

The Palmseed Industry

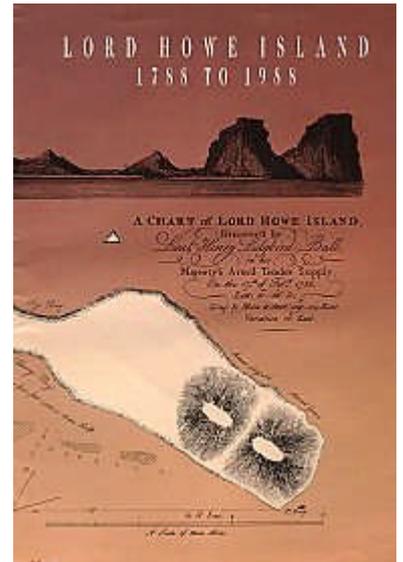
This natural growth of the soil

Lord Howe Island boasts four unique palm species, two of which prefer the moist humid conditions around the mountain summits, while the other two thrive along the lowlands, often in luxuriant, pure stands. One of these lowland palms - *Howea foresteriana* - has found extraordinary favour with nurserymen worldwide. This robust palm shows a remarkable tolerance to conditions in cool, temperate climates where lower temperature, humidity and light levels prove fatal to most tropical palms.

When the whaling industry declined in the Pacific in the 1870's, Lord Howe's role as a provisioning station came to an end. The islanders faced tough times, at first attempting to bolster their incomes by shipping produce to Sydney. For a short time, onions were the staple export until the crops were decimated by smut. In these depressed economic circumstances it was the lovely *Howea* palm that came to the Island's rescue.

Howea foresteriana was known to the early Islanders as the 'Thatch Palm' because its tough leaves could be used for thatching the roofs and walls of their houses. Battens split from the palm's trunk were fastened over the thatching, so it could not be blown away in summer cyclones or winter gales.

Commencing in the final two decades of the 19th century, the *Howea* palm quickly became the doyen of indoor palms, gracing parlours, drawing rooms, ballrooms and hotel lobbies around the world. Nurserymen from Australia, America, England and various European countries eagerly sought its seed.



Ray Shick scaling a palm tree (L)

Charles Retmock shelling seeds from palm spikes (R)

They called it the *Kentia* Palm

There is no reliable record of who first exported palmseed from Lord Howe Island. Some accounts credit Captain Armstrong, the resident government official (1878-1882) with being the first. Others say that Island resident, Ned King, was the first to send seed to Sydney, while the Island schoolmaster, T.B. Wilson, was the first to export seed overseas. Records show that the palmseed trade was well established by the end of the 1880's, with Europe being the biggest single customer. Such was the interest in the palm that the Sydney-based horticultural company, Searles, sent their landscape architect, Alex Fenton, to the Island to procure seeds and live palms. Alex Fenton stayed on the island to found an island family.

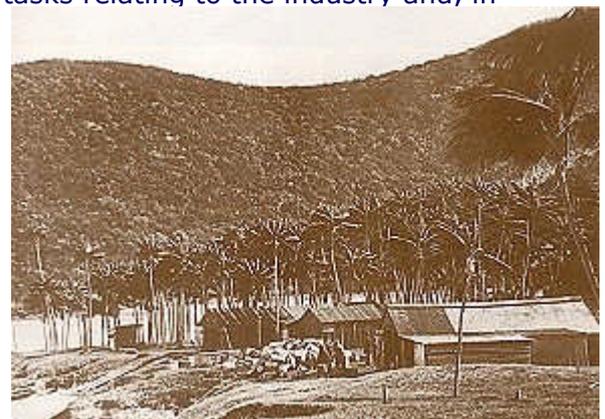
At first the palmseed industry developed in a haphazard manner, with Islanders continually undercutting each other in price. Sydney, seed merchants took advantage of this situation, and at times were paying Islanders only 2/6d. (250) per bushel when the going rate on the mainland was as high as 8/- (80c) or 10/- (\$1.00). In 1905, the English seed company, Sander and Coy, tried to secure a monopoly on the Island by offering the handsome price of £2 (\$4.00) to £2.10 (\$5.00) per bushel in return for a seven year contract securing all seed produced on the Island. Australian nurserymen protested to the Chief Secretary, and the agreement was blocked by the State Government. BY now, however, Islanders had realised the value of the seed and placed a price of £2 (\$4.00) per bushel free-on-board at Lord Howe Island.

