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## Chapter 13

### **Water: The lifeblood of survival.**

Like electricity, a decent water supply is one of the fundamentals of a "civilised" existence. With it, a town has a better chance of attracting and keeping population. From the start of European settlement, the people of Cooktown, and their Council representatives, regarded the provision of a permanent water supply as necessary for the growth of the town. A number of water schemes were proposed over the years, but the town did not get a reticulated water supply until 1970. A number of factors contributed to Cooktown's failure to achieve this most basic of services sooner. Successive Governments were reluctant to provide funds for a water scheme when the town's population was too small to justify the investment, or to repay the necessary loan. This reaction by Government generated a "catch 22" situation, because the lack of services such as a water supply contributed to the decline in population. Many people refused to remain in a town without services, and new settlers were dissuaded from coming to the area by the absence of such services. The Government was then justified in refusing to supply funds because the town was too small.

However, the Government was not responsible for the failure of all Cooktown's proposed water schemes. In 1947-49, a private developer offered to provide a reticulated water supply to the town. Despite the developer's commitment to carry all expenses for the scheme, a lack of consensus in the town caused the plan to fail. The disappointments did not cease when Cooktown eventually got a reticulated water supply.

The first scheme failed to meet expectations. This was followed by another scheme that had limited success, and finally by the present successful water supply. Because the Government had refused to commit funds to a reliable water scheme in the beginning, people who were already disadvantaged were saddled with a greater debt burden than was necessary.

### **First water supply.**

The first European settlers to land at the Endeavour River in 1873 drew water from the same small creek used by Cook in 1770. When the area was first surveyed, this site was designated a Reserve for Water on the first survey charts of the town. Some settlers soon sank wells for water, but most households had carriers deliver supplies from the various soaks and streams around the town. This supply was restricted and unreliable, and in 1877 the Mayor asked the Colonial Treasurer to provide funds for a water supply. The Treasurer was sympathetic, but said that the Hydraulic Engineer was too busy to investigate the matter. He promised an investigation when funds and expertise were available.<sup>1148</sup> Despite his assurance, nothing had been done by the end of the decade.

In addition to providing for domestic consumption, as a major port Cooktown was expected to have a ready supply of water to provision ships. Faced with the Government's reluctance to help, the Municipal Council contracted to have wells dug at strategic positions in the town. In 1879, a well that supplied ships with water was lined and covered, and equipped with a pump to deliver water to three iron tanks. These

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<sup>1148</sup> Cooktown Courier, 21 November 1877.

were kept full to provide a ready supply for shipping.<sup>1149</sup> However, demand still exceeded supply. The Council enlarged its existing wells, and employed well sinkers to find further supplies.<sup>1150</sup> By late December 1881 the Works Committee reported that the well sinkers had reached thirty feet on one of the new wells. Although they found a reasonable supply, it was not enough for the entire population, especially in the dry season.<sup>1151</sup>

### **Isabella Creek scheme.**

Despite the obvious need for a suitable supply, the Government's Hydraulic Engineer did not come to Cooktown until 1884. He inspected the town wells and the springs at Mount Cook, and agreed that they could not provide enough water. He also went to Isabella Creek, about twenty miles from Cooktown on the road to McIvor River. He found it had a drought season flow of fifteen million gallons per day, and said it was the most suitable supply in the district. He suggested a weir fifteen feet high to impound the water. From this pond a turbine driven pump would deliver water to a high level tank near the Creek, and would provide gravity feed to the highest dwellings in Cooktown. The scheme would deliver about 60,000 gallons daily to the town, allowing forty gallons per person each day for the population of 1,500. Some aldermen on the Council had greater faith in the town. They wanted to plan for a possible increase in population to 6,000.<sup>1152</sup>

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<sup>1149</sup> Cooktown Courier, 1 October 1879.

<sup>1150</sup> In 1881 the Works Committee recommended that the town's main well be deepened another ten or twelve feet.

<sup>1151</sup> Cooktown Municipal Council Minutes, Cooktown Courier, 3 December 1881. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1152</sup> Water Supply Report, Report on Water Supply to Cooktown, 4 December 1884, TRE/A29 84/4093, Q.S.A.

The scheme was estimated to cost £34,684, with annual working expenses and interest amounting to £2,094 per year.<sup>1153</sup> This was well beyond the resources of the local population, and engineers proposed a revised plan. By reducing the size of the main, they could cut construction costs to £26,718, with only a slight reduction in the amount of water delivered.<sup>1154</sup> The Municipal Council applied for a Special Order to borrow £21,000 to implement the scheme. However, the Colonial Treasurer said the town's population and finances would justify a loan of only £10,500.<sup>1155</sup> This would not pay for the scheme, and no further action was taken.

