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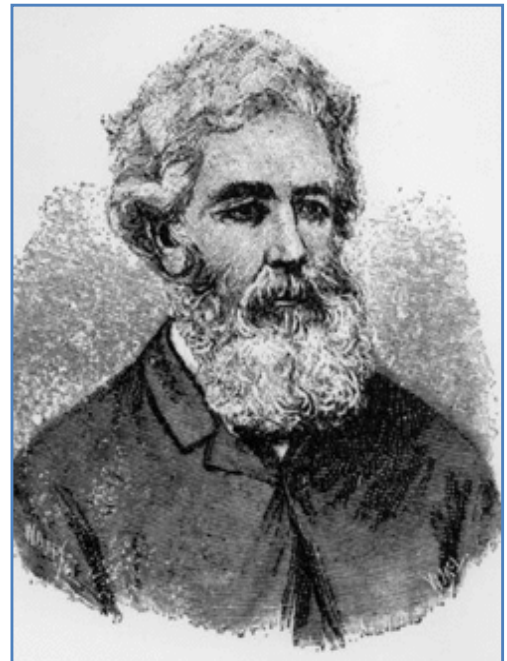
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Andrew Petrie early explorer of the Colony of Moreton Bay

by Bill Lavarack

This paper tells the story of one aspect of the life of Andrew Petrie who was one of the prominent citizens of early Brisbane or, as it was then known, the Colony of Moreton Bay. Andrew Petrie is best remembered as an architect and builder of several of the private and public buildings of early Brisbane, but it is clear that his major passion lay in the exploration of the wild, unknown country to Brisbane's north and, in particular, the search for major stands of the Bunya pine tree.

Andrew Petrie (1798-1872) was born in Fife, Scotland the son of Walter and Margaret Petrie. In Edinburgh Andrew worked for four years for a prominent builder, learning many useful skills. He married Mary Cuthbertson in 1821 and they were to have seven sons and a daughter. Petrie's employer was a friend of prominent Sydney identity John Dunmore Lang who, in 1831, organised a group of Scottish free settlers to migrate to Sydney to help in the development of the city. Andrew Petrie along with his wife and family of four (at that stage), were brought to Sydney by Lang on the chartered *Stirling Castle*.¹ His passage from Scotland was funded by Lang on the



¹ The *Stirling Castle* was wrecked north of Fraser Island (then known as 'Great Sandy Island' now known as 'K'gari') on 25 May 1836. Captain Fraser and his wife Eliza Fraser and some crew made it to K'gari Island but only Mrs Fraser and a few crew members survived, living with the local Aborigines before being rescued. One of the objectives of Andrew Petrie's 1842 expedition was to search for more survivors. See page 4

condition that he worked on Government projects after his arrival. He then gained a position in what was described as *the nucleus of a new force of free workers* and worked as a clerk in the Ordinance Department where his work gained him a good reputation. After this Petrie went into partnership with George Ferguson as building contractors in Sydney. This partnership lasted for two years until he went into business on his own. He was favoured by the Government to construct many of their projects.

The quality of Petrie's work impressed his superiors so much that, when in 1837, there was an urgent appeal from the Moreton Bay Settlement for a competent builder, Petrie, along with his family, was sent there as Superintendent of Works. An early task was to repair the mechanism of the windmill on what is now Petrie Terrace. Generally his work involved the supervision of convicts in various tasks including building. A year after arriving in the colony Petrie built a stone house for his family at Petrie Bight.



The Petrie house.

His work took him to several convict outstations inspecting sheep and cattle runs and this gave Petrie the opportunity to develop his growing interest in the exploration of the unknown country north of the Pine River and he made several private journeys into this area. In 1839 the colony ceased to be a convict station and became a free settlement. Petrie left Government employment and founded the Petrie Construction business. With his family, he remained in the settlement where they were to make a significant contribution over the years to the growing community of Moreton Bay, later named Brisbane.

Andrew Petrie, now with more time to pursue his private exploration ambitions, embarked on a number of expeditions. Some of his first expeditions to Bribie Island and the Maroochy River were the subject of official wrangling as some of his superiors considered them a waste of his time. On one trip with his oldest son John, he was the first white man to climb Mount Beerwah, tallest of the Glass House Mountains.

Bunya pine trees

The Bunya pine (then not scientifically named, now known as *Araucaria bidwillii*) was known from a few scattered specimens north of the Pine River as early as the late 1820s. It was considered as a potentially important tree, but it was known only from a few records. There was no reliable knowledge of significantly large Bunya pine stands. Between 1837 and 1841



Petrie undertook a series of trips to the area between the Pine and Maroochy Rivers in search of a large stand of Bunya pines which rumour suggested existed, but initially found only scattered trees. He collected seedlings and specimens of the Bunya pine from this area and prepared a detailed description of the species which he named '*Araucaria petriana*'. Petrie considered that it had commercial potential.

