

Sand and Gravel Dredging Operations near the Seventeen-Mile Rocks

For many years, an old wharf at the riverside off Windermere Estate was the only remnant of the Sand and Gravel industry that was based in the area for at least 30 years. The wharf disappeared after the January 2011 floods.

1950s (pre-suburban development). From the early 1950s, **Stirling Sand and Gravel Company**, associated with Readymix, had a wharf and plant off Sinnamon Road (Windermere Estate section) a short distance upriver from Counihan Road. Barges travelled upriver to carry out dredging operations, avoiding the difficult passage through the Seventeen-mile Rocks in the river. This Company's operations and the nearby QCL wharf for bringing in coral were the only industrial concerns in the predominantly farming district of the 1950s and early 1960s.

1960s and later

Later, more sand and gravel producers moved to the area, pressured by Brisbane City Council to move sand and gravel operations away from the central city. The process was assisted by the fact that farmers in Seventeen Mile Rocks were selling farmland in response to the strong drive for development by Hookers/Centenary Estates Limited.

In 1962, William Collin & Sons acquired approximately 11 acres of farmland between



Sinnamon Road (Windermere Estate section) and the river, on the upriver side of and adjacent to the Stirling/Readymix site. After Wm Collin and Sons company used the site for stockpiling of sand and gravel in the early years, the plant was built and sand and gravel processing commenced about mid-1967. More details of the Wm Collin & Sons (Jindalee) Pty Ltd operations can be found in the book by Noel Field cited below (pp. 167-9).

The sand and gravel operations on this part of the riverbank can be seen in the background of the October 1970 photograph (taken approximately from the intersection of Seventeen Mile Rocks Road and Windermere Road when the first plaque honouring Thomas Macleod was installed).

In 1963 the Moreton Tug and Lighter Company purchased the former Magee-Counihan farm on the upriver side of Counihan Road. This was later taken over by **Boral Kleinschmidt Brothers** established a plant on the downriver side of Counihan Road.

In about 1980 there were four sand and gravel plants operating side by side on the river, one on the downriver side of Counihan Road, the others off Sinnamon Road stretching upriver from Magee Park/Counihan Road.

The Seventeen-mile Rocks Navigational Challenge. In the early years, the sand and gravel dredging companies preferred to be positioned upriver of the Seventeen-mile Rocks to avoid the hazard to shipping. However, deepening of the channel between the Seventeen-mile rocks in 1962, followed by the widening of the channel and creation of another wide channel in 1965, facilitated the expansion of the sand and gravel operations. This also advantaged companies already upriver of the rocks such as the Collin enterprise whose ships were then able to work with full loads.

Increased dredging was carried out upriver following the blasting of the channel at Seventeen Mile Rocks and the Government placing more controls on dredging downstream of the city (many downstream dredging operations closed). The Government encouraged dredging of the shallow spots to improve navigation. Conditions for the coal industry bringing its stock downriver by ship were improved and the Government saved the additional cost of improving the river for coal transport.

Expansion and Contraction of Sand and Gravel Dredging. Commercial dredging of the river expanded markedly in the 1950s and 1960s and reached its peak in the mid 1970s.

However, by the mid 1970s, there was increased public concern about the impact of river dredging. Concerns included noise, turbidity of the water, impact on aquatic life and bank slippage (it was suspected that commercial dredging contributed to the bank erosion in many places during the 1974 flood). Gravel was still a much needed resource particularly in the construction industry. However the rate of commercial dredging of the river diminished the supply considerably. The Government established regulations, some aimed particularly at curbing impact on the banks and at limiting the rate of extraction of gravel.

Sites of upriver dredging included Hell's Gate Crossing, Redbank Crossing, the area near the mouth of Pullen Pullen Creek, the Moggill ferry crossing and the junction of the Brisbane and Bremer Rivers. The area around Cockatoo Island, which had always been notoriously shallow as a result of gravel near the surface, was denuded of gravel by the early 1990s.

The diminished supply of gravel was a significant factor in the winding down of dredging in the upper Brisbane River. Structural engineering projects upriver such as the building of Somerset and Wivenhoe Dams prevented sand and gravel from being washed down from the headwaters so there was little likelihood of natural replacement. With constraints on the rate of gravel extraction and the recognition of the greatly diminished supply, the industry needed to seek other sources of supply. Attention was turned to other rivers and also to land-based sources of sand and gravel. The local sand and gravel dredging enterprises closed.

For further information about the sand and gravel industry and about the impact of dredging on the river, see –

Field, Noel D. (2011) *Adventure and Enterprises: Captain William Collin Building From the Brisbane River – 1862-1972*. Published by the author, Woody Point, Qld.

Gregory, Helen (1996) *The Brisbane River Story: Meanders through Time*. Australian Marine Conservation Society.