form, into ledgers.

The majority of the records can be divided into several distinct types, these being — despatches from the Colonial Agent to the Court of Directors and *vice versa*; various series of correspondence relating to the Company; records which deal with the financial aspects of the Company's business including land sales; records which give particulars of the Company's stock, being mainly concerned with increases and decreases; annual reports and other reports on the Company's affairs; maps of the Company's properties; and documents relating to shareholders. These give an extremely detailed picture of the Company's varied activities, both in business and exploration from 1825 to the 1950s.

Probably the most important series in the group is the despatches from the Colonial Agent to the Court of Directors in London. These are complete (either as originals or letterbooks and press-copies) from 1825 to 1954 in the form of very comprehensive reports on all the Company's operations in Tasmania. The earlier despatches, especially, contain a great amount of information on the early exploration of the North-Western part of the State as they contain accounts of the journeys made by the Company's surveyors and other employees. These describe very clearly the country as it was before settlement and also give an idea of the problems confronting the early settlers. From these despatches one gets an insight into the character of the men who pioneered this area as many personal details are included and also reports by the Agent on the character of the men engaged in this work. An example of this is a very detailed description of the sequence of events which led to the suicide of the chief surveyor, Henry Hellyer, in 1832. The later despatches,

although still very detailed deal only with the actual business of the Company being mainly concerned (in the 20th Century) with its dealings with tenants.

Another large and important series is the despatches from the Court of Directors to the Agent. These despatches, which contain replies to the Agent's despatches and instructions to him, are also very detailed, clearly demonstrating the Company's attitude on most matters and also showing how the lack of first-hand knowledge of Colonial affairs on the part of the Directors was partly responsible for the Company's lack of success as a business venture.

Two other quite important series are the minute books of the Court of Directors and of the Annual General Meetings. These cover the period from the foundation of the Company to 1907 in the case of the Director's minutes and to 1940 for the minutes of the Annual General Meetings. Like all the records of the Company these are quite detailed and, when used in conjunction with various series which contain documents relating to the foundation and aims of the Company, show how the policy of the Company was formed. They also show that this policy of trying to obtain considerable income without much expenditure meant that many of the Agent's recommendations which would have been beneficial to the Company were turned down because the Directors would not approve the spending of large amounts of money on schemes which would have probably yielded a reasonable income in the future.

One of the largest series of the Company's records contain letters between the Colonial Agent and various correspondents, mainly local. Although some of this material is not of great importance, it shows in great detail the day-to-day running of the Company and also the diverse activities the Company eventually became involved in, despite the original intention of being mainly a pastoral concern. This series runs from 1829 to 1913.

Apart from this large correspondence series there are also quite a number (about 30) smaller series of correspondence which have been kept separate for various reasons. About half of these are letters received by the Agent from employees of the Company or from persons directly concerned with the Company, such as solicitors, while most of the others, which are also addressed to the Agent, are from official sources such as Colonial Government departments.

Although colonial letters make up the bulk of the correspondence records, some series belonging to the London office were either written or received by the Court of Directors. Probably the most important of these series is that concerning the foundation of the Company. These letters are between the Colonial Office in London and the Court of Directors and date from 1825 to 1831.

Quite a large number of reports exist which deal with the affairs of the Company in Tasmania. These were made over the years by men working for the Company in Tasmania or who had been sent out from England for the express purpose of making these reports, (e.g. Sir Edward Poore's report 1859). The reason for these reports (which date from 1840 to 1900) was apparently the lack of progress, especially financial, although some of the reports are on individual subjects such as gold mining. There is also an almost complete set of the Annual Reports of the Company from 1826 to 1964, but although the earlier ones are quite detailed regarding the Company's activities the later ones contain only a balance sheet and a very short summary for the year.

Another interesting group of Colonial records are those dealing with the livestock on the Company's properties. These records, which are mainly in the form of monthly or quarterly returns, give quite detailed information, such as the number and breeds of sheep, number of acres under cultivation, number of inhabitants etc., some even going as far as to record details of the weather for the period covered. Others are more detailed, such as a register of the age, pedigree and disposition of the Company's horses. These are quite early, covering the period from 1826 to 1858 and are quite useful in showing the growth of the Company and provide interesting comparisons between the different areas or estates owned by the Company.

A number of records relate to the sale or rental of land and give details of land rented or bought by people who were either brought out from England to colonise the land or who had come from other parts of the State for the same reason. In the early days of the Company there were not a great number of settlers but from about 1850, especially after the discovery of gold in Victoria, the number grew rapidly as disillusioned men from the gold-fields came back to Tasmania. The land sale records nearly all date from about 1880 as, until this time, the Company had encouraged people to rent rather than buy land. These records give details of land put up for sale and in many cases the purchasers are also listed.

Another fairly large series from the London office is that dealing with shares and shareholders. These records (from 1826 to circa 1930) list the shareholders and the number of shares held as well as the date at which they were allotted. There are also documents and registers which deal with the transfer of shares and which roughly cover the same period as the shareholders' registers.

The bulk of the remainder of the records deal with the finances of the Company and provide an extremely detailed record of the financial situation of the Company from its beginning until the 1950s. These records, for the most part, consist of either ledgers or journals in which details of income and expenditure are entered under the names of individuals or under specific accounts such as stores or buildings. There are also records of wages paid to employees, originally by stores but later by money while some of the smaller series contain balanced statements of the Company's finances both in England and Tasmania as well as accounts which have been prepared for auditing. There are also series of receipts and invoices mainly for the period after 1900.

