The SS Our Elsie - A Tough Timber Trade Workhorse

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Figure 1: SS Our Elsie photographed in Sydney, New South Wales, prior to 1924.²

Close to the Timber

Shipwright, Alfred William Morrow Settree (1877-1957), located his shipyards in New South Wales as close as possible to accessible sources of timber.³ In 1909, he considered that Spotted Gum (*Eucalypt maculata*) growing below the Wollongong escarpment would be used in building the SS *Dumaresq* at his shipyard on the foreshore of Belmore Basin. While this location would provide Settree the opportunity to remain near to his young family, the stands of Spotted Gum at Mount Saint Thomas were not of sufficient height to supply the shipwright the required lengths for the ship's construction.⁴ Settree sourced most of the timber for the SS *Dumaresq* from south coast sawmills at Bawley Point, Pebbley Beach and Durras. This material was then taken to his Belmore Basin shipyard on board the SS *Our Elsie*.⁵

Bawley Point sawmill had a 'crude' established tramway to facilitate transport of Spotted Gum and Turpentine (*Syncarpia glomulifera*) from the Termeil State Forest and Kioloa State Forest. Alfred Settree, shipwright and son of A. W. M. Settree, confirmed that his father had used these species of timber from the Termeil Forest near Bawley Point and Pebbley Beach, in the construction of the SS *Dumaresq*. The *Illawarra Mercury* also reported that the: 'hull was made of hardwood, with kaurie [sic] top, sides and deck'. 8

Prior to building the SS *Dumaresq*, Settree had established a shipyard at Camden Haven where rich timber resources were first noted by John Oxley during his expedition in 1818. On 13th October, Oxley discovered the Camden Haven River including the expanse known as 'Queen's Lake'. He reported stands of coast banksia (*Banksia integrifolia*) growing on high ground near the river and commented upon the species' potential use for shipbuilding. Such comments provide further evidence of the interest in the natural resources of the Colony by British settlers. It was at Camden Haven that Settree built the SS *Our Elsie*. This wooden coastal steamer reportedly in the joint ownership of 'A. Settree & Sons and A. & E. Ellis' was named after Alfred E. Ellis' daughter, Elsie. The ship was intended for transporting timber between the Bellinger River, Nambucca Heads and Sydney.

After launching, the hull of the SS *Our Elsie*, with a load of sawn timber, was towed down the coast by the tug *Unique*, arriving at the wharf of A. & E. Ellis, Blackwattle Bay, on 4th April, 1908. It was subsequently towed to Mort's Dock and Engineering Company Limited, Balmain, to be fitted out 'under the supervision of Mr. A. Rogers, consulting engineer, on behalf of the owners'. The SS *Our Elsie* was fitted with two sets of compound surface condensing engines, and two h.p. boilers. The dimensions for the ship were: length on keel, 116 ft.; overall, 125 ft.; beam, 28 ft. 6 in; and draught, loaded, 6 ft. 6 in. The vessel had the capacity to carry approximately 220 tons deadweight, at nine knots with minimal consumption of coal.¹¹ There was a definite similarity between the bow and rudder design of the SS *Our Elsie* to that used in Settree's later construction, the SS *Douglas Mawson*.

The Ellis Brothers

Documentary evidence relating to the Ellis brothers' enterprises, partnerships and the periods in which they operated, is scarce. Private letters, newspaper reports and miscellaneous articles refer to the businesses under various names. However, annotations on consecutive editions of the *Parish of Nambucca, County of Raleigh* maps from the 1890s to c.1920, reveal names in which several special leases were issued for the purpose of sawmilling and shipping. Alfred Edwin Ellis and his brother, Hendrick Olbers Ellis, known as 'H.O. Ellis' or 'Harry', established Ellis Brothers' store at Bellinger Heads in the 1890s. ¹² The store, managed by Charles Bryce, was adjunct to Ellis' sawmilling operations relocated from Camden Haven. The Elliston sawmill was located approximately one mile south of Bellinger Heads, 'on a rise just above the river where there was a wharf and deep water frontage'. ¹³ Mill hands lived adjacent and contributed substantially to social activities in the area until the mill's closure in the 1920s. ¹⁴