### **Wells and tanks.**

Cooktown continued to rely principally on wells and rain water tanks. The Council tried to recoup some of the costs of sinking and equipping its wells by calling tenders for the rights to sell water from the Corporation wells.<sup>1156</sup> However, as the town's population fell, some wells fell into disuse and became contaminated. The largest town well, which is still in existence, had been sunk on the site of a soak that was used extensively by the original European settlers. The well was twenty-three feet across, with brick sides and a granite floor. It held almost fifty thousand gallons of water, and was equipped with a donkey boiler and pump to supply the wharves.<sup>1157</sup> By 1936 this supply was used by several householders and business proprietors for "slop"

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<sup>1153</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1154</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1155</sup> Cooktown Municipal Council Minutes, 7 January 1886.

<sup>1156</sup> E. Finn (could be Feinn) was awarded the lease of three town wells at £20 for twelve months. Cooktown Municipal Council Minutes, 28 October 1886.

<sup>1157</sup> S.E. Stephens, Hon. Curator of History, Freshwater, to N. Innes-Wills, Resident Custodian, James Cook Museum, Cooktown, 17 December 1979. Cairns Historical Society.

purposes, and by visiting lugger crews for drinking. The well was contaminated by gutter runoff and the intrusion of salt water at high tides, and occasionally goats fell into it and drowned. The Council saw the well as a health hazard, and asked the Government Chemical Laboratory in Brisbane to test the water.<sup>1158</sup> No record of the analysis is available, but it is safe to assume that the water was declared not potable.

In that year the Council made another attempt to secure a reticulated supply. It asked the Department of Irrigation and Water Supply to provide an officer to report on "a plant for water supply". The Clerk took it for granted that the Council would not be expected to pay for the report.<sup>1159</sup> The assumption was naive. The Department said that it would provide an officer for a preliminary investigation, but the Council was responsible for his travel expenses and accommodation, and any necessary professional services. It estimated that total expenses would be between £40 and £60.<sup>1160</sup> Even this amount would strain the Council's budget, but it asked for the investigation to be done before the wet season.<sup>1161</sup>

### **Redmond's scheme.**

While the Council was negotiating with the Department, it was approached by a private consultant who offered to look for a water

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<sup>1158</sup> Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to Director, Government Chemical Laboratory, Brisbane, 20 May 1936. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1159</sup> Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to The Secretary, Dept. of Irrigation & Water Supply, Brisbane, 6 July 1937. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1160</sup> Secretary, Department of Irrigation, Water Supply, and Sewerage, Brisbane, to The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 13 July 1937. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1161</sup> Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to The Secretary, Dept. of Irrigation & Water Supply, Brisbane, 5 October 1937. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

supply for Cooktown. E. Vernon Redmond, a consulting engineer, told the Council he had completed a number of schemes, the most recent being at Mossman. Unlike the Department of Irrigation, Vernon promised that the Council was under no obligation to pay for the initial advice, nor to proceed with any scheme.<sup>1162</sup> The Council decided not to accept Redmond's offer, preferring to wait for the report by the Department of Irrigation.<sup>1163</sup>

### **Department of Irrigation report, 1938.**

The Department's report was completed in May 1938, when the town population was 700. It found that Jensen's Crossing, on the Endeavour River, was the most appropriate site for a supply. Another site near Mount Saunders, on the coast to the north of Cooktown, was considered the next best supply. However this site would require a five-mile rising main, including a half-mile of submarine line to cross the harbour. These two sites were discounted because they were well beyond the financial capacity of the town.<sup>1164</sup>

Four other schemes were investigated. The least expensive one provided for gravity-fed water through a two-inch pipe from a spring at Mount Cook, to a 25,000 gallon tank with a central stand pipe. This limited scheme was estimated to cost £1,943. The other schemes ranged in cost from £11,482 to £19,072, and included total or partial reticulation throughout the town. Council considered the report, and

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<sup>1162</sup> E. Vernon Redmond, Consulting Engineer, Cairns, to Mr. A.S. Sampson, Chairman, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 13 July 1937. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1163</sup> Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to E.Vernon Redmond, Cairns, 5 October 1937. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1164</sup> History of Cooktown Water Supply (ND). Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

chose a scheme to provide a storage catchment on the North-West foothills of Mount Cook, with delivery by gravity through a four-inch main. The estimated cost was £14,497, and the Council applied for a subsidised loan.<sup>1165</sup> However, the Department said that the preliminary estimates were tentative, and the Council would have to pay for a more detailed costing first. Then, if the scheme went ahead, the Department would provide supervisory staff for the construction phase at the usual percentage charge.<sup>1166</sup> The Council accepted the conditions, and asked that preparatory work begin immediately.<sup>1167</sup>

