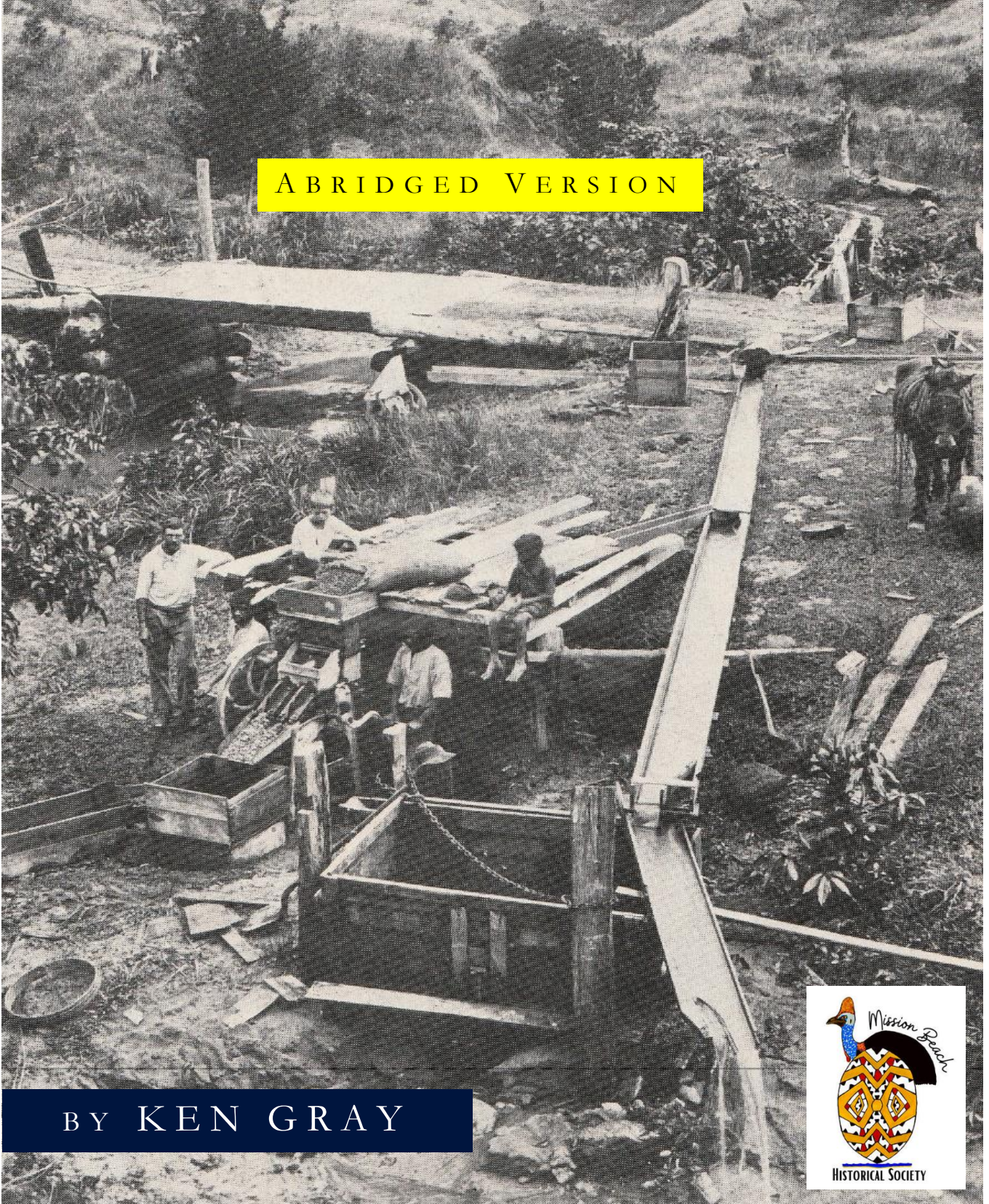


BICTON

THE CUTTENS OF CLUMP POINT

ABRIDGED VERSION



BY KEN GRAY



If Mission Beach has any past residents who could be considered celebrities, our first settlers, the Cuttens would come close. Maybe Dunk's author, Ted Banfield or Reef activist, John Busst would be known more widely, yet locally the Cuttens are icons. Their story is one of our most important.

