

THE BUNTINGS

At HULL RIVER, PIONEERS of MISSION BEACH



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Published by Mission Beach Historical Society Inc.

Document H034.

Website: mbhs.com.au



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Cover Image

Timber getters on the Atherton Tableland, 1890 – 1900, from the John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland.

Acknowledgements

We thank two of the family's descendants who made this history possible: Doug Bunting and Coral Robartson.

Doug and Mavis Bunting visited Mission Beach and helped us correct many errors in our histories, especially for the related pioneering families, the Cuttens, Alexanders and Wildsoets. Many images were donated by Doug and Mavis as well of the Buntings and related families. Doug engaged his cousin, Coral Robartson, in the research venture, and Coral sent me many records via Doug, with images and corrections to enrich our understanding of the district's past.

Some images have been enhanced using *Luminar Neo*, *ChatGPT* or *Google Gemini*, and these AI tools improve damaged old photos immensely when carefully instructed and scrutinised to avoid distortion of content. Occasionally, we colourise black and white images and the colours are a raffle on AI of course. We use equally valuable tools like *Ginger Writer* and *Claude AI* to ensure that our spelling and grammar are satisfactory, yet our wonderful editors still detect a few errors. AI is not used to generate our content.

THE BUNTINGS at HULL RIVER: PIONEERS of MISSION BEACH

The story of the Buntings begins not with triumph, but with heartbreak. This family was forged by loss and resilience.

When Margaret Eakin stepped onto Australian soil in 1877 aboard the *Scottish Bard*, she had already buried two lives: her first husband, lost overboard during the voyage from County Leitrim, Ireland, and her baby, who died the very day they landed.¹ She was just twenty years old.



Hundon, Sussex, England



County Leitrim, Ireland.

Four years after her arrival in Australia, Margaret married John Bunting in Townsville. John had arrived from the small Sussex village of Hundon in 1875, and like Margaret, he was rebuilding a life in a new land. Together, they would become the foundation of one of Mission Beach's most significant pioneering families.

The number of siblings that John had is uncertain. Family trees available online differ. A family tree is shown at the foot of this story. John's sister, Nellie, and a brother, Samuel, also immigrated to Queensland. Samuel worked on the railway lines and was killed while felling a tree for firewood and is buried in the Comet cemetery in Queensland. Ellen (Nellie) came with her husband, John Anderson, and they also lived in Townsville.

The ancestors of the Bunting family can be traced back to John Bunting, who was born in Essex in 1752. John married Jane Cowel and lived in Suffolk, England. If we follow the ancestry of Jack Bunting's wife, Margaret Alexander, of Bingil Bay, we can reach back to relatives who arrived on the First Fleet in 1788. That story is told in Peter Alexander's book *We've All Come From Somewhere* on mbhs.com.au.

HULL RIVER BUSH CAMPS

Around 1902, the Buntings arrived at Hull River with cattle,² intending to establish themselves as graziers. But drought has a way of redirecting plans. Instead, they turned to the towering forests, rich with silky oak and maple, and became timber getters, joining a tradition that had begun briefly in 1876 further north in the district when the Freshney brothers and Heinrich Scheu had scoured the area for cedar.

John brought his daughter Maud and son Jack with him initially, establishing a camp on the north bank of the Hull near the river mouth. They created what would become known variously as *Oak Landing*, then *Buntings Landing*, and eventually *Silky Oak Landing*, a wharf near where Carmoo Creek joins the South Hull, where remnants of a jetty could still be seen decades later.

¹ Coral Robertson, oral history.

² Dorothy Jones, *Cardwell Shire Story*, Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1961, Chapter 28.

There is no record we can find yet of a cadastral map with land lots that the Buntings owned in the area, but Jack and Margaret lived here for over 30 years. Maybe they stayed with Maud and Chris Wildsoet for some time when they were not living in tents in the bush. Chris and Maud had a home at East Feluga on a 250 acre property east of Carmoo.

There are references to *Silky Oak Camp* near to Sugar Cane Creek, a tributary of the South Hull, where they had a clearing and planted sugar cane to augment the feed for their horses. This indicates that the Buntings set up temporary camps and moved around. This camp was on Maud and Christian Wildsoet's land. Ted Banfield wrote in his usual effusive way about that site and about Christian Wildsoet and the Buntings in 1915, showing how well regarded these families were and painting a picture of life on the camp:³

Stripped to his waist he smiles genially, as does his father-in-law, a taller man and strong and tough, a yeoman of whom the State may be proud and might well pray for thousands like him. True as the temper of their own axes, men whose word is above reproach, keen in business, frank in expression, knowing the secrets of the bush, they rejoice in their strength ...