It is clear that the Council let their enthusiasm for a water supply blind them to economic reality. When caution was clearly called for, they committed the Council to unnecessary debt. The Minister for Lands said that planning for the scheme could start immediately, but advised the Council to first confirm that Treasury would give it a subsidy-loan to complete the scheme before more funds were spent.<sup>1168</sup> Council ignored the advice, and voted for an immediate start. The Minister's warning was well founded. The Loan Council allocations for the financial year did not include a water supply for Cooktown, and the Treasurer could not approve the loan.<sup>1169</sup> This left the Council responsible for the cost of the investigation, and the preparation of the

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<sup>1165</sup> Chairman, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to The Hon. P. Pease, Minister for Public Lands, Brisbane, 14 July 1938. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1166</sup> P. Pease, Minister for Lands, Department of Public Lands, Brisbane, to H.H. Collins, M.L.A., Parliament House, Brisbane, 16 August 1938. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1167</sup> Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to The Hon. P. Pease, Minister for Lands, Brisbane, 9 September 1938. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1168</sup> P. Pease, Minister for Lands, Department of Public Lands, Brisbane, to Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 21 September 1938. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1169</sup> Under Secretary, The Treasury, Brisbane, to H.H. Collins, M.L.A., Parliament House, Brisbane, 31 October 1940. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.



report. The account, for £207/7/2, was an unnecessary drain on the Council's budget, and the scheme was delayed until after the war.<sup>1170</sup>

### **Post war reconstruction scheme.**

Another episode demonstrates that Cooktown was the victim of the syndrome pointed to by Myrdal. Towards the end of the Second World War, the Council was offered the chance to apply for funds for a water supply. The Federal Government realised the civilian economy would need stimulation after the war, and asked local authorities to apply for funding of desirable projects under the "Urgent Post-War Works" program. Cooktown asked for finance for a water supply, an electricity scheme, and a new Council Chambers.<sup>1171</sup> The Coordinator General wanted details of all three schemes, as well as a rough estimate of costs, to assist the selection process.<sup>1172</sup> Unfortunately, the opportunity was lost because the Council had no competent staff to process the necessary information, and no funds to commission the work. The application did not meet the criteria demanded by the selection committee, and it was rejected. The situation was due significantly to the war situation, where funds and people were committed to defence. Small towns are often the victims of events over which they have no control, and this can prevent them taking advantage of a situation that would improve their position. The situation was ironic, in that a lack of funds and expertise prevented the Council from taking advantage of a scheme designed to help towns like Cooktown escape from their

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<sup>1170</sup> History Of Cooktown Water Supply. (ND). Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1171</sup> Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to Co-ordinator General of Public Works, Brisbane, 9 January 1945. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1172</sup> W.A. Rogers, Secretary, Department of the Co-ordinator-General of Public Works, Brisbane, to The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 19 January 1945. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

disadvantaged position. The irony did not stop there. During the war, the armed forces had provided a water supply from the Endeavour River to the aerodrome, and the cost of extending this scheme to Cooktown would have been minimal. However, the Council did not have the funds to purchase and extend the scheme, and the Government wouldn't give it a loan.

### **Water diviner's scheme.**

By now, the Council would grasp any opportunity to get a water supply. After the war it asked for help from T.M. Whitman, a water diviner who described himself as an "Expert in detecting Springs of water and their outlets". Council offered Whitman £5 per site to locate four sites in the town,<sup>1173</sup> an amount Whitman bumped up by £1 per day. Whitman found four promising sites that he expected would guarantee a suitable supply.<sup>1174</sup>

