



Brookfield Afforestation Camp Huts

Photo Courtesy of Jon Sloan

***A Short History of the Brookfield Afforestation Camp,
Mila. 22 August 1927 – 30 June 1939***



Brookfield Afforestation Camp Parade Ground

Photo Courtesy of Jon Sloan

The Commencement of Reafforestation Camps in NSW.

The Brookfield, Mila Afforestation Camp commenced operation in 1927. This camp was not the first of its' kind in NSW. In April 1913, the Macleay Chronicle published a report on afforestation camps.¹

The Department of Prisons has just decided to put into operation a scheme which it has had in view for some time past, and which it is believed, will tend to increase the chances of the reformation of prisoners.

For the past 12 months the Department has been considering the formation of afforestation camps on the same lines as those that exist in South Australia and Tasmania, and it has now definitely decided to establish the first of these at Tuncurry, on the North Coast, in August next. The Department of Works will commence the work within the next few days, and expects to have the camp ready in about six weeks. Only a small beginning will be attempted and it is not intended, since the camp is only in the nature of an experiment, to send more than from fourteen to twenty prisoners there at first. Later, however, Mr McFarlane, the Comptroller-General of Prisons, hopes to be able to increase the number to some hundreds.

Apart from the great economic value to the scheme, it is claimed by the leading criminologists of the world that there is no factor so important in reforming criminals. They spend the greater part of the day in working at the planting of trees, under, of course, armed supervision; and as it is seen that they can be trusted, they are allowed more and more freedom, until they are scarcely in confinement at all. The best behaved men are allowed to assist the warders in the direction of the work, and for good conduct considerable remissions are granted.

It seems that at least some politicians and Prison Department staff had an enlightened approach to management and rehabilitation of prisoners. Both the Tumbarumba and Bombala (Mila) camps were named Brookfield Afforestation Camps. According to the Barrier Miner,² *Mr. W. J McKell, Minister for Justice, stated yesterday that he intends to establish a prison afforestation camp at the Mannus State forest, six miles from Tumbarumba and name it the Brookfield Afforestation Camp "as a tribute to the interest taken by the late P. J. Brookfield M.L.A., in matters affecting the prison system".*

William McKell, boilermaker, premier and governor-general was born at Pambula, NSW in 1891. Percy Brookfield, NSW M.L.A. (1917 – 1921) was shot dead at Riverton Railway Station, SA, in 1921, while trying to disarm a man who had already wounded two people.

Establishing the Mila Camp.

The proclamation for the establishment of the afforestation camp, covering an area of about 14,200 acres (5,746 hectares) was made on 4 March 1927³ and stated in part:

I, Sir Dudley Rawson Stratford de Chair, Governor of the State of New South Wales and its Dependencies in the Commonwealth of Australia, with the advice of the Executive Council, in pursuance of the provisions of section 35 of the Prisons Act 1899, do, by this my Proclamation declare and notify the area comprised within the following boundaries to be a

place of detention for the purpose of employing prisoners in the work of tree planting, to be known as the "Brookfield Afforestation Camp, Mila":

Almost six months later, the Maitland Daily Mercury reported⁴ "The Prisons Department recently acquired 11,000 acres of land in the vicinity of Mila, 23 miles from Bombala, for the creation of an afforestation camp, where good conduct prisoners may be employed.

Mr. McCullough, the superintendent of prisons, labour, and other officials have visited Bombala, and made preliminary arrangements for the transport and provisioning. A consignment of tents has gone forward. Those will be used until suitable buildings are constructed. The first batch of 16 prisoners will arrive at Bombala within a fortnight. At no time will the complement of the camp exceed 60 men. Recreation will take the form of cricket, football, quoits and tennis.

A large number of pine trees, to be used in the afforestation scheme have arrived from Moruya.

An August 1930 Bombala Times⁵ report provides details on the commencement of the camp: It was established on August 22nd, 1927 – three years ago this month – when officers from the Prisons Department motored out and pitched their tents on "Jackson's Bog," a little distance from where the compound is now located.

