A glimpse of the Moreton Bay Penal Settlement in operation is given by the following report, found among the Colonial Secretary's records in the Archives Office of New South Wales.

The authorities at Moreton Bay were required to send a number of regular returns to the Government in Sydney — an annual return of building works carried on, a half yearly return of all convicts on the settlement, monthly returns of stock, convicts, and their employment, land under cultivation, agricultural produce, public work in progress, provisions in hand and the time they were calculated to last, the whole population and the number of each class in and out of hospital, and trials in a summary way. But no mention has been seen of regular enquiries into lost articles. It seems very likely that the holding of the Board of Enquiry covered by the report resulted from a circular letter addressed to all Commandants by the Colonial Secretary on 11 June 1829. This circular requested a return of all stores and tools held by the settlements. Deficiencies shown up by this taking of stock may well have led to the holding of an Enquiry. However, the stimulus for the sending of the circular is not known.

The Lumber Yard where the Enquiry was held was on the site now occupied by the Prudential Building at the corner of Queen Street and North Quay. The Pilot's residence was at Amity Point (Stradbroke Island), and the Female Factory was on the site now occupied by the General Post Office in Queen Street.

The impressions given by the report, of the importance of timber-getting, the reliance on water-transport, the frequency of absconding and the brushes with the Aborigines are borne out by other documents. Timber was one of the principal products of the settlement, grain being the other. However, the information incidentally conveyed in this report, that cedar-getting gangs went as far as the Tweed, was a surprise.

As late as November 1837 the then Commandant, Major Cotton, commented unfavourably on the amount of time consumed in visiting the outstations by water, compared with the time it would have taken by a road. He had had a line of road to each outstation marked by a plough, and requested two saddle horses for general purposes. (The request was refused.)

About a quarter of the prisoners sent to Moreton Bay absconded, but most returned after a short time. By the time this Board of Enquiry was held, some of the absconders reported to it had already returned, obviously without their axes. It is interesting to notice that this must have been so normal a situation as to call for no comment, no matter how brief the absence (John Harwood had returned the next day). If the Aborigines took the axes, can we assume that the prisoners did not attempt to use them as weapons?

Towards the end of 1828 the Commandant, Captain Logan, stationed some soldiers at Point Danger to intercept runaway convicts. How long this arrangement continued is not known, but when Allan Cunningham gave some particulars of Moreton Bay to a Select Committee on Secondary Punishments in London in 1832 he said that it had been given up as a result of a rupture with the natives, adding that 'some pine and cedar gangs employed near the spot had to retire, as the natives attacked them also, and obliged them to leave that part of the country and make the best of their way to the settlement'. Possibly this refers to the very incidents mentioned in the following survey, in which case they may have been rather uncommon. It is possible on the other hand that attacks were a normal hazard for timber-getting parties.

Some notes on some of the men mentioned may be of interest. First the free men: Lieutenant Bainbrigge of the 57th Regiment had taken over from Ensign Long Innes in October 1827 as Assistant Engineer. The title of this position was later changed to Superintendent of Public Works, which describes its functions better. He was second in command to Captain Logan and in charge of the settlement whenever the Commandant was absent.

Peter Beauclerk Spicer held the position of Superintendent of Convicts from September 1826 till the settlement closed in 1839.

John Tosh of the Amity and a seaman (William Innes) of the Mary Elizabeth had been left at Moreton Bay to superintend the buoys, but continued on the strength of their respective vessels until in March 1827 the Master Attendant complained of the inconvenience of this arrangement. The Commandant having replied that they were still required, especially Tosh as he was the only man on the settlement who could pilot a boat, they were transferred to the Moreton Bay establishment from 1 July 1827. Tosh in the capacity of pilot. He and two of his crew were drowned on 13 January 1830 when their boat was upset on the bar at Amity Point when returning after taking the Mary Elizabeth to sea.

Edward King became master of the Regent Bird on the death of the previous master, Bremer, towards the end of 1827, and as he still held this position in 1833 it is not clear why he was master of the Glory at the time of the survey, unless the Regent Bird was then undergoing repair. This was the position when Captain Clunie took command on Logan's death at the end of 1830. Clunie therefore applied for a master for the Regent Bird, not realizing that King held this position and that it was the other vessel that required a master. This led to confusion in the records of the free seamen, which took some time and correspondence to sort out.

As to the convicts, some at least were doing the same kind of work at Moreton Bay that they would have done as free men. Thus, William Mortimer had been a quarryman before he was transported, William Plomer Daniel a clerk, Cornelius Wilbee a shoemaker and Thomas Boardman and Robert Turnbull had both been seamen.

The two last mentioned were among the few prisoners at Moreton Bay who were not doubly transported men. They had arrived in the Colony as free men. Boardman received a very good reference from Lieutenant Long Innes, Bainbrigge's predecessor in charge of Public Works, and as a result was made wharfinger. He was pardoned in 1831 but was to remain at Moreton Bay as part of the crew of the Regent Bird.