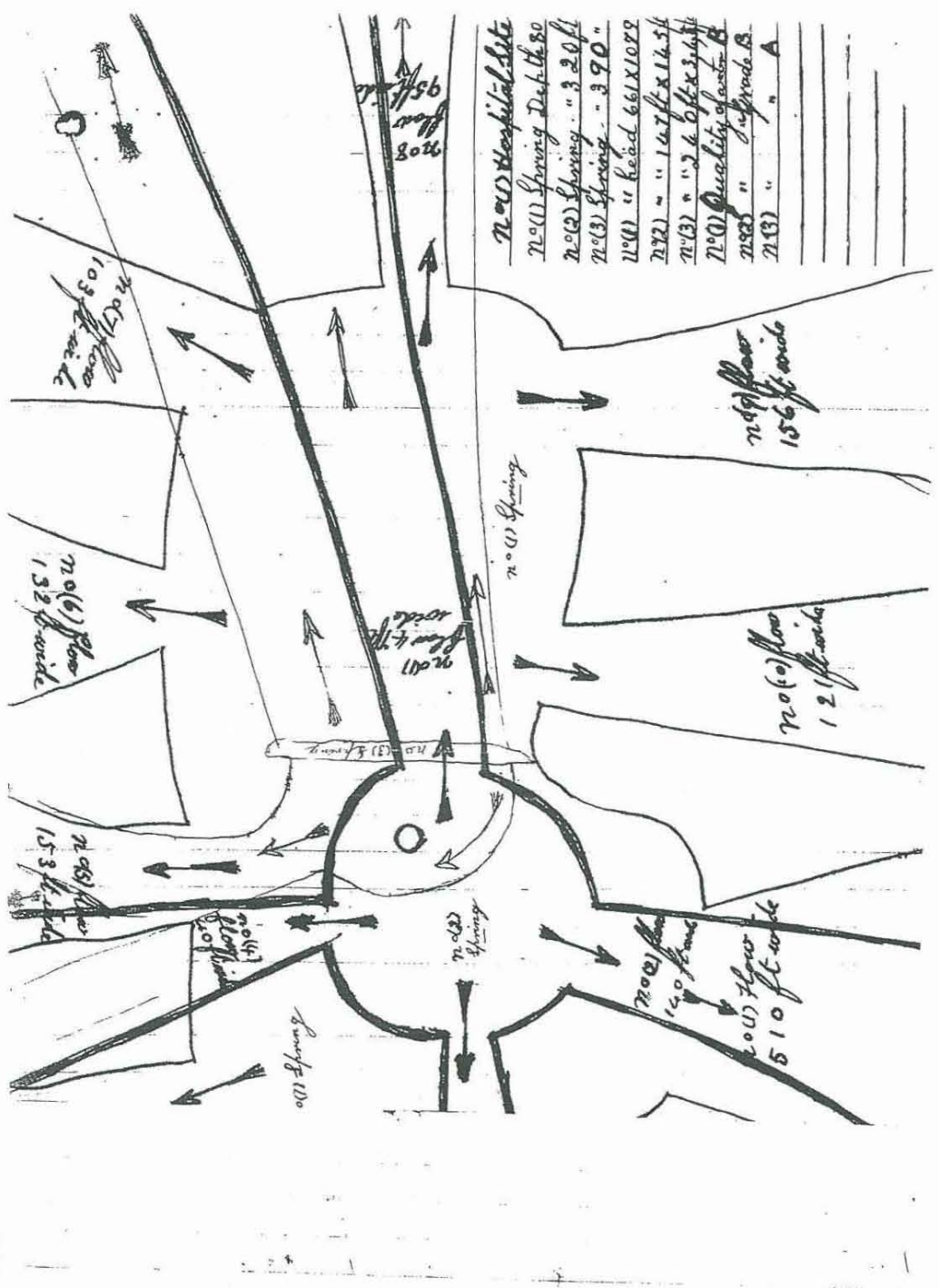
The Council showed Whitman's report to the local Member, and enlisted his support for a drilling program to prove the supply. Council wanted a Treasury subsidy of £1 for £1 to sink a bore to 500 feet, at a cost of approximately £1,000.<sup>1175</sup> The subsidy was approved, with the provision that the Council followed the guidelines and labour conditions supplied by the various departments. However, the sites were not tested, and the subsidy was diverted to digging wells.

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<sup>1173</sup> Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to T. Whitman, Cooktown, 10 December 1945. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1174</sup> The Cooktown Water Supply: The report on the four sites considered suitable for the Cooktown water supply. T.M. Whitman, 29 January 1946. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1175</sup> Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to Hon. H.H. Collins, M.L.A., Parliament House, Brisbane, 8 April 1946. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.



Whitman's plan of underground water streams in Cooktown area, 1946.

1946

THE COOKTOWN WATER SUPPLY.Site. No. (1).Remarks on the Hospital Site.

This site is situated 100 deg. S.E. from the Hospital, at the distance of sixteen chains 54ft. It comprises three separate flows of water.

The first flow or spring covers an area of 1,079 ft., in length, and 661 ft., in width. It has ten streams flowing from its source and they are the following widths,

(1). 510 ft.	<del>XXXXXXXXXX</del>
(2). 548 "	(6). 132 "
(3). 232 "	(7). 103 "
(4). 157 "	(8). 95 "
(5). 153 "	(9). 156 "
	(10) 121 "

The pressure and rapidity of the flows are good, this being so, the water would make quickly when in use. The quality of water under Grade (B) is good, the mineral content detected is Iron. This supply is a large one.