On 7 October, the Sun (Sydney), reported⁶, The acquisition of 13,000 acres at Mila in the Bombala district, as an afforestation camp, marks another step forward in prison reform. The first batch of prisoners was drafted there this week.

Prisoners who, because of more than one conviction, are, disqualified from being taken to Tuncurry, will be eligible for admission to Mila as long as they show that their powers of self-redemption have not vanished.

The Manaro Mercury⁷ reported that on Friday 20th January 1928, the Hon. J. R. Lee, Minister for Justice and Mrs Lee, accompanied by Mr W. J. Kessel, Under Secretary for Justice, Mr W W Hedges M.L.A and Mrs Hedges visited the new camp.

There is accommodation for 50 prisoners; at the present time there are 30 in charge of a Sergeant and staff of warders. The men are engaged in clearing scrub and planting pines, which should have a great future value to the state. The housing of the men is excellent and they are well fed, competent cooks from amongst their number attending to this.

Two weeks later, the Sydney Morning Herald published a progress report on the establishment of the Mila camp.⁸

Good progress is being made with the development of the State's second prison camp, which was recently established at Mila, twenty miles from Bombala, for the purpose of afforesting an area of 14,000 acres known as the Bondi State Forest.

Operations were begun with twelve prisoners, who were placed under canvas pending the erection of the first huts. As the construction of additional huts proceeded, the number of men was increased, and today there are twenty-eight prisoners engaged in making preparation for the planting of the first pine trees in May, which will mark the beginning of the favourable season. The country is covered with heavy timber, but a considerable area

has been felled, and a temporary nursery prepared. The Forestry Commission is collaborating with the Prisons Department in the work.

The Mila camp will eventually employ forty-eight prisoners, a larger complement than that of the original prison camp at Tuncurry. Men sent to Mila have mostly been second offenders, whose dispositions and conduct have been favourably reported upon.

The Minister for Justice (Mr. Lee) is a keen supporter of this prison activity, believing that the system has a big reformatory value. He is supported by the statistics of the establishment at Tuncurry. These show that the number of men who again lapse into crime is small."

A few days later, the National Advocate at Bathurst⁹ reported *"The closing of some of the State goals in order that more prisoner may receive the benefit of the open air treatment of the prison camps is one of the hopes of the Minister for Justice, Mr. Lee.*

The success of the establishment at Tuncurry has resulted in another camp being started at Mila, about twenty four miles out of Bombala, and the Minister has given orders for the commencement of another one at Mt Mitchell, in the Glen Innes district.

By 1930, 5 afforestation camps had been established at Tuncurry, Bombala, Glen Innes, Tumbarumba and Oberon.

Escapes from the Mila Camp.

One of the concerns that communities can have with low security prisons is the risk of prisoners escaping. Despite the screening processes that were in place at the time and prisoners, having signed a declaration not to escape, less than 7 months after the establishment of the Mila camp, the first recorded escape occurred on 23 March 1928.

The Bombala Times¹⁰ reported *Two prisoners escaped from the Mila Afforestation Prison Camp on Thursday night last. They were duly locked up in their hut at 9 o'clock on Thursday night, and when the warder made an inspection at a later hour he found they had sawn a hole in the wall, undone the bolts of the door, and left without asking.*

The telephone line between the camp and the Mila post office was cut, so the alarm was raised from Mila. Warders started an initial search and were later joined by police from Bombala, Delegate, Bendoc and Cathcart. A Police-tracker William Rutherford, from Dalgety was also called in. The escapees initially went into Victoria, but later returned to NSW.

The escapees were Frederick Milton, alias Rafton and John Moran, alias Clayton. Milton was serving a four year sentence for breaking and entering and Moran, five years for assault with intent to rob. They were recaptured on about 28 March. John William Byron was the officer-in-charge of the Mila camp and Roy Withers, was one of the warders at the camp, at the time of the escape.

At their committal hearing, Sergeant Ruffles gave evidence of the search and the recapture of the escapees in the Goulbourn Police Court on Monday 30 April. Details were reported in the Goulburn Evening Post¹¹ and the Bombala Times.¹²

Next day he (Sgt Ruffles) and Constable Agnew, with Police-tracker Rutherford, found Moran's tracks on the railway line at a point about six miles on the Cooma side of Bombala.