The site of the camp is an old clearing made by "Chris" years ago while he fulfilled his residential conditions under which the selections were taken up. A few mango trees and oranges and lemons have escaped a bush fire which swept through the district some years ago, but for the most part the citrus trees are invisible, having been overtopped by the "undergrowth."

A pleasant creek with deep water holes – the bathing pool is five feet deep during this record dry season – runs down from the neighbouring jungle-covered range. The buildings are temporary, as befits those designed for the comfort of an ever-shifting camp. Cows, fowls, ducks and dogs seem to indicate the essentials of a permanent home, and surely the welcome afforded by Mrs Bunting to all who visit the spot – and it is remarkable how many wayfarers appear from apparently nowhere on the road to somewhere equally indefinite – would of itself, not to say the cakes and tea, hearten up the most dejected and dustiest traveller.

For it must be told that a main road – quite new – runs past and partly through the block, a road designed to carry the produce of the Banyan Creek group of settlers to the Hull for transport ...

The land, which is about four miles from the landing at Carmoo Creek, the biggest of the tributaries of the Hull, belongs to Mr C. M. Wildsoet, Mr Bunting's son-in-law and a native of the district. Generally, the road is a narrow greyish ribbon, high puckered, with a deep gutter on the scarcely to be distinguished lower side. Striding behind the timber wagons returning to the camp from the daily trip to the landing, each drawn by fourteen horses the wayfarer is enveloped in white dust almost as impalpable as flour. Does not the four-mile walk under such conditions evoke anticipations of the hostess's warm greetings and the cool refreshment of the camp.

The team draws up in the accustomed places. A slip of a black girl, with a head of hair which Kipling would describe as "fuzzy-wuzzy", is on the spot with the first consignment of feed bags for the hungry horses, and soon all are contentedly munching. The local grass is not abundant or nutritious, but with a ration of corn and a portion of sorghum put through the chaff-cutter, the horses do very well.

Mr Bunting is discovered "snigging" logs out of the jungle. His voice, exhorting the patient, guileless, inoffensive bullocks, has been heard in the distance, but you may listen in vain for the crack of the whip. It may be held threateningly, but is seldom used, for the team knows the master's voice, and is obedient to it though he may be out of sight and far out of the range of the whip...

"Chris" and his mate, Mt Peter Peterson, fell the trees, crosscut them, and cut tracks to each. "The Boss" with occasional help from his son Jack, "sniggs" the logs to a central point, whither the tracks concentrate, and Jack and his help, "Tom",

³ E J Banfield (the Beachcomber), *Rural Homilies. Silky Oak Camp, Northern Miner*, 21 April 1915. Accessed on Trove August 2024. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/79082669?searchTerm=Silky%20Oak%20Camp>

a lusty black boy with the ideas of a white-man – parbuckle them on the wagons and so to the landing, making a trip each day. Thence Messrs. Rooney's scow, the Clyde, transports them to the mill on Ross River.

The work was gruelling. Jack Bunting proved as industrious as his father. By 1908, he was making news with his timber operation, reporting to the press that he had nearly 100,000 feet of oak and maple ready for transport to Rooney and Co.'s Ross River mill in Townsville.⁴ He shared the story of one exceptional axeman who single-handedly felled, logged, and barked a massive maple yielding 8,000 super feet in a single day, earning the princely sum of £5. That tree was used to build the Porter's first home on 'Clare Road'.



Left: Proud retired timberman, Chris Wildsoet. Image from Dawn Todd nee Wildsoet – granddaughter of Chris. Right: Bullock team on the Tully-Mission Beach track in the 1930s from Helen Pedley (*A brief history of Mission Beach*). Possibly driven by Jack Bunting – see the large log on the wagon.

In 1907, Cardwell timber getter, William Watkins, found a pearl and sold it. He acquired a traction engine with the proceeds and somehow managed to bring it to the North Hull River to haul logs. Jack Bunting had built the timber-railed railway line from Wongaling to the Hull River by then, and they used the traction engine to haul logs on the line. That machine is now lying in a bog in the forest behind Holland Street in Wongaling.



