

LIMEKILNS

A traveller arriving at Blubber Bay 100 years ago would have been confronted with the full extent of Pacific Lime Company's vast operations: wharves, storehouses, limerock pits, a sawmill, cooperage, bunkhouses and dozens of labourers who kept the entire enterprise alive.

Our traveller might have wondered at the ghostly-white pall descending over the little bay - the result of 10 tons of lime dust per day settling onto the surroundings. The culprits were the kilns - three vertical draw kilns.

The first Texada kiln was built by a "Pop" Lee whose 1887 Blubber Bay venture lasted only a year. Seven years later Donald Menzies built kilns at Limekiln Bay. These were demolished and replaced by four new ones erected in 1897 by the WH Christie - JJ Palmer consortium. Another 30-foot kiln (still visible across Sturt Bay from the boat harbour) with sawmill and cooperage was also constructed on their property in Van Anda in 1898.



Our observant traveller from a century ago would note the Chinese labourers breaking, sorting and hauling limerock by hand. Large chunks were loaded into the top of the kiln chimney and, as gravity led them downward, a skilled kilnsman roasted them above 780 C to drive off the carbon dioxide.

The resulting "cooked stone" (quicklime) was recovered through the heavy iron doors at the base. This caustic powder had to be quickly stored in barrels (made at the company cooperage) before it reabsorbed water. The product was then sent south on company ships. All operations were steam-driven, fuelled by slabs of wood and sawdust gleaned from the company's sawmill and hauled by horse cart.

The Limekiln Bay kilns remained relatively intact until 1985 when Ashgrove Cement sought to realign the highway. Although the PRRD and local concerned citizens attempted to save them, these treasures of an earlier age were destroyed as it was determined that they were too dangerous to keep and too expensive to restore. Only part of the base of one kiln remains today as silent witness to the proud industry of the last century and a present-day lack of resolve to maintain and preserve island history.