According to the records Turnbull returned to Sydney in June 1829. This does not explain how he was able to give evidence to a Board at Moreton Bay in September. He had been pardoned as the result of a petition signed by 'respectable citizens', including John Dunmore Lang, who said that Turnbull would go back to being a mariner in the South Sea Whale Fishery, where he would be under the direction of a respectable relative and away from the bad company that caused his downfall. (He had stolen a quantity of dollars.)

Thomas James, a sailmaker from London, was sentenced to transportation for life on 30 November 1824, and on 22 December 1825 was sentenced to death for rape, sentence commuted to transportation for seven years. He and two others were reported for improper behaviour when on their way from the Hulk Phoenix
Richard Bottington returned to Sydney on the expiration of his colonial sentence with a commendation from Captain Clunie, and as a result, when the post of Chief Constable at Moreton Bay fell vacant he was appointed to it, in June 1834. However in August 1836 he was caught climbing the wall which surrounded the Female Factory where the women prisoners lived. As a result he was dismissed from his post, and the wall was topped with broken glass ordered from Sydney for the purpose. His colonial conviction had been for bigamy.

Report of a Board of Enquiry held at H.M. Lumber Yard Moreton Bay for the purpose of ascertaining and strictly inquiring into the cause of a number of Tools and other Articles lost, stolen, and otherwise found to be deficient.

Lieutenant Bainbrigge 57th Regiment — President
Mr. P. Spicer — Superintendent of Convicts

Henry Spencer states that on the 25th Day of March last, Thomas Miskelly absconded from his gang and took with him one falling axe.

Thomas James states that on the 5th Day of May last, a tribe of Black natives attacked his gang and took from him five falling axes and further states it was with difficulty they escaped without being speared, and this deponent further states that on the following 7th Day of the same month the same party of Blacks again attacked his gang and forcibly took from him two Falling axes.

Thomas Tingle states he was one of the men attached to the Cedar Party under Thomas James, and perfectly recollects a party of Blacks attacking them at two different periods when a number of Falling axes were lost, and further that in the hurry and confusion he left his blanket on shore, which was also taken by the Blacks.

James McNally states that on or about the 19th Day of May last, he was up the River Tweed procuring Cedar Logs for Government when a party of Black natives attacked his gang and took three Falling axes and two Iron Wedges.

Thomas James states that about the same time his gang was also attacked by a party of Blacks who took from him one Falling Axe and three Iron Wedges.

Robert Turnbull states at the time he was conveying a raft of logs from the South Passage across the Bay, the wind blowing hard he lost an Anchor, further states he has made very diligent search for the same, but cannot see anything of it.

James Brady states that on the 1st Day of June last, he left his Tools at the New farm in the evening after leaving off work and on his return the following morning he missed one falling axe further states that on the 30th Day of June, John Harwood absconded and took with him one falling axe also that on the 7 July last, at the time he was delivering in his tools at the Toolhouse to the Clerk of the Agricultural Establishment he found himself deficient of one axe although he positively remembers his exact number being delivered into the yard by his Toolman.

King master of the cutter Glory states he was proceeding to Dunwich on the 2nd Day of June when on crossing the Bay the wind blowing hard from the S.W. a Lead and Line, and one Iron Pot was lost overboard accidentally.

William Heffernan states that on the 3 Day of July he was left to watch the Tools during the Dinner hour when he was taken very unwell and was obliged to go to the rear and on his return he missed one Brush Hook. Cannot positively say whether it was there when the men left off work.

John Bright states on the 18th Day of June, John Welch absconded and took with him one axe, further states on the 10th July, C. Moore and J. Woods absconded and took with them two falling axes.

George Yates states on the 20th day of June his gang was digging a drain over the river when a spade was lost by one of his men.

William Mortimer states on the 22nd Day of June he mustered his Tools before he went to dinner and on his return to the quarry he missed one Crow Bar and five Wedges and has every reason to believe they were taken by Black Natives.

Robert Hughes states that in the month of June last, he left his Iron Pot on the Wharf during the time he was conveying the Gangs across the river and on looking for it next morning the Iron Pot could not be found, verily believes it was washed away by the Tide.

William Rhodes states that on the 13th day of August he was returning from the Settlement to his gang distant about Ten miles facing the Islands with Tools, when a party of Black natives attacked him and forcibly took from him two Broad axes, two files and a line. Further states it was with great difficulty he made his escape without being speared.

Thomas James states that on Wednesday the 12th day of August, he sent William Rhodes to the Settlement for two Broad axes, two files and a line for the purpose of squaring Girders required for Settlement use, and that he verily believes them to have been taken by the Blacks as above stated.

Robert Winters states on the 8th day of August Joseph Brooks absconded and took with him one falling axe.