The Hull River, south branch looking towards Carmoo. Image by Susan Kelly of *Natural Images*.

Maud Bunting married Christian Wildsoet in 1910. Chris was working on the timber with her family and had selected land a little further up the river valley.

⁴ *Our Timber Resources*, *Morning Post*, Cairns, 23 July 1908, accessed on Trove, August 2024 at: <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/39409278?searchTerm=Bunting%20Hull%20River>

DOUG BUNTING MEMOIR

Doug Bunting, son of Florence Bunting, was adopted by his grandparents, Margaret and Jack Bunting due to complicated family circumstances. The following is a slightly abridged version of Doug's memoir:

... my grandparents, Ma and Pop, decided to formally adopt me. This is something that I have been forever grateful for. During that time, I spent a lot of time with Ma at Bingil Bay with Granny Alexander and uncles Ken, Les and Charlie and always had a feel for the Cutten-Alexander history.

Pop had always been a hard worker. He often told me of his times timber cutting with Chris Wildsoet around the Tully district. Apparently, during the 1930s they had a large amount of really good timber stockpiled when the Depression hit and they could not sell it. I believe it was accidentally or deliberately burned.

Pop had no formal training but certainly knew a lot about working with timber. He had an accident sometime in the 1930s which left him with a severe limp and he was always in pain. However, this did not slow him down. After the family moved to Charters Towers, Pop worked for Civil Construction Corp building the Breddan Aerodrome and other was related jobs.

Another little known fact is that when the Japs took Malaya, the supply of rubber dried up, a plan was hatched to plant the wild rubber vine that grew in pest proportions in the Towers and harvest it and take it down to Maryborough for processing. This has been disputed but Pop showed me the plough drills where quite a bit was planted. However, by this time, the Japs had been pushed out of Malaya so the need was no longer there.

When the war was over, Pop began working for QLD Rail as a bridge carpenter. It was all heavy work with no power tools. The tools of trade were cross cut saws, brace and bits, hand augers, axes and adzes. All concrete mixing was by hand and the approaches to bridges were all stone pitched. He was picked up on Monday morning and away all week. The onsite camps were just tents with basic cooking facilities, but he revelled in it and was always held in high regard by his work mates.

Pop was really good to me. He became the father that I never had. I had long admired the skills he had with the adze and was keen to learn. Around that time, my mate Eric Smith and I were keen on bows and arrows (as kids that age are) and we learned that the ideal wood to make bows was brigalow. We obtained two saplings of suitable length and set about trying to shape the bow. Pop saw what I was trying to do and said he would shape the wood to the basic shape of the bow. Pretty soon it was close to being finished. To complete the work, he showed me how to make a "Poor Man's Spoke Shave". This consisted of broken bottles held in an old glove and used to run with the grain to obtain a good finish. When the glass lost its edge, you just got another piece and there was plenty of glass around.

When QLD Rail retired him he worked for Main Roads as a Ganger. I am forever grateful for the effort Ma and Pop put in as it allowed me to go on to year 10 and to then gain an apprenticeship as an electrician.

When Pop retired, he and his old mate George Hackett would go out bush near Fletcher Creek to cut gidgee house stumps. I often went with them and old George banged the trees with the back of an axe to see if they had a pipe in them and Pop and I would cut and top it to about ten foot in length with a crosscut saw.