Alfred E. Ellis and his wife Elizabeth Henderson, who had married at Sofala in 1872, lived in the residence attached to the store at Bellinger Heads with daughters, Florence, Elizabeth and Elsie, and sons, Sydney and Reginald. Their eldest daughter Mary Ann, married James Leonard, son of John Leonard, the first pilot at Camden Haven. ¹⁵ H.O. Ellis married Mary Ann Brockwell at Hill End in 1877 and settled at Nambucca Heads after leaving Camden Haven in 1895. A year later, they were joined by the youngest brother, Edward Ellis.

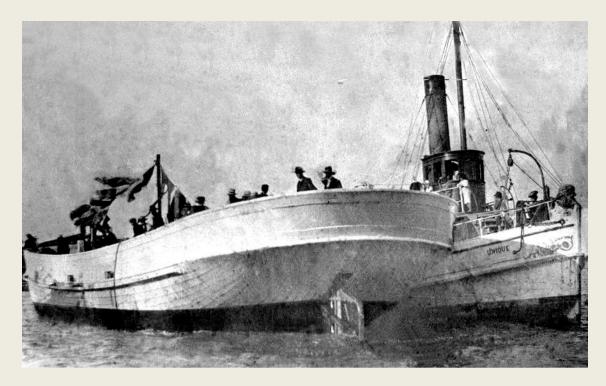


Figure 2: SS $Our\ Elsie$. Photograph taken immediately after launching at Camden Haven. The tender vessel is the Tug Unique. 16



Figure 3: Ellis Bros. sawmill Nambucca Heads, 1900, later the site of the RSL Club carpark.

Timber Industry Expansion ... Sawmills and Ships

Growth of the sawmilling industry in New South Wales at the turn of the century led to business alliances between the Ellis family and Allen Taylor at Bellwood on the Nambucca River. Thomas Davis' 'Bellwood Sawmills' opposite Parkins' Ice Works had been sold to H. O. and Edward Ellis. ¹⁷ Machinery from the Davis mill, including the boiler, was moved by bullock team to establish the Elliston Sawmill. ¹⁸ The Ellis brothers also operated an old, unnamed wooden punt as part of the sawmill's operation. Pacey states:

... when Ellis started his sawmill he came over from Camden Haven he brought the old punt over ... ¹⁹

Ellis brothers retained workers from Camden Haven when they relocated. Mill management was undertaken by George Shipman until 1905, when ill health required James C. Henderson, Alfred Ellis' brother in law, to take the helm.²⁰ The Bellinger Valley Historical Society in their publication *Pioneering in the Bellinger Valley* while referring to the sawmill stated:

'The mill prospered so well that Mr Ellis and his brother Edward (Ted) found it expedient to move to Sydney, where they founded the timber firm of A. & E. Ellis'. ²¹

Mary Ann Ellis Leonard obtained a Special Lease to construct a new sawmill on the former Thomas Davis' 'Bellwood Sawmills' site. Construction began in July 1910 and, by September was nearing completion with mill machinery leased from Allen Taylor & Co. This machinery was formerly used in the Dunbogan sawmill at Camden Haven, owned by Alfred E. Ellis (Mary Ann Ellis Leonard's father), prior to its acquisition by Allen Taylor & Co. The SS *Uralla*, the vessel that serviced Shallow Crossing Sawmill, near Bawley Point, transported this machinery to Nambucca Heads. ²²