No. 2. Flow.

This flow is a spring measuring 147x145 ft. across and has four out-lets or streams flowing from it, the widths are as follows,

- (1). 47 ft.
- (2). 140 ft.
- (3). 49 ft.
- (4). 40 ft.

of the flow is fast.

The ceiling pressure is high and the rapidity

No.3.Flow.

This flow of water is of the fissure type, it measures 240 ft., in length and 1,2,3, and 5 ft., wide in places along its length. The outlets are two, flowing North, South and East, these two flows after leaving their fissure spring are 240 ft, wide. The North flow turning sharply to the East forming a basin like pocket of whirling water, at a short distance it narrows to a small channel and then widens on its Easterly course through the country. The bore site is so situated, so that it will tap the flow in the basin of fast moving water.

The depths are,

- (1) Flow. 80 ft.
- (2) " 320 "
- (3) " 390 "

Signed. J. M. Whitman

Expert in The Art of Detecting  
Underground Moving Water.

Date. 29/1/46.

Whitman's report on underground water streams, 1946.

Cooktown experienced a severe drought at this time, and the Council had to sink another well to supply the population. With the Land Administration Board's assistance it converted part of R.87, an area reserved for a drill hall when Cooktown had a volunteer militia, to a water reserve.<sup>1176</sup> The Council sank two wells on the reserve, and both gave an adequate supply of good water. With a third, the wells were expected to provide an assured water supply. The Council then called tenders for the supply of two tanks, of two thousand gallons each, to be erected at the water reserve, and one of eight-hundred gallons at the wharf.<sup>1177</sup> It also hoped to buy the large reservoir tank in the railway yard, as it would be suitable for a town reservoir.<sup>1178</sup> However, the conditions of sale made it impossible to relocate the tank to a suitable position to supply the town, and the deal fell through. It settled for the three galvanised water tanks, and a pump for the well.<sup>1179</sup>

#### **Moffat Constructions scheme.**

The saying "it never rains but it pours" could be applied to Cooktown at this time. While the Council was in the process of developing the wells at the reserve, it was offered the possibility of getting a reticulated water supply from a private source. As noted in chapter six, Moffat Construction proposed to build a tourist complex in Cooktown, and planned to supply water from a series of dams at the foot of Mount Cook. He offered to supply water to most of the town, on condition that

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<sup>1176</sup> Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to Secretary, Land Administration Board, Department of Public Works, Brisbane, 25 October 1946. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1177</sup> Tender Form, Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 13 May 1947. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown

<sup>1178</sup> Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to The Secretary, Commissioner of Railways, Brisbane, 14 May 1947. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1179</sup> Minutes of Special Meeting, Cook Shire Council, 22 May 1947.

he could charge a reasonable price for the water. Moffat promised that the Council would be given the option to take over the scheme at a fair valuation.<sup>1180</sup> The Council was interested, but its negotiations with the Government precluded any other arrangements. However, it told Moffat that if the scheme under consideration did not proceed, it was willing to consider a joint project with him.<sup>1181</sup>

Moffat's offer was made more viable thanks to the war, an event that often brought much-needed new services and technology to isolated towns. During the war, the Mission Strip aerodrome had been supplied with water from the Endeavour river by a three-inch galvanised pipeline. The Government removed the pumping facility after the war, and offered to sell the Council the 17,000 feet of pipe for seven pence per foot.<sup>1182</sup> The Council agreed to the price, and asked Treasury for a temporary loan of £600 to secure the pipe.<sup>1183</sup> Approval was given, and the Council bought 14,585 feet of the pipe at a total cost of £425/7/11.<sup>1184</sup>

Having the pipe gave the Council an advantage, as Australia faced a shortage of most building supplies, and especially of steel products,

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<sup>1180</sup> O.C.C. Moffat, Manager, Moffat Construction Coy., Brisbane, to The Town Clerk, The Cookshire (sic) Council, Cooktown, 14 May 1947. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1181</sup> Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to The Manager, Moffat Construction Company, Brisbane, 28 May 1947. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1182</sup> F.J. Martin, District Superintendent, Commonwealth Disposals Commission, Townsville, to The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 22 July 1948. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1183</sup> Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to Hon. H.H. Collins M.L.A., Parliament House, Brisbane, 12 August 1948. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1184</sup> Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to The Director of Local Government, Department of Local Government, Brisbane, 13 December 1948. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

after the war. This was caused by several factors, including a lag in production as the economy adjusted back to peace-time uses, the post-war construction boom and industrial unrest. Moffat suggested that the Council cooperate with him to provide the town with water, offering to supply the pumping equipment and the plant to construct the scheme if Council supplied the pipes.<sup>1185</sup> Post-war shortages interfered again, as no deep well pump was available. Moffat then purchased a two-inch air pump, which he said would deliver sufficient water for the town.<sup>1186</sup> However, when the Council failed to accept the town plan and zoning plan Moffat had commissioned, he abandoned his development plans for Cooktown. Once again, the people of Cooktown were let down.