A further significant development took place in 1906, when the visiting magistrate, Mr. F. Farnell, formed the Kentia Palm Seed and Plant Cooperative Ltd. in conjunction with 22 Islanders and 3 Sydney-based individuals. Mr. Farnell had earlier gained the trust of Islanders by offering to act as an honest broker (without commission) to help them sell palmseed in Australia and overseas. The new company had a paid up capital of £2,400, and it was not long before a second company was formed to export seed to foreign markets. Unfortunately, within a few years, tensions rose between the Island shareholders and some of the Sydney-based members of the company '

To forestall further ructions in the palmseed industry, the State Government sponsored two Commissions of Inquiry into the welfare of the Islanders generally. The first of these, in 1911, was led by Hugh Langwell and the second, in the following year, by a barrister-at-law, Walter Bevan. As a consequence of these Royal Commissions, the Lord Howe Island Board of Control was formed to "take charge of the affairs of the Island and the trade thereof". Following the recommendations of Commissioner Bevan, the new Board formed a Limited Liability Cooperative Company in which all Islanders were given shares. Men over 21 years of age were entitled to 25 shares increasing to 50 shares after a further ten years. Women were treated equally and held exactly the same number of shares. A family supporting children received an extra ten shares for every child, with a maximum number of shares being set at 135.

Henceforth all Islanders were to share equitably in the profits of the palmseed trade. As befits the nature of a cooperative, all were also expected to help harvest, cart, pack and ship seed under the direction of a three man local committee appointed by the Board. A small wage was paid to all those performing specific tasks relating to the industry and, in addition, dividends were paid on the shares at the end of every month.

Alas, two factors damaged the palmseed industry almost as soon as the new arrangements had come into effect. The first of these was the outbreak of World War 1 which disrupted the European market. The second factor was the grounding of the Burns Philp ship 'Makambo' off Ned's Beach in 1918, which released a rat plague on the Island. As a consequence, palmseed harvests declined considerably.



Old Packing shed near jetty

In order to combat the rates, a bounty of Id. per rat tail was introduced in 1920, later rising to 4d. and finally to 6d. in 1928. (One anecdote relates how a rat tail was actually placed in a church collection plate!) As beneficiaries of the palmseed industry, all Islanders were expected to give one day per fortnight hunting rats with dogs, traps and light shotguns. In 1928, owls were introduced to try to reduce the rat population, but without great effect. More effective control had to wait until after the Second World War when poison baits were introduced.

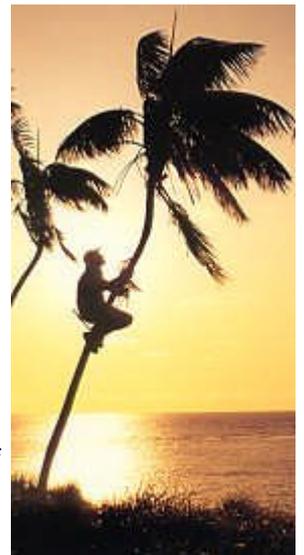
World War 11 brought the palmseed industry to a temporary standstill because of widespread disruption to markets. During the difficult years of the war, Islanders earned a livelihood growing vegetables and flower seeds for mainland seed companies like Yates and Rumseys. During this period, the Board allowed the long-established share system to lapse. When the war finished, there was only a small market for the seed, and so the share system was not revived. Instead, Islanders were paid a fixed sum per bushel to collect the seed, and any profit derived from seed sales went into the Board's consolidated fund for Island administration.

Up until 1959 the annual seed harvest remained low - usually, around 300 bushels compared to average yields well over 1000 bushels in the pre-war period. Then, commencing in 1960, seed orders increased and the industry once again began to flourish. Various methods were employed to sell seed including the tendering of the entire crop, or direct selling of the crop by an appointed agent.

Two major significant developments in the palmseed industry, were pioneered during the 1970's and 1980's. The first of these was the export of live palms from the Island. Island resident, Mr. Alan Williams, was the first to germinate seed and export live seed sprouts to Belgium. Following his success, the Board established its own nursery on the Island. By 1981, palmseed exports had ceased entirely, and only live plants were being shipped from the Island. Alan Williams supervised the establishment of the nursery which is now managed by Chris Weale. Its operation has expanded continuously and now returns over 2 million dollars annually to the Board's consolidated revenue.

The second major development was a project that once again gave Island residents a direct stake in the palm industry. While the Board was establishing its own nursery, a group of Islanders formed an island palmgrowers cooperative, in conjunction with Sydney nurseryman, Gary Andreasen. Representations were made to the Island Board, which agreed to sell an annual quota of seed to the coop. Consequently, a cottage based palm growing industry was established on the Island with 12 Island families participating initially. This industry, open to all Islanders, continues to flourish alongside the Board's much larger operation.

Prophetically, such an arrangement had been recommended by the far sighted Commissioner, Bevan, some 75 years earlier when he wrote, "A large profit might and ought to accrue to such islanders as adopt system of cultivation leading to the output of well-established and well-grown palms".



How are Palm Seeds Collected?

Harvesting of palmseed begins at the end of February each year, and usually continues throughout winter into early spring. The seed collector first selects a palm, and then slips both feet through a loop of strong material - often made from layered hessian. Using this circular 'strap' to grip the palm trunk, the seeder then jack-knives his way to the top of the palm. (like "a monkey on a stick".) The seed spikes are then wrenched from their positions underneath the crown of palm leaves, and are tossed or carried to the ground by the seeder as he slides back down the palm trunk. The palm seeds are then shelled from their spikes, and packed into jute or hessian bags before being carried to waiting vehicles.



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