No one expected them to suddenly migrate, let alone to end up in one of the most inaccessible and little known districts of north Queensland. This family did just that.

Frederick and Margaret Cutten were living happily in London in 1870. Fred was a successful lawyer and their children were being educated in the best London schools. He wanted more for his children and felt that they would have better prospects and enjoy more fulfilling lives in Australia.

Fred (54), Herb (15), Len (14) and Sid (12) arrived in Brisbane in 1871. Margaret (44 in 1871), James (18), Jessie (14), Margaret (10), Florence (8) and Alice (4) came on the same ship, *Indus* in 1872. They had a sheep farm on the Darling Downs and another near Emerald but suffered drought years, so the boys worked for a decade in western Queensland to amass funds for a planned move north.

Land was available at Clump Point in 1882, so they loaned a punt at the Tully River and rowed 30 km to it, but it was already selected. In 1884, they returned and found the perfect lots at Bingil Bay. They selected six 160 acre homestead lots. Title deeds were issued 1 April 1884. In time, they owned 3,200 acres of land there and cleared about 400 acres of it. They settled the land on 27 August 1885.

Soon after, the entire family, apart from daughter Margaret who had already married, arrived at their new home; *Bicton*, Clump Point. Florence and Alice soon became bored with farm life and sought work as governesses and both married not long after.

THE DJIRU PEOPLE

The Cuttens dispossessed the Djiru people who knew that white men were coming and from inter-tribal meetings, they heard how tribes near Cardwell had been violently dispossessed. Djiru country lies between Maria Creek and the Hull River and, before the British invasion, their population was about 450. Today, only 11 Djiru people live on their Traditional Lands.

Before the Cuttens came, in 1872, the *Maria* sank on Bramble Reef with 75 men aboard. 40 survived; 35 died and, of those, 23 drowned and one died of exposure. 11 were killed and eight were saved by Aboriginal people. Djiru fared badly in the media with hysterical articles claiming these *savage* tribes *massacred* all aboard the *Maria* and ate them. The truth, available from the testimony and diaries of survivors and settlers, is that Djiru people were fired on before they attacked and killed three white men. Four planned raids by the Queensland Police with the Royal Navy and a band of settlers occurred without legal consent. Between 108 and 132 Djiru people, almost an entire tribe, were killed. Their camps were all burned. One child and one woman were kidnapped. No white people were ever sanctioned for their crimes. This area was, at the time, not subject to the rule of law.

Despite the daunting propaganda, the Cuttens came without fear of their new neighbours. They were not armed, ready for battle. In contrast, some settlers who came later were fully armed.

The number of Aboriginal people who worked for the Cuttens varied over time. Typically, they employed 10-40 Djiru people. Len Cutten wrote several letters to newspapers about problems faced by Aboriginals and the obligations of farmers who had dispossessed them. James also wrote letters seeking justice for Aboriginals and claimed to have friends among the Djiru.

Once, the Cuttens were accused of providing rum to Aboriginal workers. At times there were angry moments when they cut down a Djiru food tree unnecessarily, but even that caused no severe confrontations. The Cuttens were probably fairer than most settlers with their Aboriginal workers.

THE FAMILY

Bicton land was occupied from 1885 until 1950. Herb and Len lived there for 45 years, Sid for 38 years and James for 20. Florence and her six children returned to *Bicton* in 1913 and she and her son Les stayed on for 37 years before living in a cottage nearby. Of the sons, only James married. He had a daughter, Isabel, who had no children, hence Frederick Cutten has no direct descendants named Cutten today. Fred came from a large family of ten children and at least one of his brothers (Edward) had sons, so the Cutten name lives on through their many cousins.

The family valued education and culture and continued learning all their lives, reading what they could of world affairs. They enjoyed music and literature and the company of others. They met with many influential people and engaged well. The Minister for Lands, Percy Pease was a family friend.

The five main people spoken of in the records are Len, Herb, James, Florence and Les. There is less written of the Cutten 'girls' yet they were equally capable and contributed to the outcomes at *Bicton*. Florence and Les were the most akin to Herb, Len and Sid. Together they were a formidable force.