#### **Peake's report, 1950.**

No further progress was made until 1950, when the Government sent T.D. Peake, a water supply engineer, to Cooktown to report on the situation. He found that the principal supply for the town came from the three Council wells at the water reserve. The wells were four feet in diameter, and the depths ranged from 24 to 31 feet. Each well usually held about twelve feet of water but the level dropped after heavy pumping over an extended time. After an inspection of most of the wells in the district, Peake decided that they would never provide a reliable water scheme.<sup>1187</sup> He then looked at other possibilities.

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<sup>1185</sup> O.C.C. Moffat, Manager, Moffat Construction Coy., Brisbane, to The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 11 November 1948. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1186</sup> O.C.C. Moffat, Manager, Moffat Construction Coy., Brisbane, to The Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, 21 October 1948. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1187</sup> Memorandum from T.D. Peake, Water Supply Engineer, to Engineer In Charge: Cooktown Water Supply, Revised Preliminary Report, 21 February 1950, p. 2. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

Peake discounted a possible catchment scheme on the slopes of Mount Cook because the ground was too porous, the catchment area too small, and the cost of carting suitable earth fill for the weir prohibitive. A scheme to draw water from the Annan River above the tidal influence was also discounted because of the lack of reliable data on the stream flow. He also thought that tin mining in the upper reaches of the river could cause turbidity, forcing the Council to install treatment facilities. Peake thought that Jansen's Crossing on the Endeavour River would provide the best supply, as basalt bars across the stream bed above the tidal reach provided a prime site to construct a low weir. He had sufficient information on the flow to guarantee a viable water supply. The site of the pumping station that supplied water for the Mission Strip during the war would place all machinery well above flood level.<sup>1188</sup>

No electricity was available to drive a pump, so Peake suggested that a diesel or suction gas driven generator be installed. A six-inch water main would follow the rail line until the mangroves were reached, after which the pipe would follow the road. He recommended the construction of a reservoir of 100,000 gallons on a ridge near the town. He estimated the scheme would cost £70,000, with annual operating costs of £3,173.<sup>1189</sup>

The Council used Peake's report to support an application for a loan, but because of its bad economic position, it asked for more than the usual 33.3% subsidy.<sup>1190</sup> Treasury found that even with a 50% subsidy,

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<sup>1188</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>1189</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>1190</sup> P.J.R. Hilton, Minister for Public Works, Office of the Minister for Public Works, Brisbane, to C.F. Wordsworth, M.L.A., Parliament House, Brisbane, 19 May 1950. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.



the repayments would be beyond the resources of the local population. It said that on a loan of £57,000, with a 50% subsidy and payments spread over 40 years, the annual costs per reticulated household would be £16/4/6. If the interest and redemption charges and maintenance costs were levied on all ratepayers, the charges would reduce to £13/1/-, still well in excess of the accepted ceiling of £6 per household.<sup>1191</sup>

The Council accepted Treasury's conclusion, but did not admit defeat. It applied for funds through two alternative avenues. The local State Member was asked to support Council's application for a special subsidy.<sup>1192</sup> The Council said that Federal assistance was also justified, as the decline in population of small towns could only be reversed by the provision of amenities taken for granted by other sectors of the population. Cooktown was a prime example of the decline of regional towns. By 1947 the population had dropped to about 400, with the total population of the Cook Shire just over 1,000.<sup>1193</sup> The Federal Government offered no help, claiming the provision of services such as a water supply were a State Government matter. The news was not all bad though. The State Department of Public Works decided that a limited supply, between 21,000 to 30,000 gallons each day, could be provided for approximately £25,000. This scheme would have partial

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<sup>1191</sup> R.L. Murray, Under Secretary, The Treasury, Brisbane, to The Honourable H.H. Collins, M.L.A., Minister for Agriculture and Stock, Brisbane, 23 June 1950. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown. It is of interest that the Treasury regarded £6 as the favoured yearly charge for water, as the weekly wage for a labourer at the time was about £6. A council labourer now earns about \$400 per week, and the water rates at Cooktown are presently \$600 per year.

