

Maitland and District Historical Society Inc.

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The Cabbage Tree Hat

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*The Aims of the Society are to
Discover, Record, Preserve, Advise on and Teach the History of Maitland and the
District*

Maitland and District Historical Society Inc.

Cover: A cabbage tree hat in the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (Powerhouse Museum).

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Lecture meetings are held on the first Tuesday of each month from 5:30-7.00pm as a forum for lectures, talks and presentations.

Committee meetings are held on the third Tuesday of even months from 5:30-7.00pm.

General meetings are held on the third Tuesday of odd months from 5:30-7.00pm. Members are invited to attend all monthly meetings.

Meetings are held at the Society's rooms, 3 Cathedral Street Maitland.

Membership fees : \$25 (single) and \$35 (double / family)

The rooms are open between 11 and 3 on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

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Editor's Notes: Until recently I had never heard of the cabbage tree hat. An internet search suggested that the cabbage tree hat had an interesting and important history, which explains the following article. Allan and I have drawn together several of the major themes related to this iconic Australian head gear, utilising both what is available on-line and in literary sources.

On another note, this month our home was added to the State Heritage Register as "Nowland's Lochinvar Coach House and Setting". Undoubtedly, during the 1800s many of the men who visited our property would have been wearing a "cabbage tree".

Much More than a Mere "Lid": The Cabbage Tree Hat

By Allan and Lisa Thomas

In the 1800s, all the men coming down to Maitland from the far plains, driving their beasts before them, would have been wearing cabbage tree hats. For much of the nineteenth century, the cabbage tree hat (often referred to simply as a "cabbage tree") was the preferred headgear for men in the countryside. Men from all social classes, from wealthy settlers to bushrangers and all those in between, wore cabbage tree hats since they provided excellent protection from the Australian sun. There is anecdotal evidence that even city men who favoured headgear imported from Britain changed to their cabbage trees when travelling in the bush.

It may have been ubiquitous during colonial times, but today the cabbage tree hat has been almost forgotten. So what was it?

The Making of the Hat

The production of the cabbage tree hat was a true cottage industry and one of the earliest as it was made by hand from local materials.

The hat was made from fronds of the cabbage tree palm (*livistona australis*), a native tree which grows in the wetland areas along Australia's eastern coast.

The knowledge of how to make hats from palm fronds might have originally come to Australia with British soldiers who had previously served in the West Indies. It has been asserted that in the earliest years it was the soldiers' wives who actually stitched the hats together. (*Australian Worker*, 15 April, 1925)



livistona australis



Fronds of the *livistona australis*

It is also possible that convicts were among the first makers of the hat. “It was well known that prisoners at Cockatoo Island in Sydney harbor earned money for tea sugar and tobacco from making the hats in their spare time” (Free Settler or Felon: The Cabbage Tree Hat).

“At Newcastle in the 1840s convicts who were assigned to the steam dredge on the river flats occasionally found themselves before the Magistrates if they were found to be making hats instead of their assigned work on the dredge” (*Ibid*).

As transportation eased, production of the cabbage tree hat shifted from convicts to settler women. During hard times the production of the hat could bring in much needed money for a family since a well-made cabbage tree hat could cost a fair bit.

“Stockmen used to take great pride in their cabbage tree hats, and they have been known to pay several pounds to have a special hat by a woman who had a reputation for making them. When things were not too bright with outback settlers many a settler’s wife made the hats and sold them to keep things going.”
(*Herald Melbourne* 18 October 1935)

Years after the cabbage tree hat stopped being a familiar item, its making was described in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (2 November 1929):

The bark of the cabbage tree is almost as tough as the horn. And the tree tried an axe in felling. Once down, the best “hands” were taken home and subjected to scalding for about ten minutes then a vigorous shaking would cause the leaf to open like a fan ready for bleaching white, or as white as possible in the dewy night air. The leaf was then split into narrow strands of equal width by means of a home-made splitter, consisting of a short, light wooden haft, into the ends of which were inserted peg-tooth points, or teeth, filed from stray busks, the implement thus resembling a miniature rake in appearance.