Prior to 1910, the sawmills owned and operated by the Ellis brothers were simple partnerships. Hamon, in the 1994 publication *They Came to Murramarang*, states 'the two partners in A. & E. Ellis were brothers Alfred and Edwin'. Research into files of the NSW Registrar of Births Deaths and Marriages indicates that Mary Randall and Alfred Ellis did not have a son named 'Edwin'. It is considered that Hamon's reference to 'Edwin' is erroneous and the 'E' in the later established company, A. & E. Ellis Ltd., c.1914, was Alfred's brother Edward, born at Sofala in 1867.²³ The business name was originally 'A. E. Ellis' (Alfred Edwin Ellis). In September 1910, the directors of the 'Ellis Company' were noted as: Alfred Edwin Ellis, H. O. 'Harry' Ellis, Robert Beer, D. J. Russell (Managing Director). The firm had offices at Nambucca Heads, Bellinger Heads and head office at 114 Pitt Street Sydney.



Figure 4: The SS *Uralla* loading timber at Shallow Crossing Sawmill, NSW.

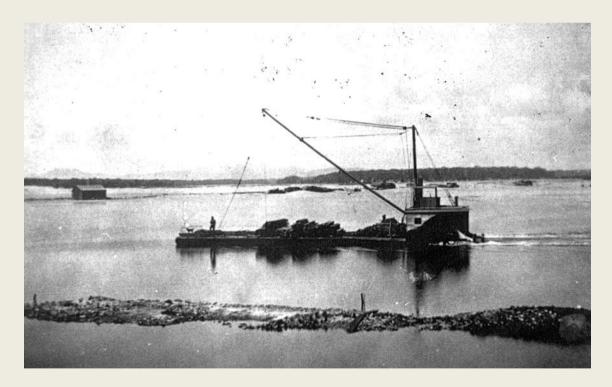


Figure 5: Ellis Bros., 'old punt at Nambucca Sawmill NSW'.

The 'Elliston Steam Sawmill' as it was referred to, was located in close proximity to the Bellinger River and allowed the efficient use of punts, tugs and ships to transport milled timber. At the commencement of their operation at the new sawmill Pacey stated that A. & E. Ellis operated two ships:

... Ellis built a sawmill just down below the R.S.L. club, they had a couple of ships one called the "Townsland" (?) and later on another called the "Premier" ... ²⁴

An article in the Sydney Mail 29th September, 1900 states:

... The Mill was managed by Mr. H. O. Ellis, and expert in the timber trade. He had already some years' experience in mill in the Camden Haven River before coming to Nambucca. The mill cuts out about 40,000 super feet weekly, chiefly blackbutt, tallowwood, mahogany and ironbark. The greatest trouble was getting their supply of logs, owing to the shallow crossing into Warrel Creek, the place they mainly depend on for supplies.

The mill owners were getting tired of Government promises to dredge the Bar and would have to so do something about it themselves. Besides sending one and half million feet per year of sawn timber for the home market, they supplied some 37,000 feet of girder timber to colonial trade

A. & E. Ellis Limited

As a result of a business transaction between Allen Taylor & Co., John Wright and C. McClure, concerning the SS *Bellinger*, Taylor acquired financial interests in the A. & E. Ellis company and the option to nominate a director on the Company's board. Taylor used this association to appoint himself to the board and to instigate further shipbuilding. In 1912, the A. & E. Ellis company commissioned shipwright Alfred William Morrow Settree, to undertake construction of 'a suitable wooden ship'. Settree had been in company with John Hibbard and Nicholas Cain in the operation of a Tug Boat service out of Port Macquarie from 1903. The SS *Douglas Mawson* (333 tons) was commissioned and Taylor, and, by way of his directorship in the A. & E. Ellis company, was a part owner of the vessel.

A. & E. Ellis had purchased the Bawley Point sawmill from Francis Guy in January 1911 with the company being registered as 'The Bawley Point Sawmill Company Ltd'. ²⁷ However, the company's financial position was not secure and arguably had been in decline for some time. It is considered that Allen Taylor financed the company and the construction of the SS *Douglas Mawson*.