<sup>1192</sup> Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to C.F. Wordsworth, M.L.A., Cairns, 19 July 1950. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1193</sup> Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council, Cooktown, to T.V. Gilmore, M.H.R., Cairns, 19 July 1950. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

reticulation, and a standpipe for general supply.<sup>1194</sup> Council accepted the offer, and Treasury issued a loan of £2,000 to draw up the plans.<sup>1195</sup> The stand-pipe and tanks were installed, but the supply proved expensive, as householders had to buy extra holding tanks, and pay to have the water delivered.

### **Two-mile dam.**

In 1955, the civil engineering firm Gutteridge Haskins and Davey was commissioned to provide yet another report on Cooktown's water problem. They found that the Endeavour scheme was too expensive, as was the proposal to construct a dam at the Two Mile. The matter was dropped until Rollo Gallop was appointed Administrator of the Shire. One of his first actions was to seek funding for a water supply, but found that the Government would not make a large loan to a town with such a small population.<sup>1196</sup> However, a change in Government policy in 1972 made more funds available, and the Council was offered a Special Grant plus subsidy, which finally enabled it to fund a reticulated supply.<sup>1197</sup>

Despite the engineer's report in 1950, which found that a storage scheme on the slopes of Mount Cook was impractical, this was the scheme adopted. The dam was designed to hold 30,000,000 gallons,

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<sup>1194</sup> Minister for Public Works, Department of Public Works, office of the Minister, Brisbane, to C.F. Wordsworth, M.L.A., Parliament House, Brisbane, 9 March 1951. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1195</sup> Loans And/Or Subsidies Approved For The Financial Year 1950/51, Cook Shire Council. Cook Shire Council Archives, Cooktown.

<sup>1196</sup> Shire Administrator's advice to Shire Clerk, Cook Shire Council Administrator Minutes, 10 November 1964.

<sup>1197</sup> Norman Traves, interviewed by Duncan Jackson, 1984. Transcript in Cook Shire Council Library, Cooktown. Traves worked for G.H.&D. on the water supply in Cooktown.

and was expected to cost \$223,000.<sup>1198</sup> As predicted in the 1950 report, when the dam was eventually built it proved a failure. In addition to a restricted catchment area, the porous country failed to hold water effectively.

### **Borefield scheme.**

By 1982 the Queensland Water Resources Commission was asked for help to supplement the dam supply. The Commission investigated five possible sites, and recommended an underground supply from an area near Cooktown known locally as the "Duckfarm".<sup>1199</sup> The initial estimate for drilling was \$54,000, to be provided by the Commonwealth Government (\$18,000), State Government (\$ 21,600), and Shire Council (\$14,400).<sup>1200</sup>

The bore field relieved the situation for a short time, but an inspection of the dam in 1984 revealed that the wall was in danger of collapse. Engineers recommended that the capacity be reduced by 50%.<sup>1201</sup> The reduced supply was the least of Cooktown's problems. An engineer's report on the water supply in 1986 found that the water was smelly and dirty, and was unusable except for sanitary purposes.<sup>1202</sup>

The dam was decommissioned in early 1987, when the water quality fell further. However, it was used again later in the year while the bore field was fitted with a treatment plant. Residents were assured that the

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<sup>1198</sup> North Queensland Register, 20 December 1969.

<sup>1199</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>1200</sup> Cook Shire Council Minutes, 19 December 1985.

<sup>1201</sup> Report on the Meeting of the Annan River Water Supply Investigation Management Committee, 7 August 1987, p. 33, Z2232, Q.S.A.

<sup>1202</sup> Cook Shire Council Minutes, 22/23 April 1986.

objectionable smell had disappeared, but that the "colour, turbidity and iron levels could cause problems with washing". Despite this unappealing picture, the Council promised that there was no health risk.<sup>1203</sup> By the end of the year the dam was again decommissioned, and the bore field was back on line, although the supply was limited.<sup>1204</sup> Despite the considerable investment in the bore field, the Council sought a long-term solution, as engineers doubted that the field could meet future requirements.<sup>1205</sup> Their pessimism was well founded. By June 1988 production at the Duck Farm bore field was falling, and was expected to fail altogether if the poor wet season continued.<sup>1206</sup>

### **Annan River scheme.**

The Council and the local population again pressured the Government for help, and it eventually awarded MacDonald Wagner a \$500,000 contract to investigate and plan for a supply from the Annan River.<sup>1207</sup> The prospects were good, and the Government announced in May 1988 that it would provide \$9,000,000 for the Annan River supply. In announcing the provision of the funds, the Premier said that "The scheme will be built at no cost to Cooktown ratepayers". The Government supplied the Council's share of the finance, which would be repaid by the imposition of headworks charges on new developments.<sup>1208</sup> The Annan River water scheme gave Cooktown residents their first assured water supply. The Duck Farm bore field is

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<sup>1203</sup> Cooktown State School Weekly Newsletter, No., 16, 20 May 1987.