William Pearce states in the month of July last, he left his Tools at the wharf one night and on his return the following morning he missed one spade.

John Brady states that on 21st August he was at the Breakfast Creek Farm at work and on mustering his Tools at night he found himself deficient of one axe which he cannot account for.

W. P. Daniel states on the 29th August last, in his capacity as Clerk of the Public Works, he mustered the mechanics Tools and found all present, and further that on learning Cornelius Wilbee had absconded, the Government Shoe maker, he again mustered his Tools and found one knife and one Gigger deficient, had no doubt but they were taken by C. Wilbee after the Saturday morning muster.

John Tosh states that on Sunday the 13th day of Sept., James Murray was shaving the Boats Crew with a Gov. Razor
Moreton Bay Settlement, 1829

(Reproduced by kind permission of the Mitchell Library, Sydney — ZSSV4B/MORE B/1)
Portion of Dixon’s Map of the Moreton Bay Settlement, 1840.
(State Archives, AIA 1842)
and on enquiring for it the following day the same could not be found, and verily believes some of the Blacks took it, as they were about.

James Murray states he left the above mentioned Razor on a Shelf in the Pilots House after using it and have not seen it since.

John Tosh states that his Hutkeeper came home on Monday the 22nd July last, and stated that some of the Blacks had taken from him by force his Watch Coat and that it was with difficulty he made his escape, and also that he was obliged to leave a Pair of Pinchers behind him, and further states he sent him out the following Day to look for the Same, but without effect.

Richard Bottington states that on Thursday the 10th Sept., he was at the Bay at the time the Boat “Providence” upset, and was in the Fishing Boat attempting to save the lives of those on Board the “Providence” when it was deemed necessary to lighten her as much as possible and in order to do so one Iron Pot, one Frying Pan, one Bucket, one Messkid and one Breaker were thrown overboard belonging to the punt.

Richard Lewis states that he saw the Boat “Providence” upset at the Bay in September last, when one Frying Pan, Six Pint Pots and three small Dishes were lost overboard in attempting to save the lives of the Crew on board the “Providence”.

Thomas Boardman states on the 10th Sept., he was on Board the Boat “Providence” at the Bay when a heavy Squall of Wind came on and owing to some confusion in shortening sail she upset, further states that he perfectly recollects the following articles being on Board belonging to Government. One Breaker, two Balers, one Bucket, three Scrapers, one mainsail, one foresail, one Jibsail and seven Blankets, all of which were lost.

James Blacklock, Corporal 57th Regiment states that on Saturday the 19th September last, Cornelius Keele one of the Prisoners stationed at Limestone Hill, hung his Blanket on the Railing to air when some of the Black Natives came in and stole it.

Richard Bottington states he was in charge of the Punt about three months back when she upset in conveying Cattle across the River, at which time Two Blankets and a quantity of Provisions were lost.

Daniel Davis states that about the beginning of August last, No. 3 Launch was stationed at Dunwich in which he was employed, that it was very Squally Weather and she broke from her moorings and not since been found he verily believes it was in consequence of the Painter not being sufficiently strong to hold her.

William Walsh, coxswain of the above Launch corroborates in the statements of Daniel Davis.

Brisbane Town Moreton Bay.
24th September, 1829.

P. Logan comdt.

Tho. Bainbrigge S.P.W.
P. Spicer Supt. of Convicts

Report of a Board of Enquiry held at H.M. Lumber Yard, Moreton Bay for the purpose of ascertaining and strictly enquiring into the cause of a number of tools and other articles found to be deficient.

24th September, 1829.

ENDNOTES

1. The report is not numbered, but is placed with Commandant, Moreton Bay to Colonial Secretary, 27 October, 1829. [New South Wales Archives Office 4/2052, in-letter 8756 of 1829, John Oxley Library microfilm reel A2.4, frames 318-27, with the report at frames 324-7].


3. Commandant, Moreton Bay to Colonial Secretary, 20 October 1828. [John Oxley Library, Logan letterbook].


5. It is difficult to say whether John Oxley named the Bremer (or Bremer’s) River after the Master of the Regent Bird or after Sir James John Gordon Bremer (1786-1850), naval officer. Bremer (Regent Bird) was in the Moreton Bay area from the earliest days of settlement, whereas Captain Bremer R.N. was in Sydney only from June to July 1824, before taking his ship, H.M.S. Tamar, to Port Essington to found a settlement, sailing via Torres Strait. Oxley appears to have been in Sydney in June/July 1824 and probably met Captain Bremer, R.N. Refer J. G. Steele, The Explorers of the Moreton Bay District 1770-1830, (Brisbane, 1972), pp. 135-158; and Australian Dictionary of Biography, for Bremer v.1, pp. 148-9, and for Oxley v.2, pp. 305-7.

6. A small tub.

7. A small wooden cask.