

# The Story of Ash Island

(By J.M.M.)

In the early days of settlement in the Newcastle district the islands in the Hunter River interested people chiefly for their commercial rather than agricultural value. Ash Island was first known to timber-getters, who soon forsook it in favour of more promising cedar groves further up the river.

The whole island formed part of a grant of land to Mr. A. W. Scott, a magistrate of Newcastle. Mr. Scott, who became one of the first members of Parliament for the district, was keenly interested in its industrial possibilities. He made several attempts to obtain coal on the island. Many coal experts of the time hoped to strike a continuation of the Tomago seam. Coal was found, but only a small seam, which was crumbly and practically useless. Mr. Scott also started a salt works on Moscheto Island.

These early efforts did not meet with success, and from that time onward the islands were used for agricultural purposes.

Ash Island is one of the oldest centres in the district. Known to many Newcastle people only as "the mud swamp across the white bridge at Hexham," it was once a fertile spot. Salt water has encroached on the land and the swamp areas have increased considerably. The mangrove trees that surround the island are of comparatively recent growth. Deposits of mud have silted up the front channel of the river and formed a marsh ideally suited for the prolific growth of mangrove trees.

Ash Island was included in the survey of the delta of the Hunter which Lieutenant-colonel William Paterson and Captain John Grant made when sent by Governor King in 1801 to investigate the port of Newcastle. They named the largest island Greville Island and one of the smaller ones Ash Island because of the class of timber they found there. During the next 20 years the names of the islands were altered, and Greville Island was called Ash Island by the surveyors who came to divide the land up

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The original Ash Island was then called Moscheto Island, which name it retains.

When Mr. Scott received his grant he made his home on the island. It was a large stone structure, surrounded by an orchard, vineyard and one of the most beautiful gardens in the district. He employed German servants, bringing them out here cheaply under an immigration scheme. About this time many German people come to Raymond Terrace and other parts of the district. From Ash Island Mr. Scott travelled into Newcastle every day by boat.

Water was supplied from underground wells, some of which are still in existence.

In spite of its isolation, the island thrived. After the death of his wife in 1866, Mr. Scott sold the land which he had retained on the island, including the homestead, which was demolished. Some of the stones remain in buildings on the island.

An amusing sidelight of this sale was that people, unaware of the Government reserve of 100 feet around the island, paid for Government land as well.

People bought farming allotments and carried their produce to Newcastle by boat. To leave the island it was necessary to swim the horse across the river behind a boat. Later a punt was supplied, and then a bridge was built. This was swept away by a flood, and was replaced in 1917.

Now there is a controversy whether two new bridges will be built, and the main northern road diverted across Ash Island to Raymond Terrace, thus doing away with Hexham ferry. Already a line of pipes to supply Newcastle with water has been laid across the island from Tomago to Sandgate.

Ash Island has been the centre of other controversies. At one time it was proposed to build a tunnel under the island from Hexham across to Tomago so that coal could be carried underground to Hexham railway line. This scheme, although attempted, was not a success.

Most interesting of all was the island's connections with the river traffic that passed on its way to Morpeth, Raymond Terrace, and other historic centres.

Old wharves remain to remind one of the days when this flourished, and when it was the only source of communication. Boats were then visible from when they

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Boats were then visible from when they passed Mosquito Island until they turned the bend of the river above Hexham.

One of the oldest landmarks on the island are the pine trees, which stand out, stiff as sentinels, on Scott's Point. Some of the trees planted on the island are known to be over 100 years old.