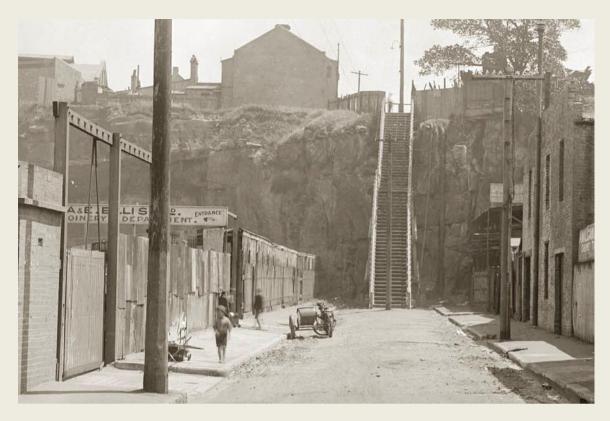


Figure 6: A rare photograph of A. & E. Ellis' timber yard and joinery works off Miller Street, Pyrmont in 1923.²⁸

The company of 'A. & E. Ellis Limited' formed c.1914, was to initially prosper with timber yards at Ryde and head office in Pitt Street, Sydney. An advertisement in 1920 notes the company was the proprietor of sawmills supplying hardwood at Bellinger, Nambucca Heads, Bawley Point, Flatrock and Brooman, along with various shipping interests.²⁹

One of the ships owned by A. & E. Ellis Limited was the SS *Our Elsie*. The ownership of this vessel establishes a commercial link between the Ellis company and A. W. Settree. It was the SS *Our Elsie* that was used to tow the completed hull of the TSS *Douglas Mawson* to Sydney for fitting out after her launching from Bawley Point. ³⁰ Several months later, the SS *Our Elsie* was again required to tow the TSS *Douglas Mawson*, on this occasion off a sandbar at Hat Head, NSW.



Figure 7: The SS *Our Elsie* at the wharf of the Elliston sawmill. Note the log punt between the ship and the wharf.



Figure 8: A. & E. Ellis & Company was in Sydney and managed by Dulcie Ellis Hammond.

The head office of A. & E. Ellis & Company was in Sydney and managed by Dulcie Ellis Hammond. She was an astute business woman and had acquired a unique insight into the estimating available sawn timber in logs. During the years of economic depression and hardship she lobbied the New South Wales Government and the Forestry Commission to obtain larger quotas of timber to enable her staff to continue working.

A. & E. Ellis Sawmillers at Nambucca Heads finally ceased operations in 1954 and the sawmill was demolished. Financial insecurity and the high cost of transport had made their demands on the timber industry. Pacey, who had worked with the company for many years, commented:

I worked on a lot of log punts the best days of my life was with Billy Smith we were together a good few years till Ellis went into liquidation.³¹

The land on which the sawmill was located reverted back to NSW Land Board and became a Reserve for Public Recreation. It was reclaimed and used for a small park, boat ramp and jetty for tourist charter boats. The foreshore land so eagerly sought by the early sawmillers for the establishment of wharves for their transport ships became a car park and all remains of the sawmill were destroyed. A small plaque marks the site of the Ellis sawmilling operations.

Chapman and Co., Ltd.

Despite considerable effort in searching archival and other sources, no formal business records for either A. & E. Ellis or Chapman and Co Ltd., have been located. There is minimal archaeological evidence or historical documentation for either company.



Figure 9: Advertisement for Chapman and Co., Ltd. Sydney.³²

Chapman and Company Ltd., Sydney were an engineering firm that also supplied foundry products and chandlery to shipbuilders.³³ On the evening of 13th December 1890, a fire occurred at the Pacific Foundry, Druitt Street, in close proximity to the Union Co.'s wharf. A report states that the two-storey building was occupied by 'Messrs. Chapman and Co., iron founders... containing machinery, forges &c., and the second story a large number of patterns, some of which had been made over 20 years ago'. Many were invaluable ...All are destroyed'.³⁴