Margaret Cutten senior was a welcoming and convivial hostess. She was well educated and spoke seven languages. The family were known for their generosity to new settlers and their willingness to invite visitors into their comfortable home at *Bicton*. Sid said little. Late in 1917, he was severely injured when a tree fell on him. He probably died of malaria. Herb was a literate man like Len. He was attractive and dressed smartly for occasions. The boys all had the bushy beards that were in vogue in their day. He died in 1930 of 'heart trouble.'

Len was a prolific letter writer with a sharp wit and an ability to influence and was, late in life, dubbed *King of Bingil Bay*. Despite leaving school early, he was articulate and was often provocative, using humour effectively to fend off critics. Most notably, he was a potent advocate for NQ farmers. He was not keen on the establishment or enamoured of the aristocracy or churches. He asked for a fair go for Aboriginal people, yet that advocacy had a good deal of self-interest attached. Len died shortly after Herb in 1930; he never recovered from the deep loss of his brother.

James wrote some letters to the press but was not an advocate for the district like Len. After years of writing he proposed to May Tudhope in 1906, boasting that he was, *the oldest son of the famous Australian Coffee Barons*. His humble brothers would have cringed at that title. James thought that his mother would appreciate female company, but that did not work and he left the farm, never to return. James died under anaesthetic with a fractured thigh incurred in a car accident in Brisbane.

Florence was well connected. She married Charles Alexander, a miner in the Herberton district. They were at Irvinebank until Charles died in 1912. She had many exciting times as a governess when she was single and working for a few notable families. She was a keen pianist and played at public events on occasions. She was survived by six children, 11 grandchildren and six great grandchildren.

18 year-old Les arrived at *Bicton* and stayed in the area until 1958 so was the last direct link the family had with the district. He recalled his days in Irvinebank, saying he always loved to stay at *Bicton*

during the school holidays. He went out on the boats to load cargo and fondly remembered interacting with Djiru boys and going to the reef in their bark canoes. He lost his left hand in an accident yet only six weeks later led a rescue operation at Clump Point after the 1918 cyclone. Les was highly active in politics and wrote often to the press about Clump Point matters.

THE ENTERPRISE

For the main Cutten era at *Bicton*; a period of 33 years from 1885 to 1918, the venture was largely an economic failure. The Alexander era from 1918 to 1950 (Florence Cutten married Charles Alexander) was more successful, with banana growing. The Cuttens invested over £20,000 at *Bicton* yet ended up with only £5,000 in assets, mainly land.

They were hard working, resilient and capable farmers and grew brilliant produce yet were too distant from the markets, and the costs usually exceeded selling prices. They had a bad run of luck with cyclones in 1890, 1911 and 1913 then the monster one in 1918. There was a drought and fire in 1902. However, one cannot but conclude that the Cuttens were just here too early. Today, there is no significant farming activity on *Bicton* land.

Their coffee farm was successful for almost a decade but collapsed when tariffs dropped. In the late 1890s, they were Australia's largest suppliers of coffee, producing 250,000 lb pa. It was branded, *Bicton Coffee*. The irony is that if this well operated coffee farm existed in 2022, it would be booming. While less than 1% of Australia's coffee consumption is grown in Australia today, the industry is re-emerging. The *Bicton* plantation had 100,000 plants on 100 acres, so in 2022 it would be the largest coffee farm in Australia, producing almost 15% of the nation's home-grown coffee.

The Cuttens grew corn, pineapples, bananas, coconuts, mangoes, all varieties of citrus, and even tea and all failed long-term. They also dabbled in timber and even tried tobacco. They always had their land to sell for income in retirement, but the land was worth little. They dreamed of a town and in 1926 surveyed part of the seaside land into allotments and sold many of them for holiday cottages.

LIFE AT BICTON

Life at *Bicton* was never going to replicate that of Islington, London. However, they retained much culture and comfort in their home life and re-created some elements of London life and with their books, magazines and many newspapers, they maintained reasonable contact with the wider world. They rose at daybreak and had meals at strict times, but the 15-hour work-day wasn't akin to life in London. They stuck to the ritual of dinner being a 'dress' occasion every day; coats were worn.