Andrew Petrie left accounts of most of his journeys but it is often now difficult to distinguish one expedition from another. The following paragraphs are based on a *Courier Mail* article written by Andrew Petrie on 10 April 1863 some 24 years after the events he describes¹. He tells how, in March 1839 along with his oldest son John and a boat crew, he headed north towards the Maroochy River, setting up his first camp on Bribie Island. They then proceeded to the Maroochy River. With some difficulty they walked across country, presumably to the Blackall Range where they found a large stand of Bunya pines.

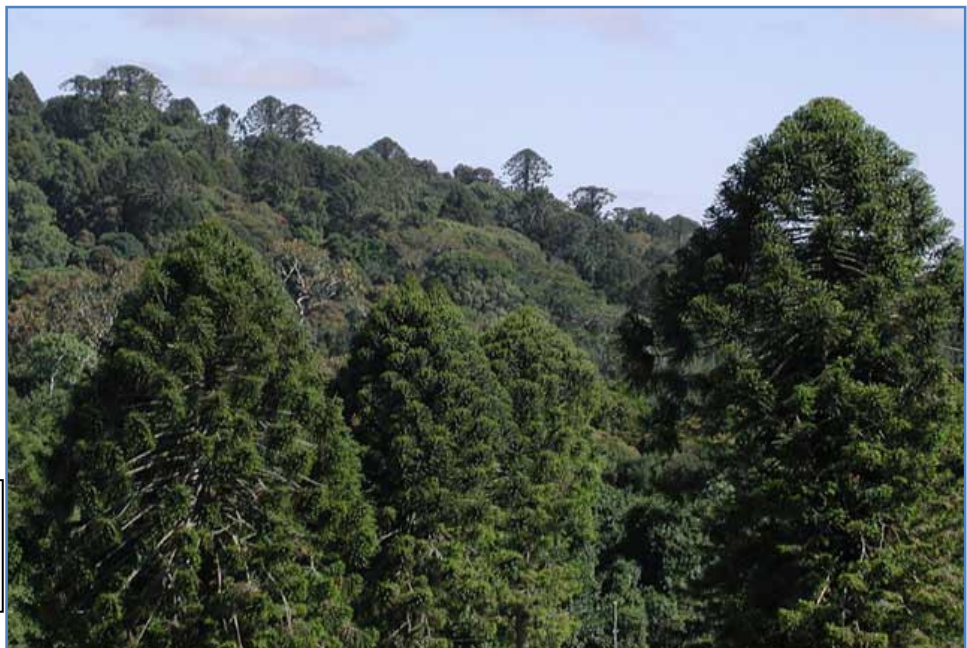
Inside a Bunya forest. The scars on the trunk of the tree, being photographed by Bev Lavarack, were made by Aborigines as an aid to tree climbing.



By the time they reached the Bunya forest and commenced collecting seedlings and specimens, they were being followed by a large crowd of aggressive local Aborigines, causing fear amongst Petrie's men. The aggressive attitude was caused by the fact that each Bunya tree was traditionally owned by a particular Aboriginal man and they jealously guarded them as the seeds were a food source and the trees were important ceremonially.

At least one shot was fired by a member of Petrie's party but fortunately no one was injured. Petrie remained calm and an uneasy truce was effected, partly because the local Aboriginal tribesmen were aware of the effect of the rifle .

A Bunya forest. Note the tall trees on the skyline.



¹ Andrew Petrie, *Courier Mail*, 10 April 1869, page 3, *Adventures in the Early Days of Brisbane*.

Both sides agreed to lay down their weapons and the local Aborigines accompanied Petrie back to his camp and even offered Petrie's party fish for their dinner. As a precaution Petrie took two hostages. The situation now seemed calm, so John Petrie and helpers resumed collecting seedlings and the hostages were freed. However many of the seedlings collected were damaged by rough, hurried handling due to inexperience.