The tracks of two men were followed and, leaving the line, within half a mile they found where two persons had camped.

He, Constable Agnew and the tracker boarded a train and near Holt's Flat, about 24 miles from Bombala, after the train stopped he saw Moran and another man on the side of the line. He and his companions jumped out of the train. Moran's companion ran away and was chased by Agnew and the tracker.

He caught Moran. Constable Agnew and the tracker cornered Milton behind the brake van, where he was arguing with them. He was wearing prison clothes and was arrested and charged together with Moran.

At the Circuit Court on Tuesday (1 May) the two accused pleaded guilty and were sentenced to six months imprisonment.

The next escape reported in the media, was on 13 November 1928. The Manaro Mercury¹³ stated *A report was received by the Cooma police on Tuesday afternoon that a prisoner at the Mila Afforestation Camp near Bombala was missing at noon. The escapee was named Jack O'Brien, a labourer who was in Sydney on 5th October sentenced to 12 months' goal for breaking and entering, and stealing from a dwelling.*

Inspector Glenn and Constable Bowerman went out along the Cooma-Nimmitabel Road and shortly after six o'clock after travelling six or seven miles saw the accused in a motor car, he having been given a lift by the driver. Arrest followed, and O'Brien was lodged in the Cooma lockup.

The Manaro Mercury¹⁴ reported on the court case, which was held on 12 February 1929.

"I won't live to serve it!" was the statement made by Jack O'Brien when sentenced at the Goulburn Quarter Sessions on Tuesday (reports the "Post") to six months imprisonment for escaping from lawful custody. "I don't expect to live another week!" he added.

"Well do the best you can!" replied Judge Coyle amid laughter.

O'Brien made a statement from the dock that he had got out of bounds on the day in question and had wandered lost, until picked up in a car by a man near Cooma. He was glad to be picked up, he said, but being so hungry as he had had no food he was so annoyed that he made all sorts of excuses when he was found.

He also said he was a sufferer from throat trouble and did not expect to live a week.

When approached by the police, he said his name was Alfred Harris and he was from Victoria. As he had managed to "wander" about 100 kilometers in 6 hours, it is not surprising that the court proceedings ended as follows:

Judge Coyle said he did not believe a word of O'Brien's story of wandering away.

The jury arrived at its verdict without leaving the court.

The events surrounding the last recorded escape for the Mila Camp on Saturday 30 December, 1933 were covered by the Bombala Times¹⁵ in early January 1934. Roy Withers was the officer in charge at the time.

After the prisoners were locked in their cubicles at the Mila Afforestation Camp on Saturday night two of them broke the windows and escaped. The escape was not noticed until the roll call next morning, when the Bombala, Delegate and Cooma police were at once notified. Sergeant Lewis and Constable Sturgiss with Warders Lyons and Clear (Charles) started out in a car to pick up the tracks, and located these near the turnoff to the Camp from the main road.

After camping in a wheat field during daylight hours on Sunday, the escapees began walking along the Bendoc road. A motorist, who they had flagged down, in an attempt to get a lift, reported their location to the Constable in charge of the Bendoc station, who went out and detained them.

Other police involved in the search included Sergeant Hammond and Constable Green from Delegate, Sergeant Turnbull from Cooma, Constable Carr and police from Bendoc.

On Tuesday Donald Thomas James Mostyn (23) and James Waters (29) were charged before Messrs Bancroft and Plowright, J's P., with escaping from custody, and were sentenced to twelve months in Goulburn goal. Mostyn was serving a sentence of three years, and was due for release in November; Waters was serving two years, and his time would have been up next July.

Community Concerns

In June 1929, following a visit by Minister Lee, the Bombala Times¹⁶ reported:

The Mayor said there was another matter they wished to mention, and that was the class of criminals proposed to be sent to the Mila Afforestation Prison Camp. They had been informed that it had been declared a camp for habitual criminals, and at the last meeting of the Municipal Council it was decided to protest.