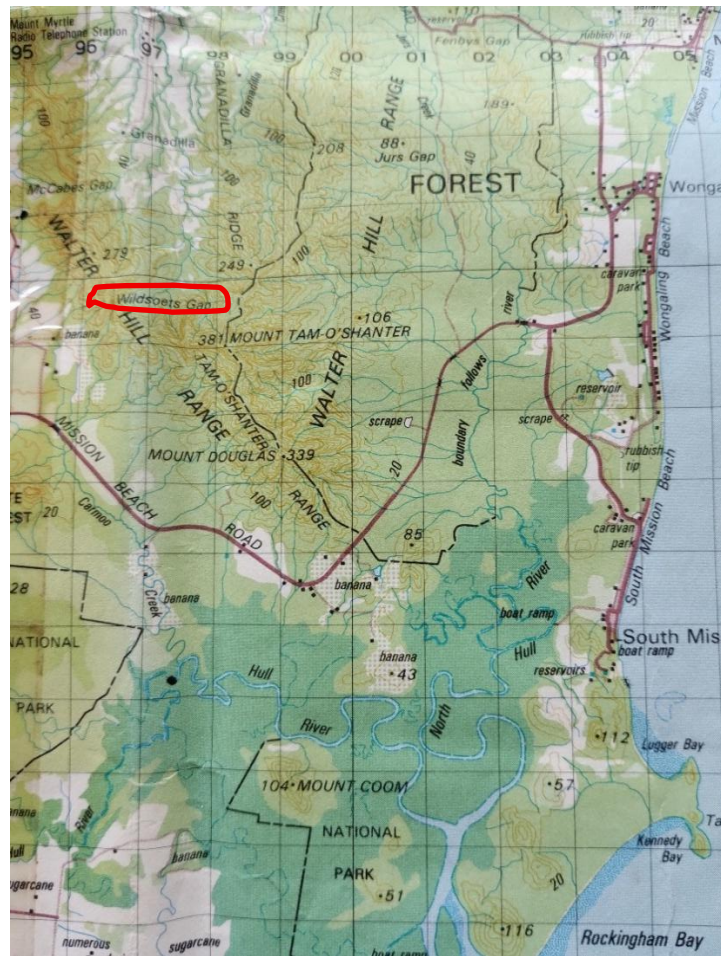
They were always looking for work and started putting in cattle grids on stations and were away for weeks at a time. In their spare time when the annual show came to town they each got a job on the gates collecting entrance money. Sadly, old George passed away shovelling a load of sand into his truck and wasn't found for a few days. This really knocked Pop around and his health quickly deteriorated and he passed away at 79 years of age.

John Bunting had a gold pocket watch which was passed on to Jack then to Sidney Charles Bunting then to my son Geordie Robert Bunting who was the last in the Bunting blood line of the next generation by name. I engraved the back with those four names before I gave it to Geordie.

BUILDING COMMUNITY

The Buntings and Wildsoets gave the district more than timber. Before the proper gravelled road from Tully to Mission Beach was built in 1940, it was their logging tracks that connected the scattered settlements. They built wagon roads to access logs and landings, but these became lifelines for the entire community, allowing families to get supplies from Banyan (Tully) and farmers to transport produce to the river landings.

When the council finally built proper roads with state funding, they largely followed the Bunting tracks, with Chris Wildsoet recruited to navigate the ideal routes. Council even named Wildsoets Gap in the Walter Range in recognition of the family's contribution.



1989 Royal Australian Surveys Corps., one km grid map of the district showing Wildsoets Gap (above Mount Douglas in the Walter Hill Range)

THE NEXT GENERATION

In 1917, John and Margaret, now nearing their sixties, returned to their Townsville home in Aitkenvale. John went on to become president of the Aitkenvale Progress Association in 1921 and won several awards for his Jersey bulls at the Townsville Show. Today, Bunting Court in Aitkenvale honours his memory.

That year, Chris and Maud Wildsoet also moved to Townsville for their children's education, and Chris worked at Rooneys sawmill. They returned to Tully district a few years later where Chris was a timber inspector for the Tully Sugar Mill then he worked with the Department of Main Roads and the Cardwell Shire Council as a roads foreman before retiring at seventy-six in 1959. They stayed in Tully until shortly before Chris's death at Charters Towers in 1966.



John Bunting in Ute at Aitkenvale Home

Grandpa, John Bunting, Aitkenvale, 1920s after returning from the Hull River.

Jack remained at Hull River, marrying Margaret Edith Alexander of Bingil Bay in 1919. Margaret came from another iconic pioneering family; her mother Florence was the grand old lady of Bingil Bay, part of the first European family to settle there in 1885. Margaret had previously been courting Bert Bryant, a Clump Point farmer, but Bert enlisted in WWI and was killed in France in 1917. Florence Alexander lived in Bingil Bay until she was almost 90 years old and was widely known and respected.

Jack and Margaret raised seven children in the Hull River area: Leslie, Florence, Dorothy, Albert, Elizabeth, Sidney, and Muriel. They remained until WWII, when Japanese threats forced them to relocate to Charters Towers, probably around 1939, though they appeared on the Hull River electoral roll as late as 1943.



Albert Bryant

Left: Bert Bryant image by Margaret Alexander, courtesy of Helen Pedley. Right: Back: L R Bert Bryant, T Duraz?, Sam Williams? Centre row: Margaret Edith Bunting nee Alexander (as Alexander), Lizzie Wildsoet nee Garner, Nellie Garner/Williams. Girl with cat unknown, probably Florence Wildsoet.