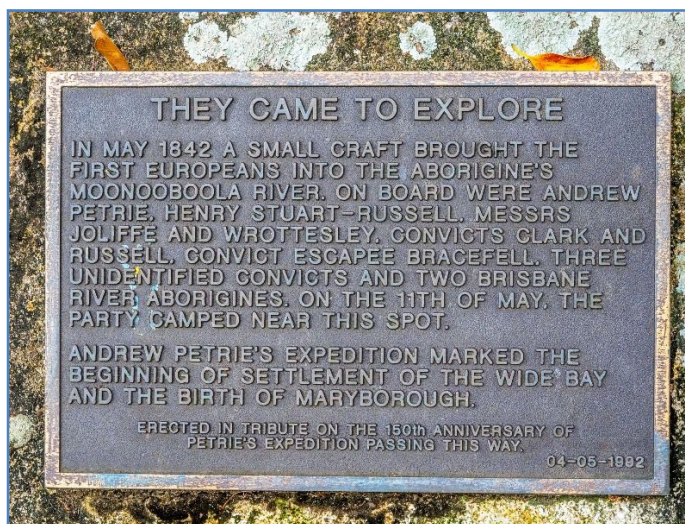


Bunya cone

On the return journey to the camp on Bribie Island, Petrie's party walked down the south bank of the Mooloolah River. Petrie and one Aboriginal helper lagged behind on Point Cartwright as Petrie took compass bearings on landmarks. A large group of aggressive Aborigines cut him off on the Point and made threatening gestures. Petrie remained calm and continued his work despite his companion's extreme fear. He levelled his rifle whenever they came within spear-throwing range, forcing the besiegers to retreat. No shots were fired and Petrie was able to return to his group further down the beach.

The account given above is based on Petrie's very detailed 1863 *Courier Mail* article probably written from his diary. It is basically similar to one given by Dimity Dorman and Denis Cryle for the 1841 expedition in their book on the Petrie Family.¹ While there is some uncertainty about the dates, particularly the incident on Point Cartwright, it seems likely that the story, as written by Petrie in 1863, is reliable and that Petrie visited a large forest of Bunya pines at least as early as 1839.

He undertook another expedition to the Bunya forest in 1841. After returning from this expedition, Petrie then decided to explore the coastal country north of the Maroochy River hoping to find Bunya trees growing near the coast, as they would be more accessible than those growing in the Bunya scrubs further inland. As well as discovering stands of Bunya pine, he hoped to contact runaway convicts David Bracewell and James Davis who were reported to be living with the local Aborigines. He also hoped he might find survivors of the *Stirling Castle* which had previously been wrecked in 1836 north of Fraser Island (now known as 'K'gari'). So in May 1842 Petrie led an expedition in a sturdy five-oared whale boat which also carried a sail. On board were Petrie, Henry Stuart-Russell, Messrs Joliffe and Wrottesley, convicts Clark and Russell, two ticket of leave men, three convicts and two Aboriginal guides.²



Commemorative plaque, Queens Park Maryborough.

He camped at Bribie Island and then landed at Noosa in heavy surf. Now beyond settled areas, Petrie took the precaution of keeping a loaded rifle at hand, but the group of Aborigines who met him on the beach at Noosa proved to be friendly.

David Bracewell ('Wandi') was in the group who met Petrie on the beach. Petrie was surprised by Bracewell's appearance as, after years with the Aborigines, he was almost indistinguishable from

¹ See 'Further Reading' below.

² The names listed on the plaque differ a little from those given by Dimity Dorman & Denis Cryle, 1992 (see 'Further Reading').

his companions. Bracewell agreed to act as a guide for Petrie's expedition. He led Petrie to the entrance to Sandy Strait which separates K'gari Island from the mainland. They camped near the southern end of K'gari. Soon after, following instructions from Bracewell, they found the mouth of the Mary River. They rowed 80 kilometres up the Mary seeking Bunya pine trees, but found none.

The Aborigines in this inland area were suspicious of Petrie's party due to the alleged (but probable) recent poisoning of at least 50 of their people by settlers near the present town of Kilcoy. With these local Aborigines was another former convict, James Davis ('Duramboi'). Bracewell convinced Davis to come to Petrie's camp on the Mary River. Davis later warned Petrie of a potential attack by the local Aborigines who were still angry about the alleged poisoning. However no attack eventuated, possibly because Bracewell had convinced them of the effectiveness of the whiteman's firearms. Davis was persuaded to return to Moreton Bay with the promise that it was now a free settlement and no action would be taken against him.

James Davis ('Duramboi') in front of his crockery store in Brisbane 1872.



The expedition finally reached Brisbane on 22 March to the welcome of a large crowd eager to learn about their discoveries. In particular they were interested in the two returning runaway convicts who were encouraged to deliver a somewhat colourful report. Petrie was impressed with the forests on K'gari Island, but had discovered no Bunya pines. However, as he hoped, he had gained relevant information from the two runaway convicts and had explored new territory. Davis and Bracewell were granted ticket of leave status and settled back into settlement life.