Mr. Tweedie said the people were rather concerned as to what was meant by "habitual criminals."

Mr. Lee said that all their camps and places of detention were declared places for habitual criminals. The habitual criminal was not generally a vicious criminal. The majority of habitual criminals were men of the drunkard type, or men of petty thieving habits who could not control themselves. One thing they could be satisfied on and that was that no man would be sent to the Mila camp unless they were satisfied he was a man who could be trusted. The habitual criminal was not always the fierce type, nor the type of man who in a moment of passion committed some terrible crime. He was the man who was kept in goal pending the pleasure of the Minister, who in releasing him, or sending him to a camp, was guided by the reports of his officers. The Mila farm had simply been declared a place for habitual criminals so that they would have power to send them there.

The concerns raised by the Municipal Council had resulted from a notice in the NSW Government Gazette¹⁷ that proclaimed the Brookfield Afforestation Camp, Mila, as a place of confinement for habitual criminals. The proclamation was made under the *Habitual Criminals Act 1905*.

Sport

Newspaper reports document that there were a number of cricket matches played at Brookfield. During the early nineteen thirties, teams from Bombala, Delegate and Mila played Brookfield teams.

Details of the earliest match found in the newspapers in the Trove collection was reported in the Bombala Times¹⁸. The match was played on 14 September 1930 and the report details the rough weather conditions that prevailed during the game.

The Bombala Cricket Club sent a team of cricketers to the Brookfield Afforestation Camp at Mila last Sunday to play a friendly game, and incidentally have a look round the Farm and see the work being done. Unfortunately, the weather was not up to cricket standard, but the cricketers enjoyed themselves, and even a snow storm was not sufficient to send them to the pavilion.

A cricket match with snow falling is a novelty in this country, and although it is not unusual for football matches to be played with snow on the ground, it is not the right thing for cricket. The ball at times was covered with snow and the wicket keeper might be pardoned if he caught a snowball instead of the cricket ball.

Frequent inspections of the wicket were not made as the umpires were of stern stuff and decreed that play should go on, snow or no snow, wet wicket or dry. And so they played the match to a finish – and two innings at that. If they didn't have first class cricket they had plenty of fun, and were so well entertained by officers and staff that they voted it one of the best days they have had for a time.

The report concluded with full match statistics. The Bombala Club had two matches at Brookfield during October of 1930.

Reports on the Brookfield Mila Prison Camp

In addition to visits by NSW politicians and departmental staff, from time to time other visitors had reports of their visit to the Mila camp published. The editor of *The Methodist*¹⁹ published an article on his visit to the camp in May 1930 under the heading of *The Home Mission Agency*.

A Prison Camp in the Bush

In a holiday in this beautiful Monaro country the Editor was able, through the kindness of relatives and friends to pay visits to many station homesteads and to enjoy the abounding hospitality of people of other church communions. A lady of one of these delightful station homesteads motored a party of us one day to the Mila Prison Afforestation Camp situated 23 miles from the town of Bombala.

This is a reformatory established amid surrounding natural beauty, and where everything conduces to restore men who have fallen out of the way of ordered society to respect for themselves and give them hope for the future years. Such a magnificent work as is being done in this and similar camps by our Prisons Department should be more widely known.

We were courteously received by the officer-in-charge, Mr. Bowler, and were shown over the compound. Mr. Bowler explained to us the whole afforestation scheme, the method of this special prison treatment, and the encouraging results achieved. Nine other warders are stationed here, and we felt proud of the public service of the men who were far removed from the amities of social life in city and town; and proud too, of the natural and ready response of the prisoners to the trust reposed in them by the officers. The conduct of them all is excellent, and the term in this camp is not so much punitive as remedial.

The area set aside for the purpose of the Prisons Department comprises 14,000 acres of Crown land, and operations towards establishing a pine forest were commenced two and a half years ago, when a few selected prisoners were set to do the preliminary work. Two nurseries have been planted, 200,000 in one and 60,000 in the other. A hillside has already been planted with 145,000 little trees from the nurseries, and this year it is expected that another hill will be planted with 140,000 trees.