Subsequent reports confirm the 'Pacific Foundry' and Chapman and Co. Ltd. remained at the Druitt Street location.³⁵ The address has been verified as used on engineering drawings.³⁶ As the foundry was a subsidiary of Chapman and Co., Ltd., it would have undertaken casting of small non-ferrous metal objects essential to the fitting out of vessels. However, the company did work in association with Mort's Dock and Engineering Company Limited. Thomas Sutcliffe Mort arrived Sydney 1838 and 'Mort's Dock' opened in 1855.³⁷

It is considered that Mort's undertook the casting of heavier, larger non-ferrous and ferrous objects including pump casings and engine cylinder blocks. Chapman and Co., Ltd. installed the secondary machinery and built the superstructure for the TSS *Douglas Mawson*. Mort's Dock and Engineering Company Limited, Balmain, also supplied and possibly fitted the boiler and two double expansion engines, the castings for the propeller shaft, the bilge pumps and twin propellers.³⁸

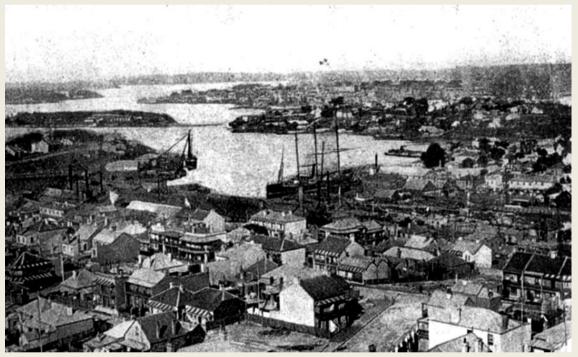


Figure 10: Mort's Dock and Engineering Company Limited Waterview Bay, Balmain.³⁹ The company went into liquidation after 70 years of operation.

Chapman and Co. Ltd. records relating to the fitting of the engines and boilers to the TSS *Douglas Mawson* may have recorded identifiers such as serial numbers cast into the machinery. Such information would be of considerable importance in identifying the wreckage of that ship when it is located. Chapman and Co. Ltd., associated with the SS *Dumaresq*, SS *Our Elsie* and the TSS *Douglas Mawson*, had both family and business interests with William Henry Chapman c.1820, from Newport Pagnall, Buckinghamshire.⁴⁰ In the unpublished genealogy of the descendants of William Henry Chapman it states:

Boatyards, ship repair and ship building yards abounded around the foreshores of Balmain ... Mort's opened its second graving dock at Woolwich. ... the Adelaide Steamship yard, Ward's floating dock, Chapman's slipway and others flourished. On what was referred to as

the "Sydney side", the shipping companies had their wharves for loading and unloading cargo and for repair and maintenance to their ships and men travelled from Balmain to seek work along Sussex Street, later to become known as "the Hungry Mile", where they would wait for jobs on the shipping wharves.⁴¹

An 1839 plan titled: "Chapman's Wharf, Sydney" shows features including the wharf, and several structures on the western side, include a Shed, Counting House, 3 Stall Stable and a 3-Tiered Stone Storehouse.⁴²



Figure 11: SL NSW 1839 - Plan Mercantile Premises - Chapmans Wharf, Sydney'.

SS Our Elsie ... 'How the Douglas Mawson was Salved.'

A report in the *Nambucca and Bellinger News*, Friday, 15th January 1915, with the heading '*How the Douglas Mawson was Salved*.' possibly reveals an eventual contributory cause to the loss of that ship during a cyclone in the Gulf of Carpentaria in March 1923. On 29th December 1914, the SS *Douglas Mawson* owned by A. & E. Ellis & Co., Ltd., Sydney, was reported driven ashore at Korogoro Point near Hat Head, Nambucca, with Captain Donovan and a crew of nine on board. Attempts made using a tug to drag the SS *Douglas Mawson* off the sand and into open water, however, all efforts to refloat the vessel failed. Ten days after hauling salvage equipment to the site attempts were again made to refloat the vessel. A rig consisting of three anchors connected with rope, blocks and tackle, pulled by a team of bullocks and a horse team were able to refloat the vessel. The SS *Our Elsie*, sister ship of the SS *Douglas Mawson*, acted as tug from seaward in association with the land rig. ⁴³