THE CHILDREN'S STORIES

The Bunting children carried their parents' resilience into varied lives:

Nellie (1882-1956) married Alexander Brown, had three children, and lost her second son James at just one year old.

Edith (1884-1886) died as a child.

John (1887-1890) died as a child.

Maud (1890-1972) married Chris Wildsoet in 1910. Together they became pillars of the Tully-Mission Beach community. In 1916, when Chris organized a board of enquiry meeting for the sugar industry at Jack's home, Maud and Margaret Bunting catered for 42 people, a remarkable feat in such a remote location. Chris worked as a timber inspector for Tully Sugar Mill and later with Main Roads and Cardwell Shire Council, retiring at seventy-six in 1959.

Jack (1892-1972) – see Doug Bunting's memoir earlier.

May (1894-1965) married George Brown in 1915 and had four children.

Albert Edward (1897-1921) lived only to twenty-four. In May 1921, while working as a clerk in Townsville, he travelled alone to Brisbane and took his own life. No explanation was given for his tragic end.

JACK AND MARGARET'S FAMILY



Left: Marriage of Jack and Margaret Bunting, 1919. Les Alexander, Groom Jack Bunting, Bride Margaret Alexander (Bunting), Albert Bunting and flower girl, Isabel Cutten, James and May Cutten's daughter. Images from Doug and Mavis Bunting. Right: Margaret Bunting late in life.

Jack and Margaret's children grew up between the Hull River bush and the uncertainties of wartime:

Leslie Jack (1919-1998) married May Hitchcock late in life, in 1972. Les was the last of the Bunting's to leave the Tully-Mission Beach district. Les worked for the Tully Sugar Mill and lived at the barracks there for several years before buying a home in Mission Beach where he worked partly on a banana farm and partly for the mill. He enlisted in the Army in May 1940 and served in North Africa and in the Pacific islands until the end of the war. He was a Private in the 2/6 Field Regiment. After the war, he served as President and Secretary of the Tully RSL for many years.

Florence (1920-2008) had a son Douglas before marrying Jim Jones, with whom she had Barry and Margaret. In 1955, when Douglas was ten, he was adopted by his grandparents Jack and Margaret. As of 2024, Doug appears to be the only surviving member of the Mission Beach Bunting family. Doug married Mavis Pearn and served in the Royal Australian Navy as a submariner as did his son, Geordie for 20 years. Flo was an active community volunteer working for many years for Meals on Wheels, Legacy and Civilian War Widows.

Dot was born in Townsville and joined the family in Feluga in 1928. She became a volunteer then married Frank Bowen who had a private business and later moved to Mt Isa and worked for Mt Isa Mines.

Dorothy (Dot) (1922-2004), Coral fills in the gaps here ...

My mother, Dorothy Bunting (Dot), was born in Townsville, and in 1928 she joined her siblings in Feluga. Les and Flo were already at school in Feluga, and Bob came to Feluga in 1930. The school was held in the Feluga Dance Hall at that time until a new school was built.

After leaving school, Dot worked with the Harman family on their cane farm nearby, then moved into Tully to work for the Mullens family in their hotel. Her next move was to Townsville where she worked for various hotels. When war broke out and the family shifted to Charters Towers, she joined them there.

At a dance one evening, she met her future husband, Francis (Frank) Bowen, who was in military training in the Army at The Towers and was from Wangaratta, Victoria. Soon an engagement was announced and a marriage followed quickly. Frank served in the Middle East and in New Guinea during WWII.

While Frank was in New Guinea, their daughter, Coral, was born. After his discharge, Frank joined Dot and Coral in Charters Towers. In February 1946, they moved to Frank's hometown, Wangaratta. Their second child, John (Jacko), was born there. The cold motivated their return to Charters Towers in November 1948 and their third child, Alan (Al) was born.

Frank was a keen cyclist and was involved with the Charters Towers Wheelers. When competing in a cycling carnival in Mount Isa, he was offered a job at P W Burke as a cycle mechanic. Dot was pregnant and chose to remain in Charters Towers until the birth.

Frank went to The Isa and, with help from friends, built a house there. After the birth of their fourth child, William (Bill) in October 1952, the family was reunited. Frank was working for a private business as well as the Mt Isa mines.