There are 48 prisoners, all of whom are busy every day transforming these acres into a pine forest. A couple of gangs are engaged in the construction of a metal road from the camp to the main road – eight and one-sixth miles.

The prisoners' cubicles are trim and cleanly within and without. The men are kept under lock and key only at nights and during meals, and a great measure of liberty is given them. After the evening meal (all meals are served in the cubicles) the men may assemble in the large room provided for amusement, and recreation and reading.

On 1 August 1930, a party including the Presbyterian Minister A. J. Barrett, Mr. H. R. Bryan ("S. M. Herald" correspondent), Mrs. Bryan and the "Times" editor visited the Brookfield Camp. A comprehensive article appeared in the Bombala Times²⁰ on the following Friday.

On arrival at the Camp we were met by the Officer-in-charge (Mr. Bowler), his assistant (Mr. Withers), and officer in charge of the motors (Mr. Walsh). Mr. Bowler at once made it clear that our visit was welcome, that he was pleased to let the world know what was being done at this reformatory, gave us every information, and showed us over the compound and all the works.

Probably through some misunderstanding we had been hitherto under the impression that visitors would not be welcome, and visits could only be arranged after some "red tape." Mr. Bowler dispersed these wrong impressions. "We want the people to see what we are doing for these men who are placed in our charge," said Mr. Bowler, "and are pleased to welcome visitors. We have nothing to hide." Naturally visits made out of morbid curiosity would not be encouraged.

Fifty acres of the Camp area and 400 acres outside, have already been cleared. The Camp area is occupied by buildings, tennis court for the officers, vegetable garden, potato paddock, pig pens, poultry yards, etc. The 400 acres is being used for the pine plantation. 230,000 pines have already been planted, and they are now being set out in their beds at the rate of 4,000 a day.

At the nursery we met Mr. Dooker, who explained the operations involved in growing the pines from seed, transplanting them into beds, and setting them out into their permanent

quarters when large enough. Various species of pine are grown from seed, the species selected being such as will be suitable for building purposes when matured. Experiments are now being made on Baltic and other West American pines, the timber from which is now largely imported.

Mr Dooker considers that the West American pines will do well in this climate and at this altitude. Amongst the seed a "stranger" is occasionally germinated, and these hybrids are set apart for observation and classification. One of these has already excited considerable interest and closely scrutinised by experts, who have not been able to agree as to its identity.

The vegetable garden is fairly extensive. When there is a surplus, bags of these vegetables are sent to the Delegate and Bombala hospitals, and for which the hospital staffs are very thankful. One cabbage taken from this garden last year weighed 24lbs., and 11 swede turnips turned the scales at 89lbs.



Brookfield Afforestation Camp Vegetable Garden

Photo Courtesy of Jon Sloan

"Prisoners considered in some respects incorrigible in goal turn out the best men here. The long sentence man appreciates the open life, and will do anything rather than be sent away. Only a very small percentage is sent back from here to goal, and only one man has been sent away in eighteen months for disciplinary reasons," said Mr Bowler.

Mr Bowler mentioned the case of one man who came from Surry Hills, and had done two terms of 5 and 7 years. After being a few months in this Camp he went out to a steady job. He had never worked in his life before; he learned to work at this Camp.

Of the work on which they are engaged the men prefer falling the timber. There is something fascinating in the felling of trees, and they dislike being transferred to other work.

For recreation they play cricket and football, and in the evenings read or play such games as draughts, dominoes and chess.

A Tragedy

On 24 July 1931, the Sydney Morning Herald²¹ carried the headline "Accident at Prison Camp."

At 5 o'clock yesterday afternoon a fatal shooting accident occurred at Brookfield afforestation camp, at Mila when a prisoner named O'Brien, aged 42, who was due for release in 12 days' time was shot by a warder named Martin.

It is stated that the men were working in the pine plantation, which is surrounded by thick bush, when Martin saw some distance off in the scrub what he took to be a kangaroo. He fired his rifle, and O'Brien fell, shot through the abdomen.

Dr. Jefferis was immediately summoned from Bombala, but O'Brien died at 3 o'clock this morning. An inquest will be held.