The family had no qualms about the change. They merely made the most of the great advantages that *Bicton* afforded them. Visitors were in awe of the beauty and romance of the homestead and the area and wrote glowingly of the lifestyle and people of *Bicton*. At its peak, *Bicton* was a bustling 15-room home with many huts for the Malay and Kanaka workers before 1900.

They had no European neighbours or friends nearby until 1888, when Willoughby Smith and his wife, Alice had a new home at Clump Point. However the Smiths left after the 1890 cyclone. John Unsworth came in 1892 but was seldom home. His wife, Mary, was Margaret Cutten's help and John joined the *Bicton* team in 1903 as a foreman for the workers.

When starting their coffee and tea plots, they brought Robert Connon, in from Ceylon. He stayed on at *Bicton* for three and a half years. Ted Garner and family came to run the timber mill in 1909. Christmas was a big occasion and by 1898, Edmund Banfield came from Dunk Island. By 1913, there were many more settlers in the district and Florence returned to *Bicton* with her six children.

They had interesting visitors stay, some for extended periods. One was Edward Reichenbach, known as Ryko. At age 21 years, he created widespread publicity in Australia and abroad when in 1914 he broke the cycling record for Adelaide to Darwin. Visitors to *Bicton* were ever amazed at the hospitality. *Bicton* was a centre for the community and was the district polling booth in early days.

Some writers depict the Cuttens as being sad or unfortunate, yet they remained happily at *Bicton* because they loved the life there and had a passion for and commitment to their beautiful district. They were guardians of this district and were prepared to do whatever it took to help it prosper. They could have ended their *Bicton* adventure at any time yet always chose to stay.

Constance Mackness quoted Florence's words about *Bicton* just a few days before her death:

Mrs. Alexander was the last survivor of this first pioneering group. A big-hearted, cultured lady, she shared the courage of her family and their passionate love of Bingil Bay. To a neighbour who visited her in Tully Hospital a few days before her death, she said: "You know I am never going home again, don't you?" then added softly and slowly, as if arming herself to endure it, "Never – going – to see – Bicton – again."

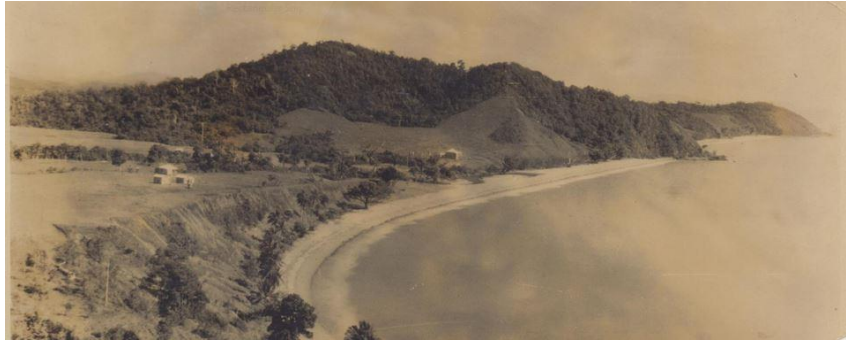
This was Mission Beach's first European pioneering family. Grit; is an overused word in modern corporate life, yet it fits this family perfectly. They had no Church to fall back on and relied on their own resilience. Faith came not from deities but from their intense belief in the wonder and beauty of nature and a genuine love of those around them.

They experimented in many ways in farming and shared their learnings with others widely. Herb Cutten was the leader of the tea and coffee ventures and is known as the *Father of the Australian Tea Industry*. The plants they abandoned became valuable to others. New tea plantations were started at Nerada and Papua New Guinea from those trees.

Most of all perhaps, the Cuttens augmented the reputation of the district. Mary Guthrie, in a memoir on Edmund Banfield, noted that some districts are known by the names of their most famed or first pioneers when she said:

We said 'Banfield of Dunk Island' just as we said 'Cutten of Clump Point' or 'Fitzgerald of Geraldton' (now Innisfail), and many others of pioneer fame.