(The strands were then tightly hand plaited into ropes called “sinnet”.)

Having a supply of plaited sinnet, the hatmaker started at the centre of the crown, widening the circles ever outward. Then the sides were made and blocked on a crownshape of wood, and well shaped into permanent form. Next came the brim and its attachment, the lining, the black velvet band, the leather chin strap, and, finally, the “button” over the crown centre.

The band around the crown was sometimes made from a coarser braid, and sometimes a bright handkerchief was used as a band, although some “purists” omitted the band altogether. But black velvet was popular, and “swells” liked the ends of the band to hang down.

With its flat brim, the cabbage tree hat was wider than its domed crown. Two hats which are in museum collections have dimensions of 33 x 14 cm and 39 x 12 cm. However, not all cabbage tree hats were domed, and some had flatter tops.

A brand new cabbage tree hat was a cause of concern. Newness “was always a source of anxiety to the wearer...the cabbage tree did not bear the true hallmark until tanned and weatherworn, it looked as though it had been through many moving incidents by flood and field. Hanging a new hat in a chimney – one of the wide bush chimneys where the beef used to be hung to smoke – was allowable, but no other artificial means were permitted. Then came the time

when it began to wear at the edge of the crown and unravel at the brim. A band of sheepskin, neatly scalloped, was then sewn on, and, thus retrimmed, and rendered still more reverent by age, it continued to bear a gallant part in the work of the day.” (Evening News, Sydney, 7 November, 1896)

The Cabbage Tree Boys

The native born sons of settlers and convicts, who were collectively known as “currency lads”, took to wearing the cabbage tree hat, which became for them a cultural identity. Some of these young men in the Sydney area early on became known as the “cabbage tree mob”.

A *Wikipedia* entry says “During the convict era, gangs of insolent youths were known as cabbage tree mobs because they wore the hat. One of their favourite pastimes was to crush the hats of men deemed too ‘full of themselves’. Cabbage tree mobs are recognised as a predecessor of the larrikin.”

The *Dictionary of Sydney* identifies the cabbage tree mob as a “Loosely formed gang from the sawyers and shingle splitters of the Cooks and Georges rivers which organized illegal bare-knuckle fights in secrecy in the bush. They were so named as they wore hats made from woven leaves of the cabbage tree palm.”

But whether light-hearted larrikins or insolent social rebels, in the 1840s the cabbage tree mob began to assume a political disposition.

The Gold Rushes and the Cabbage Tree Hat

In 1849 gold was discovered in California. Gold was subsequently discovered in Australia, and the social upheavals which resulted ultimately led to the events of the Eureka Stockade.

In his book *Australians and the Gold Rush: California and Down Under 1849-1854* (1966, University of California), Jay Monaghan described the social and political changes both gold rushes had on Australians and the colony. The wearers of cabbage tree hats figured in his analysis of those changes.

The 1849 discovery of gold in California caused Australians to flock there in search of their fortunes. In this they had an advantage over many Americans as sea travel from Australia was actually quicker than was overland travel to California from the east coast of the United States.

“Cabbage-tree-hat boys who did not know the main-trunk from a buntline claimed to be able seamen” (p 11) in an effort to gain passage to California. Monaghan’s book contains illustrations of ship decks thick with men, many of whom were wearing the “hat”.

Some Australians made their fortunes in California, but most did not. In San Francisco, “In the doorways villainous-looking vagabonds watched the street furtively. Their features were concealed by slouch felts or tattered cabbage-tree hats, and they had a way of sliding out of sight when looked at steadily.” (p 124)

The men who had remained in Australia were facing other issues. The California gold rush had siphoned off working men from Australia. In the opinion of wealthy Australians, those men had to be replaced.