The chief surveyor of the Sydney Maritime Underwriting and Salvage Association Captain Cuthbert commented 'The vessel is a credit to her builder, Mr. W. Settree. She stood the strain remarkably well.' The SS Douglas Mawson was towed by SS Our Elsie to the MacLeay River. There it was reported the vessel 'shows signs of straining', contrary to Captain Cuthbert's comments. Later, it is known from documented reports, that the SS Douglas Mawson leaked continually. It is argued that damage to the structure of the ship due to the strain of towing during the Hat Head incident was compounded as the timber used in the construction of the hull dried out.

From the outset, the SS *Douglas Mawson* and SS *Our Elsie* were inextricably linked. The SS *Our Elsie* continued her dedicated service to the timber industry remaining in the ownership of A. & E. Ellis Limited, Sydney. The Register was closed in 1928. On 14th November 1932, the dismantled remains of the SS *Our Elsie* were scuttled and sunk off Sydney Harbour to assist in the establishment of an artificial reef.

OUR ELSIE W t ss 213 g, 112 n, ON125163, 119.3 x 28.5 x 7.6, B.1908 A. W. Settree, Laurieton NSW 2 x comp. eng. 28nhp Mort's Dock. Last owners A.& E. Ellis Ltd, reg. Sydney. Register closed 1928 'dismantled' remains reported scuttled off Sydney Heads Nov. 14, 1932.

The SS *Our Elsie*, this 'tough, timber trade, workhorse' settled into history.

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¹ Michael M. Tracey holds PhDs in Archaeology and Palaeoanthropology. His research is centred on persons and landscapes. His family were associated with various coastal shipping activities and his first occupation was as a Fitter Mechanic with Evans Deakin Shipyard in Townsville, North Queensland. He began diving at the age of 6 years and professionally qualified in 1992.

² SS *Our Elsie* - launch date 1908. Gosford City Library, The Alfred and Roy Dufty Maritime Heritage Collection, file 011\011427. Metropole Hotel, Customs House, Goldsbrough Mort in background at Circular Quay, (photograph taken prior to 1924).

³ Tracey, M. M., 1995. 'When the Timber Cut Out - Archaeological Aspects of Timber Extraction Procedures and Shipbuilding in the Murramarang District, New South Wales', Honours Dissertation, Department of Archaeology, Australian National University.