Looking at the *Bicton* landscape during Cutten times and after, the image below (next page) shows the extent of land clearing in 1930. The image below that shows *Bicton* land as it is in 2022. The only signs of *Bicton* here are their coconut cultivars thriving in the wild.



Bicton beachfront lands at Bingil Bay and Brookes Beach circa 1930.



Bingil Bay and Brookes Beach area 2022, image courtesy Susan Kelly, Natural Images.

The Cutten romance endures, albeit without these wonderful people living their active lives at *Bicton*. Sadly, it is also largely without many of their neighbours and owners of this land for eons, the Djiru.

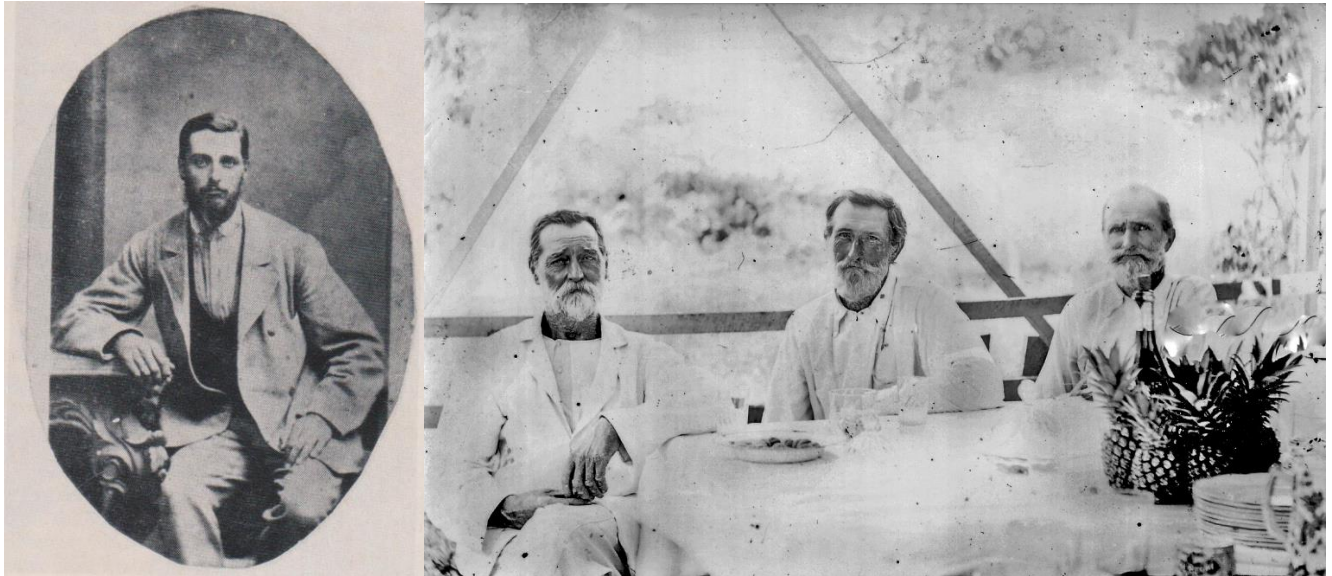


2021, Bingil Bay south showing houses on Len Cutten's Lot 159 where *Bicton* was located at the beachfront. Image courtesy Susan Kelly, *Natural Images*.

If all that this family do is remind us of their values and show us what we can achieve by sticking together when facing adversity, then they serve us well.

Paradise it was when the Cuttens lived their lives to the fullest at Bingil Bay and paradise it remains.

The Cutten romance endures.



Images top to bottom, left to right: Herbert Frederick Cutten, A dashing figure in the eighties. The long-term Cutten team at Bicton: Herb, Len and Sid. Cutten family with Edmund Banfield (rear, second from right) before the 1918 cyclone. Les Alexander with his sister Margaret Bunting.

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Published by Mission Beach Historical Society, Document AB05, Version 1.0. Web address: mbhs.com.au
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Cover Image: Cutten's open air coffee mill 1902 – image from R. J. Taylor *The Lost Plantation: A History of the Australian Tea Industry*, G K Bolton, Cairns, 1982.