In 1849 “A British ship, the Randolph, entered Jackson Bay, her decks black with convicts. Such transportation to New South Wales had been abolished, but the law was being evaded by calling these immigrants ‘ticket-of-leave men.’ Here was a supply of servants sufficient to offset the emigration to California. Employers welcomed them, but they did not reckon with the cabbage-tree-hat boys who wanted to keep labor scarce, force wages up, and get advantageous social legislation. In no time, all streets leading to Circular Wharf became packed with a protesting throng. Leaders harangued their fellows: ‘New South Wales is no longer a penal Colony.’ ‘Get that ship out of here, and fast!’ (p 95)

“The disappointed propertied class, the employers, tried another procedure. They called for a mass meeting on the Domain – Sydney’s great common – to discuss California and the labor problem. The meeting was well attended. Cabbage-tree-hat boys by the hundred trudged up Hunter and King streets from George Street. They stood thick as penguins in front of the speaker’s stand and sprawled on the massive, exposed roots of Moreton Bay fig trees... Speaker after speaker offered plans to counteract the exodus to California by importing labor from England. All were shouted down. The cabbage-tree-hat boys opposed having their wages reduced by competing with cheap English labor.” (p 168)

The wearers of the cabbage tree hat were protesting for the rights of the native born, and Monaghan asserted that “Chartists and cabbage-tree-hat boys began agitating for reform even before the California gold rush threatened to create a labor shortage.” (p 271)

The subsequent discovery of gold in Australia created further social issues which turned political in the Eureka Stockade. Anti-government feeling was rife across the gold fields.

Manning Clark, in his 1987 *A History of Australia Vol. IV: The Earth Endureth Forever 1851–1888* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press), echoed Monaghan's claims regarding the symbolism of the cabbage tree hat, asserting that it was an early symbol of Australian republicanism.

During the winter of 1853, what was called the Red Ribbon Movement was active across the Australian goldfields. According to Manning Clark, "ten to twelve thousand diggers turned up wearing a red ribbon in their hats. The old cabbage-tree hat of the Sydney radicals and republicans are now decorated with the red of revolution."

Images of the Hat

Scenes from the Australian gold rush were recorded by several artists at the time, and the cabbage tree hat can often be seen in these illustrations.



"Great Meeting of Gold Diggers December 1851"
(State Library of Victoria)

Samuel Thomas Gill painted Victorian goldfield scenes, which are now held in the National Library of Australia. The cabbage tree hat appears in almost all.



Diggers breakfast 1852 by Samuel Thomas Gill



Diggers' Breakfast and Sly Grog by Samuel Thomas Gill

In *A Treasury of Australian Landscape Painting* (William Splatt and Barbara Burton, 1977, Victoria: Lloyd O'Neil) there is a watercolour by Gill titled "The Desert Interior" (c1846) which shows a man wearing a cabbage tree hat while contemplating the landscape.



"DEEP SINKING" BAKERY HILL, BALLAARAT—1853.



"The Eureka Stockade Riot Ballarat 1854"
by John Black Henderson 1827-1918 (State Library of NSW)



Celebrations after the Eureka leaders are acquitted (State Library of Victoria)



"I Have Got It"

Painting by Eugene von Guerard (1854)

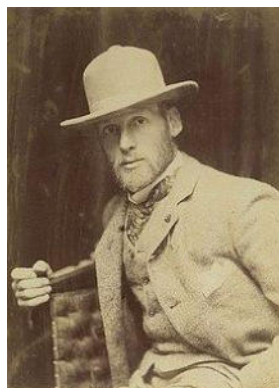
Some Notables and the Hat

English-born Marcus Clarke (1846 – 1881) is best known for his 1874 novel *For the Term of His Natural Life*, about the convict system in Australia. Along with his writings, his cabbage tree hat has been preserved.