He became involved as a volunteer fundraiser for the Aged Care Home, the Pensioners League, Endeavour Foundation and other charities thereafter. Frank passed away in September 1988 and Dot in January 2004.



Left: Jack Bunting with grandchildren, Coral Robartson and Doug Bunting.

Right: Home of Jack and Margaret Oxford Street, Charters Towers.

Albert Alexander (Bob) (1924-2011) was never married. He lived in Feluga and Tully early on and stayed there when the family moved to Charters Towers. He spent all of his working life in cane and bananas and worked for Johnny Mullins at Jarra Creek for long periods. He loved fishing, pig hunting and gambling and joined his sister Flo in the Towers when he retired.

Elizabeth Enid (Bessie) (1926-1928) died as a small child.

Sidney Charles (1931-2006) never married. Sid worked for QLD Rail.

Muriel Ruth (Ruthie) (1935-1937) died as a small child.

BUNTING DESCENDANTS

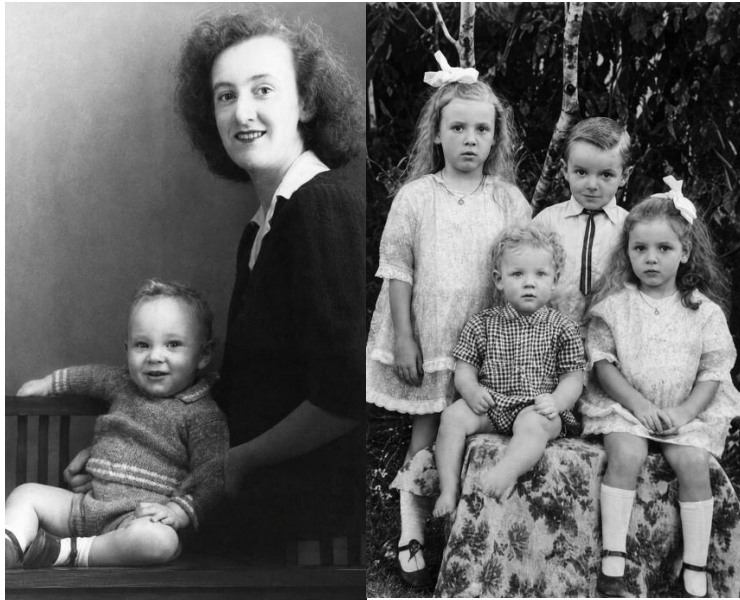


Images from Doug Bunting. Left: Grandma, Margaret Bunting. Right: Grandma Florence Alexander.

A family tree on the last page of this monograph shows where people fit. There is a history of the Wildsoet family available as well on mbhs.com.au: *Danish Connections: The Wildsoet Family of Mission Beach*, also by Ken Gray. That relates the story of Maud Bunting's family.



Bunting family in Townsville. People on horseback are not known. Edna Harden (nee Wildsoet), Nellie Brown (Bunting), May Brown (nee Bunting) holding her daughter Nancy, John Bunting (Grandad), Margaret (Nana) Bunting, Maud Wildsoet (nee Bunting), James Harden. Image from Doug Bunting.



Left: Florence Bunting with baby Douglas, 1945. Right: Bunting children taken in late 20s, Flo, Les, Bob and Dot. Images here from Doug and Mavis Bunting.



Doug Bunting, Florence Jones nee Bunting, Mavis Bunting, Dorothy Bowen nee Bunting, Bob (Albert) Bunting. Charters Towers 1995. Image Doug Bunting.

A LEGACY WRITTEN IN ROADS AND REMEMBRANCE

The Buntings weren't the first timber getters at Hull River, but they were the most significant, living and working in the district for almost forty years. They built more than a timber business; they built the literal roads that connected the community, and the figurative bridges between isolation and civilization.

From Margaret's devastating arrival in Australia to her grandchildren's generation scattered across Queensland, the Bunting story is one of adaptation, hard work, and community building. Their tracks still guide travellers through Mission Beach, even if few remember the men and horses, the dust and sweat, the voice calling to bullocks in the jungle that once made those paths possible.

The land remembers. Bunting Court. Wildsoets Gap. And somewhere in the forest behind Holland Street, a traction engine slowly returns to earth, a monument to the ambition that once moved mountains of timber from Hull River to the world beyond.

BUNTING FAMILY TREE