The Bombala Times²² published the details of the coroner's inquiry.

On Thursday last, at the Brookfield Afforestation Camp, Mila, the Coroner Mr. Julius Vider, opened an inquiry into the death of the prisoner Herbert O'Brien, who had been accidentally shot the previous day.

The evidence of the officer-in-charge, First-class Warder Withers, was taken as to identification of deceased. He said O'Brien had been in Camp two years and ten months and his conduct had been an example to the other prisoners at the Camp, and he had always been on excellent terms with the officers. He had been a general favorite. Shortly before he died O'Brien said, "I am very sorry the accident happened; I am very sorry for Mr. Martin."

The inquiry was adjourned to Bombala for the following day.

On Friday, at the Bombala police station, Dr. Jefferis gave evidence that on Wednesday 22 inst., he had been called to the Mila Afforestation Camp to attend a patient, said to be Herbert O'Brien, who had a bullet wound in his right loin and a swelling just outside the muscle of the back, but no wound of exit. His clothes were soaking wet and he was in a state of semi-collapse from exposure and loss of blood.

Efforts were made to overcome the effects of the shock and his condition somewhat improved, but it was not advisable to attempt to bring him to the Hospital that night. He was in telephone communication with the Camp during the night, and at 2am he was advised that the patient's condition had definitely improved, but at 3am he was informed that O'Brien had died. Any attempt to remove the patient to the hospital would have hastened his death.

Constable Agnew attended and gave evidence:

Soon after we arrived at the Camp a man whom I knew as Herbert O'Brien was carried in on a stretcher. He appeared to be very weak and in great pain. After he had been attended by the doctor I said to him "Herb, your condition is not too well, just now. Will you give me a statement of what happened?" He said "I think I am alright. Mr. Martin and I have been

great pals. No matter what happens I don't want any blame put on him. I was stooping down when I got hit."

Constable Agnew then took a statement from Herbert O'Brien, outlining their trip to hunt kangaroos and the circumstances of him being shot. The Warder William Martin also gave a statement giving details of the shooting, which occurred in a gully with dense vegetation. It was getting dark at the time and raining. After carrying O'Brien out of the thickest vegetation, Warder Martin returned to the camp to get help.

He said: I informed the Officer-in-charge, Second-class Withers, of what had happened and started back with Warder Bowles and six prisoners, with a stretcher. It was some time before we found O'Brien, as the bush in that part is very scrubby. We found him and brought him into Camp. The accident happened about 5.15pm and I arrived at the Camp about an hour later. It was then dark and raining. When we found O'Brien it was about 8pm.

The coronial inquiry verdict was: *Death from injuries accidentally received.*

After a service in Bombala, at St Mary's Roman Catholic Church, with the service conducted by Father Roche, the hearse travelled to the railway station. The coffin was taken to Sydney and Herbert O'Brien was buried in the Catholic section of the Randwick cemetery.

A few weeks later, the following item appeared in the sporting news²³.

The selector of the Brookfield cricket team, Mila has written to the secretary of the Bombala Cricket club, expressing the appreciation of the Camp at the sympathy shown by the Club in sending a wreath to their dead mate, Herb O'Brien, who was accidentally killed. "Your sending of the wreath," the writer says, "brought home to us that to you, at least, we are not outside the pale of the good opinion of sportsmen.

When the wreath arrived the sentiments that were expressed by my fellow prisoners would, could you have heard them, have amply repaid you for your kind action. In sending a wreath as an expression of your sympathy at Herb's death you were instrumental in bringing out the good which lies even in the worst of us. It showed that there are men who look upon law-breakers as fellow beings worthy of recognition."

Herb O'Brien was a member of the Brookfield team that played the Bombala Cricket Club in September 1930.

Interstate Interest in the Mila Afforestation Camp.

While Tasmania, South Australia and NSW had a prison farm and five afforestation camps, Victoria had only two small scale farms on French island and at Beechworth. The Bombala Times²⁴ reported on a visit to the Mila Afforestation Camp by a Victorian delegation of Government officials on 26 January 1933.