- ⁴ Alfred Settree 1997. pers. comm; Item 2.7968, mfm. 1181;
- ⁵ Tracey, M, M., 2009., 'Archaeology of an Australian Steam Tug ~ The SS Dumaresq', *Bulletin of the Australasian Institute for Maritime Archaeology*, 33; 32-47.
- ⁶ Tracey, M. M. 1997. 'Archaeological evidence for a horse-drawn tramway at Bawley Point NSW', Australia's Ever Changing Forests III, Proceedings of the third national conference on Australian forest history, John Dargavel (ed.), Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies, Australian National University, Canberra, pp. 188 - 209.
- ⁷ Alfred Settree 1997. pers. comm.
- ⁸ Tracey, M, M., 2009., 'Archaeology of an Australian Steam Tug ~ The SS *Dumaresq*', *Bulletin of the Australasian Institute for Maritime Archaeology*, 33: 32 47.
- ⁹ Oxley, J., 1820. *Journals of Two Expeditions into the Interior of New South Wales: undertaken by order of the British Government in the Years 1817-18*, John Murray, London, p. 146.
- ¹⁰ NSW Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages. Entry 23253/1886, Elsie M. Ellis, daughter of Alfred E., and Elizabeth Ellis.
- ¹¹ Sydney Morning Herald, 8th April 1908, p. 10.
- ¹² Hendrick Olbers 'H.O. Harry' Ellis, was born at Sofala, 14th August 1853.
- ¹³ Sydney Mail, 29th September 1900, p. 19.
- ¹⁴ The Manning River Times and Advocate for the Northern Coast Districts of New South Wales, 3rd May, 1902, p. 8.
- ¹⁵ Sydney Morning Herald, 4th September 1878, p. 5.
- ¹⁶ Photograph Courtesy Alfred Settree, Huskisson, NSW.
- ¹⁷ Sydney Morning Herald, 17th March, 1888, p. 16.
- ¹⁸ Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser, 29th September 1900, p. 751.
- ¹⁹ Letter from Leonard George Pacey to Nina Tipping c. 1977, Nambucca District Historical Society.
- ²⁰ Bathurst and Daily Argus, 10th January, 1905.
- ²¹ Bellinger Valley Historical Society, *Pioneering in the Bellinger Valley*, BVHS Nambucca District, NSW, p. 45.
- ²² John Humphrey Smith, *pers. comm.*, 1997, Macksville, NSW; Leonard George Pacey, 1981. Letter 11th June 1981, Nambucca Heads Historical Society.
- ²³ NSW Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages, 16238/1867.
- ²⁴ Laurelle Pacey, 1981. pers. comm.
- ²⁵ Tracey, M. M. 1997. 'Archaeological evidence for a horse-drawn tramway at Bawley Point NSW', Australia's Ever Changing Forests III, Proceedings of the third national conference on Australian forest history, John Dargavel (ed.), Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia, pp. 9-18; Ellwood, C., 1998. 'A shipping history of Allen Taylor.', Australian Sea Heritage, Number 54, p. 10-11.
- ²⁶ State Records Authority of New South Wales, 1903. Item 11150; Number 2/8535, p. 175;
- ²⁷ Sydney Morning Herald, 28th January 1911, p. 15.
- ²⁸ Justice & Police Museum; 015, Record No. 31175.
- ²⁹ Construction and Local Government Journal, 2nd February 1920, p. 2; Parsons, R., 2003. Shipowners trading to the northern rivers of New South Wales, Ronald Parsons, Lobethal, South Australia, p 73.
- ³⁰ Tracey, M. M., 1999. 'The Intrigue of the SS *Douglas Mawson*', in *Australian Sea Heritage*, Number 57, Summer, p. 16.
- ³¹ Leonard George Pacey, 1981. *Letter 11th June 1981*, Nambucca Heads Historical Society re (A. & E. Ellis).
- ³² "North Coast Guide" issued by the North Coast Steam Navigation Company Limited in 1909.
- ³³ The North Coast Steam Navigation Company, 1909. The *North Coast Guide*, np.
- ³⁴ Sydney Morning Herald, 15th December 1890, p. 6
- ³⁵ Sydney Morning Herald 29th October 1900; North Coast Guide, 1909.
- ³⁶ State Library of New South Wales, *Old Miscellaneous Drawings* (104 sheets), 76X -82X and 84X, UNCAT MSS Set 4343.
- ³⁷ Evans, V., 1989. 'Ship building and repair.' in *Sydney; from settlement to city; and engineering, history of Sydney,* Don Frazer (ed.) Engineer Australia Pty Ltd, Sydney, pp. 128, 130.
- ³⁸ Wise's New South Wales Post Office Directory, 1916, p. 1071.

³⁹ Photograph 'Balmain's own coal mine' courtesy NSW Department of Mineral Resources.

⁴⁰ Information from the unpublished genealogy of the descendants of William Henry Chapman, circa 1820, from Newport Pagnall, Buckinghamshire.

⁴¹ Information from the unpublished genealogy of the descendants of William Henry Chapman, circa 1820, from Newport Pagnall, Buckinghamshire.

⁴² State Library of New South Wales, 1839. *Chapman's Wharf*, 25b [cartographic material] Z/M4 811.1718/1839/1 / surveyed by P. L. Bemi, Sydney, NSW.

⁴³ *The Nambucca and Bellinger News*, 6th January 1915, p. 6; *The Nambucca and Bellinger News*, 8th January 1915, p. 7.