<sup>1204</sup> Cooktown State School Weekly Newsletter, No., 40, 2 December 1987.

<sup>1205</sup> Report on the Meeting of the Annan River Water Supply Investigation Management Committee, 7 August 1987, p. 33, Z2232, Q.S.A.

<sup>1206</sup> Cook Shire Council Minutes, 9 June 1988.

<sup>1207</sup> Report on the Meeting of the Annan River Water Supply Investigation Management Committee, 7 August 1987, p. 34, Z2232, Q.S.A.

<sup>1208</sup> Media Release from Premier, 16 May 1988, Z2232, Q.S.A.

maintained in working order, and is used as a backup system in times of need.

The loan for the Annan scheme carried no interest, and repayment was predicated on an expected boom in the tourist industry. Soon after the scheme was commissioned, the Queensland Tourist and Travel Commission sponsored a development based on the style of the Quintrex complex at Port Douglas. It was abandoned following objections from many local residents, and a downturn in the tourist industry. Tourism has expanded steadily since the Annan scheme was provided, but the boom failed to materialise. As a result, headwork charges and water rates are much higher than would be expected in a small town like Cooktown. Despite these charges, Cooktown has experienced a significant increase in population since the town gained an assured water supply.

### **Conclusion.**

The benefits of a decent water supply to a town are manifold, and Cooktown offers an example of these benefits. The health of the population improved when septic systems replaced the earth closet system of human waste disposal. This change also helped remove the threat of hookworm infestation that was the bane of many small rural towns. Living conditions also improved because people who previously had limited water supplies could now enjoy frequent personal bathing. Prior to the provision of the water scheme, residents relied on wells or bores. While some of these produced sufficient water for all domestic purposes, many households were forced to share bath water between

several people. In times of severe water shortages, even these "communal" ablutions became less frequent.

The population has also benefited because a town swimming pool is now available for recreational purposes, and to teach the children how to swim. The improved water supply has enabled the Council to provide a limited sewerage system for the commercial area, an important improvement, as poor soakage in this area prevented septic systems working effectively. The present Council is intent on extending the sewerage system to the entire population of the town.

The water scheme also made a significant improvement to the aesthetic appeal of Cooktown. The town often boasted of its tropical seaside aspect, but its seasonal rainfall pattern and sandy soil meant that for much of the year there was a lack of green vegetation. Since the water was connected, however, Cooktown boasts green parks, and an increase in colourful gardens. This improvement has undoubtedly helped the tourist industry to "sell" the town. Similar results have been achieved in towns in western Queensland, such as Hughenden and Winton, where improvements in the water supply have resulted in the greening of those towns.

The history of Cooktown's water supply illustrates the vulnerability of towns, especially small rural towns, to the political whim of Governments. The local authority and the people of Cooktown consistently said that the town would progress only when it had an assured water supply, but little effective help was offered by either State or Commonwealth Governments. Until the State Government decided to fund the Annan River scheme in 1987, it offered assistance only for schemes that had already been rejected by its own experts.

When the various water schemes finally went ahead, the town was under the control of an Administrator appointed by the State Government. The people of the Shire had no input into decisions that incurred debts for them to repay. Such "assistance" left the local authority, and thus the population, with a debt for failed water schemes over which they had no control. To foist such a debt on a community of obviously limited means is reprehensible, but it is even more so when the debt was incurred for schemes already discredited by the Government's own experts. Unfortunately, the reliance of small towns on Government funding in such circumstances places them in the position of having to pay for the mistakes or incompetence of the people who control the purse strings. Such action raises the question of whether the Government was really interested in providing water to Cooktown, or of providing only enough funds to quell the local unrest.

Cooktown's experience with its water supply is a clear endorsement of Myrdal's economic theory. The expansion in the general economy of Cooktown, and in tourism in particular, would not have been possible without a decent water supply. This was achieved only after the injection of considerable funds by the Government. The recent rise in population is an indication that people can be enticed to move to an area that offers good living conditions. In a modern society, an assured water supply must be regarded as necessary for good living.