The Victorian Chief Secretary (Mr. Macfarlane), the Under Secretary (Mr. Chapman), and the Chief Inspector of Penal Establishments (Mr. Akeroyd) visited the Brookfield Afforestation Camp, Mila yesterday. The object of the visit was to inspect the Camp to see whether it is possible to extend the prison farm system in Victoria by sending men to camps in the forests, where a good deal of developmental work has yet to be done, and for which there is little or no money available.

A more extensive report on the visit from the Melbourne "Age" was reprinted in the Bombala Times in February.²⁵ *Mr. Macfarlane returned to Melbourne yesterday, and he said he was so impressed with the work of the camp that he proposed conferring with the Minister of Forests (Mr. Dunstan) and the chairman of the Forests Commission (Mr. Galbraith) to ascertain whether the commission is prepared to co-operate with the Penal department in initiating a similar scheme in Victoria.*

The report provided the following details about the Mila project: *The first planting was carried out in 1929, and up to the present 1200 acres had been cleared and 900 acres planted with about 700,000 pines of different species. The Forestry department paid the Penal department £7 for each acre planted, this money being expended in buildings, tools, and other capital costs.*



Brookfield Afforestation Camp Pine Nursey

Photo Courtesy of Jon Sloan

There had been no serious attempt to escape, and of the 370 men who had passed through the camp, only 18 percent had returned to prison.

The Prisoners' Aid Association of NSW

In addition to the support given to the Brookfield Afforestation Camp prisoners by the warders and various churches, the Prisoners' Aid Association was another organisation providing support to the prisoners, once they had left prison. In January 1932, under the heading *A Fresh Start*, the Bombala Times²⁶ provided back ground on the work of the Association.

Mr. R. W. Robinson, Managing Secretary of the Prisoners' Aid Association of NSW, paid an official visit to the Mila Afforestation Camp during the week, and gave some valuable and

interesting information as to the splendid service rendered to the community by this Association. It is perhaps safe to say that there are many organisations working in an unassuming manner for the benefit of humanity, but few are exercising a greater influence and of which so little is heard than this one.

Convict, sentence and imprison any man three times, twice, or often only once, and it is almost certain that ever afterwards he will be more or less a burden to rather than an effective factor in the social structure.



Brookfield Afforestation Camp Summer House

Photo Courtesy of Jon Sloan

Tremendous improvements have been made in the treatment of those who are detained as punishment for offences against or for the protection of their fellows. John Howard made this his life's work, and the result of his labours was to make it reasonably possible that the transgressor might live through his term of imprisonment scathless of disease and cruelty.

Among the modern methods of prison reform is the treatment in open spaces of men who have been found work to do of a reproductive kind, and with a view rather to reform than to punishment.

"The splendid afforestation camp in our district has fully justified the Department's endeavour in this regard, and the humane administration of the Comptroller-General of Prisons; the Officer-in-Charge of the Camp; Rev. Barrett, spiritual advisor, philosopher and friend, and the aftercare of the Prisoners' Aid Association, deserves the highest praise; and the citizens of Bombala and district can be assured that any subscriptions forwarded on behalf of this worthy cause will reap a handsome dividend in rehabilitating men and women in useful citizenship."

In May 1932, the Bombala Times²⁷ reported on the formation of a local branch of the Prisoner's Aid Association. On the night, Mr. Robinson assured the meeting that the rumors

current relative to the discharge of prisoners from the Mila Camp were untrue, as the Departmental method was to place them as far away from their place of incarceration as possible.

In 1936²⁸ and 1937²⁹, Mr Robinson again visited the Mila Camp. The reports detail the assistance given by the Association to former prisoners.

In 1936: The Annual Report reveals splendid results achieved with restricted funds. 609 cases were dealt with, while employment was found in 137 cases.

In 1937: During the year under review 577 cases were dealt with for assistance, 106 were placed in employment, 163 were supplied with food and lodgings, 141 were given necessary clothing, fares were given to 50 persons, 35 received tools of trade, 71 supplied with swags going to employment, 8 bought stock-in-trade, 35 had their property redeemed from pawn, while 451 persons, who had not previously applied for help were assisted in various ways.