Apart from a collection of maps and photographs, the remainder of the records consist of small miscellaneous series, some examples of which are a log of a ship used by the Company, 1841-4; a list of offences by assigned convicts on the Company's properties, 1827-32; and a printed appeal book relating to the case Van Diemen's Land Company vs. The Marine Board of Table Cape. There are also various pamphlets relating to conditions in Tasmania. About 200 photographs, some quite early (c.1860-70) illustrate parts of the Company's properties, especially the towns and there are scenes of other parts of Tasmania and some portraits of people connected with the Company.

One of the major parts of the Van Diemen's Land Company's records is a collection of about 700 maps and plans, including about 20 drawings of parts of the Van Diemen's Land Company's properties (almost all of which were done by Henry Hellyer between 1827 and 1832). The maps and plans fall into

six different categories: general exploration maps, general maps of the Company's properties, maps dealing specifically with one of the Company's estates, maps relating to railways and mines, maps of Tasmania and areas other than Tasmania and plans of buildings on the Company's properties.

The exploration maps show parts of North - Western Tasmania which were explored during the location of the Company's land grants. They cover the period c.1824-32. The general maps of the Company's properties all show the boundaries of the land in North-Western Tasmania and are nearly all printed. By far the largest sections are those dealing specifically with each of the Company's estates. They range from general maps of these estates to maps of individual allotments and date from the first settlements in these areas to the present day. The mining maps show locations of mines and also sections of some mines while the railway plans consist of maps showing railway lines and also some plans of bridges and designs for rolling stock for use on the Company's railways. The plans of buildings on the Company's estates form the second largest section of this series and consist of general and detailed drawings of all types of buildings and date from 1825 to 1951. The maps of Tasmania and parts of Tasmania are all printed and cover the period from 1850 to 1900, while the non-Tasmanian maps are of New South Wales.

Included with the records of the Van Diemen's Land Company are the records of its three subsidiary companies, the Burnie Timber and Brick Company, the Emu Bay and Mt. Bischoff Railway Company and the Van Diemen's Land Mineral Company.

The Burnie Timber and Brick Company was formed in 1908 to conduct the sales of timber from Van Diemen's Land Company properties.

The largest series of this group is a series of letterbooks containing letters written by the manager (who was also the manager of the Van Diemen's Land Company in Tasmania) to local correspondents. These cover the period 1924-53 and deal with all matters connected with the sale of timber and bricks.

As with the Van Diemen's Land Company, probably the most important series of records are the despatches to and from the manager and the secretary of the Company in London. These however are not nearly as complete as those of the Van Diemen's Land Company, the despatches from the secretary to the manager covering the period 1908-10 and those from the manager to the Directors covering the period 1908-25. Although they are quite detailed they are concerned purely with the business transactions of the Company, but are very useful for showing how the business of the Company was carried out.

There is also a small series of papers dealing with the foundation of the Company including the articles of association. Other interesting series contain various contracts and agreements between the Van Diemen's Land Company and individuals employed by them for timber cutting and other work. These cover the period 1918-31. The records relating to the sales of bricks and timber date from 1908 to the 1940s and are useful for showing the growth of the Company and the amount of business it conducted. There are also various financial records, mainly ledgers and journals of income and expenditure under various accounts which cover the period 1908 to the 1950s. Included among these are books of accounts sent out and books of vouchers and receipts.

The Emu Bay and Mt. Bischoff Railway Company was formed in 1887 to take over from the general business of the Van Diemen's Land Company the

running of the railway line between Emu Bay and Mt. Bischoff which was built by the Van Diemen's Land Company.

The first series in this group is quite important and it deals with the foundation of the Company and its eventual take-over by the Emu Bay Railway Company. These papers cover the period 1883-1912.

As with the other companies the longest and probably most important series are the despatches from the manager (also the manager of the Van Diemen's Land Company) to the Directors from 1887-1902, 1922-29 and from the secretary to the manager, 1887-1902. Like the other despatches these are quite detailed and deal only with the actual business of the Company. There are also miscellaneous correspondence series which contain letters to and from the manager and various correspondents, (e.g. station-masters at stations on the Company's line) which cover the period 1887 to c.1905.

The annual reports date from 1899 to 1915 but do not give much detail about the Company's affairs. A series of reports on the running of the railways by the manager and other persons and some of which deal with the railway when it was still controlled by the Van Diemen's Land Company dates from 1884-98 and helps demonstrate the growth of the railway.

Quite a large part of this Company's records relate to returns from the stations on the railway and give details of freight carried, number of tickets sold and amounts of money collected. These are quite useful as they give a good picture of the business done by the Company. The remainder of the records are financial, mainly ledgers and journals of income and expenditure under various accounts from 1887-1925.

The Van Diemen's Land Mineral Company which existed from 1882-92 was formed as a subsidiary company of the Van Diemen's Land Company to search for minerals on the Company's properties.

There are only a few records relating to this Company but they are nearly all complete. There are series of despatches from the Agent (the Van Diemen's Land Company Agent) to the Directors and from the Directors to the Agent. These are quite detailed and deal with the running of the Company. There are also annual reports of the Company and some financial reports including accounts prepared for the liquidation of the Company.