Petrie was impressed by the size of the Bunya trees with their crop of large cones with edible seeds, which were the focus for large gatherings of Aboriginal tribes from distant places. He approached New South Wales Governor Sir George Gipps and convinced him of the value of the Bunya pine forests. As a result the proclamation opposite was made in 1842 in the *New South Wales Government Gazette*, prohibiting any person from occupation of the land where the trees grew or from the cutting of timber in this area.

However in 1859 Queensland was declared a State in its own right, separate from New South Wales. In the following year the new State Government repealed this proclamation, removing the protection of the Bunya trees. Today significant stands remain, particularly in the Bunya Mountains National Park and it remains a prominent tree in some south east Queensland rainforests and in cultivation. Populations in Far North Queensland are stable.

*Colonial Secretary's Office,
Sydney, 14th April, 1842.*

IT having been represented to the GOVERNOR that a District exists to the Northward of Moreton Bay, in which a fruit-bearing Tree abounds, called *Bunya*, or *Banya Bunya*, and that the Aborigines from considerable distances resort at certain times of the year to this District for the purpose of eating the fruit of the said Tree:—His Excellency is pleased to direct that no Licenses be granted for the occupation of any Lands within the said District in which the Bunya or Banya Bunya Tree is found. And notice is hereby given, that the several Crown Commissioners in the New England and Moreton Bay Districts have been instructed to remove any person who may be in the unauthorised occupation of Land whereon the said Bunya or Banya Bunya Trees are to be found. His Excellency has also directed that no Licenses to cut Timber be granted within the said Districts.

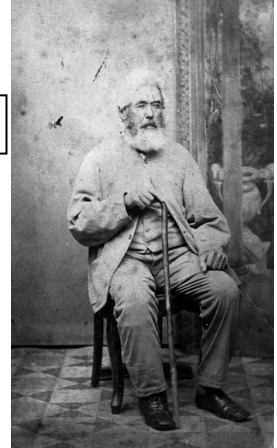
*By His Excellency's Command,
E. DEAS THOMSON.*

The Bunya pine has proved not to be a useful timber tree for construction purposes, but it is used as 'tonewood' in the manufacture of sound boards in stringed instruments.

Conclusion

The preceding stories only scratch the surface of the list of Andrew Petrie's achievements in the Moreton Bay Colony (which became the city of Brisbane in 1859). Here we concentrate largely on his work in local exploration. Petrie went on to achieve much in the development of the city of Brisbane despite losing his eyesight in 1848 after an attack of sandy blight. Eventually he handed most of his business to his oldest son John who was to become the first Lord Mayor of Brisbane. Another son Tom, who spent much of his childhood with the local Aborigines, is recognised as an authority on them, and on the timber industry. Andrew Petrie's house was a social centre of Brisbane and was open to visiting squatters from outside Morton Bay. Andrew died in February 1872.

Andrew Petrie in old age.



Today he is remembered in many local names including the town of Petrie, Petrie Terrace, Petrie Creek, the electoral division of Petrie on the northern outskirts of Brisbane and Petrie Bight, a stretch of the Brisbane River. Today Newstead House is an historic landmark in Brisbane. It is thought to have been designed and built in 1846 by Andrew Petrie for fellow Scot Patrick Leslie. It is the oldest home in Brisbane.



Newstead House the oldest private dwelling in Brisbane thought to have been designed and built by Andrew Petrie in 1846.

FURTHER READING

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Author's notes:

Distribution of the Bunya Pine

The Bunya pine (*Araucaria bidwillii*) has a surprising disjunct distribution. The major occurrence is in South East Queensland where it occurs in large (and some smaller) populations north of the Pine River, such as the Bunya Mountains and in the Sunshine Coast hinterland on the Blackall Range.

In addition two separate small populations occur much further north on the Atherton Tableland and in the Mount Lewis National Park in Far North Queensland. Surprisingly these two small northern occurrences are separated by 1500 km from those of South East Queensland.

What is the explanation for this strange, disjunct population? The seeds are too large for distribution by birds and the distance too great for trading between Aboriginal tribes. The answer appears to be that the species was once widespread in eastern Queensland, and that changing climates over millennia have resulted in local extinctions, leaving these surviving populations isolated.

The Name of the Bunya Pine

But there is one regret: The Bunya pine should really have been named after Andrew Petrie, the man who prepared the first detailed botanical description (he called it *Araucaria Petriana*'), who risked his life and covered so many arduous miles in search of its home and who argued for a reserve to protect it. However John Carne Bidwill, who was Commissioner for Crown Lands in the Wide Bay district, took specimens to William Jackson Hooker at London's Kew Gardens in 1843 and he named it after Bidwill.