Mr Robinson pays tribute to the officers at the Mila Camp, and especially Mr. Martin, OIC for the splendid state of efficiency exhibited in the well-kept Camp. Mr. Martin's fine personality inspires those in his charge to respond with their best.

Despite the success that was being achieved, in June 1935, the Glen Innes Examiner³⁰ carried the headlines: **Prison Afforestation Camps "Growing Softwoods a Failure" Abandonment Contemplated.**

The abandonment of all the present prison afforestation camps in New South Wales is contemplated by the Department of Justice (states a Sydney message).

This move is prompted by the fact that the camps are a commercial failure as far as the raising of softwoods is concerned. There are five camps devoted to the growing of pines. All of them it is considered, are in unsuitable country.

With the exception of Tuncurry which is near a port and the Mannus camp, which is only six miles from Tumbarumba, they are all over 24 miles from transport facilities.

About 300 persons are in the camps and from the point of view of reformatory work they have fulfilled all expectations. When they were established, however, it was hoped that they would eventually become an asset. There now seems no hope of this.

The prison camps are managed by agreement between the Department of Justice and the Forestry Commission.

In January 1936,³¹ the Bombala Times reported: *Mr. Robinson, Managing Secretary of the Prisoners Aid Association, who has just been on a visit to the Afforestation Camp at Mila, tells us there is absolutely no truth in the report that the Camp is to be closed down. It may be that a different class of timber will be planted, as the pine timber has been reported to be of little value.*

In August 1937, the West Australian³² announced: **Condemnation by NSW Experts"**

SYDNEY, Aug. 13 – The Tuncurry afforestation prison camp has been condemned by officers of the Forestry Commission in a report to the Minister for Mines and Forests (Mr. Vincent). It

is probable that the camp will be abandoned as economically unsound and the prisoners transferred to other camps.

The Government will now await with interest the opinion of the forestry experts on the other afforestation camps at Bombala, Glen Innes, Tumbarumba and Oberon. If the same state of affairs is disclosed there it will mean a heavy loss to the State. The capital expenditure in establishing the camp at Tuncurry was more than £19,000, and during the past 11^{1/2} years the loss on its working has been more than £6,000.

Given the critical report of the forestry experts, perhaps the agreement between the Department of Justice and the Forestry Commission did not extend to expert advice on species and site selection.



Brookfield Afforestation Camp Last Warden R M Martin

Photo Courtesy of Jon Sloan

In May 1939, the Sydney Morning Herald³³ headlines announced:

PRISON CAMP TO BE CLOSED

Numbers of Men Decrease

Forests Not Maintained

The Bombala Afforestation Prison camp is to be discontinued as a prison on June 30, because of the decrease in the number of prisoners available for transfer to the camp.

The decision was made by the State Cabinet yesterday, and was announced by the Premier, Mr. Stevens, who said last night that, because of the small number of prisoners at the camp, it was not practicable to carry out an extensive planting program and vigorous maintenance work.

He said that areas previously planted, were not being properly maintained. Mr. Stevens stated that there would not be any difficulty in placing prisoners, who would have been sent to the Bombala camp. The majority would be transferred to the Oberon camp.

On the closing of the prison camp at Bombala, the Forestry Commission would take over the maintenance of the area, he added. The camp building, cattle, and horses would be sold by public auction.

The official notice discontinuing the use of the land and buildings at the Bombala Afforestation Camp, as a place of detention, was posted in the NSW Government Gazette³⁴ on 9 June 1939 and took effect on 30 June.

The Sydney Morning Herald³⁴ under **Auction Sales To-Day** announced the sale of horses, vehicles and livestock at Bombala Afforestation Camp, Mila at 1pm.

Despite the 1935 announcement of the “commercial” failure of the camps, the plantations established at the Bombala Reafforestation Camp, in later decades provided a resource and employment for forestry and mill workers and a boost to the Bombala economy as the golden era of wool production faded.



**George Ford Beside a Load of Bombala Afforestation Camp Sawlogs at the Bombala Pine Mill
February 1982**

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Peter Rutherford

Merimbula