Marcus Clark wearing the hat

In the book *Mr Stuart's Track* (John Bailey, 2006, Sydney, Macmillan), the story of explorer John McDouall Stuart, it was reported that Stuart regularly wore a cabbage tree hat. "He adopted the uniform of the bushman – thigh-length leggings over moleskin trousers, a brightly coloured shirt, a cabbage-tree hat clamped on his head, and a rifle slung across his back" (p 20). In 1859 a station overseer reported "One day I was drafting a small mob of cattle in the Arkaba yard, a sharp voice with a Scotch accent accosted me from the fence, when I turned to see a pallid, pasty-looking face, crossed by a heavy moustache, and roofed in with a dirty cabbage tree hat, peering between the rails" (p 65).



Artist Tom Roberts wearing a cabbage tree hat
1895 photograph

Men wear the hats in Tom Roberts' 1895 painting "Bailed Up".



In *The Australian Landscape and its Artists* (Elwyn Lynn, 1977, Sydney: Bay Books), are four panels by Thomas Baines (1820-1875) titled "Expedition to North Australia" (1868) in which men wear cabbage tree hats.



1856 self-portrait by painter William Strutt (National Library of Australia)

And Some Ignotables and the Hat

The garb of the bushrangers was frequently distinctive and included a cabbage tree hat. Ben Hall dressed like a "swell" with a white pea coat, a blue waistcoat, moleskin pants, Napoleon boots, and a cabbage tree hat. Hall's bushranger companion Johnny Gilbert dressed similarly although his waistcoat was of calfskin and his trousers of corduroy. The Clarke brothers were less "flash". They wore corduroy trousers, half Wellington boots, and, of course, a cabbage tree hat. The cabbage tree worn by Fred Ward sported the traditional black band. (adapted from *Free Settler or Felon*)



Ben Hall



Fred Ward (Captain Thunderbolt)
After being shot in 1870



The bushranging Clarke brothers after capture

The Cabbage Tree Hat in Popular Culture

The cabbage tree hat often appears in Australian songs and poetry.

The Cabbage Tree Hat (Australian folk song)

There's something neat in a cabbage-tree hat
When it fits the wearer's crown
There's in it a sort of jaunty look
With its streamers hanging down
Let others boast of the felt or brab
I cannot with them agree
For nobody looks so like a swell
As a man with a cabbage-tree.

Chorus

Go where you will round Lambing Flat
Every digger wears his cabbage tree hat
Go where you will, now think of that
You're right if you've got a cabbage tree hat

Let the roughs and the muffs talk as they will
Of the rowdy cabbage tree mob
It's no paltry tile that costs a pound
And just to adorn your nob
Roam as you will round Sydney town
The lasses will all agree
You're just the man to escort them out
If you've got on a good cabbage tree

Chorus

It's been worn by men of every clime
Though Australians bear the sway
It's a relic of old departed time
Though used at the present day
No matter what caste, or class, or creed
Whether rich or poor they be
They'll never want a friend in need
If they've got a good cabbage tree

Chorus

The rich look down on the poor man's coat
If but seedy it appear
But a cabbage tree hat is a different thing
For it's free from a wealthy sneer
New chums will wear it to ape old hands
And get bush logic pat
Yet, where would they be, twixt you and me
If minus the cabbage tree hat

The cabbage tree is in Henry Lawson's 1892 poem '*Mary Called Him 'Mister'*'

They'd parted but a year before — she never thought he'd come,
She stammer'd, blushed, held out her hand, and called him 'Mister Gum.'
How could he know that all the while she longed to murmur 'John.'
He called her 'Miss le Brook,' and asked how she was getting on.

They'd parted but a year before; they'd loved each other well,
But he'd been to the city, and he came back such a swell.
They longed to meet in fond embrace, they hungered for a kiss —
But Mary called him 'Mister,' and the idiot called her 'Miss.'

He stood and lean'd against the door — a stupid chap was he —
And, when she asked if he'd come in and have a cup of tea,
He looked to left, he looked to right, and then he glanced behind,
And slowly doffed his cabbage-tree, and said he 'didn't mind.'

She made a shy apology because the meat was tough,
And then she asked if he was sure his tea was sweet enough;
He stirred the tea and sipped it twice, and answer'd 'plenty, quite,'
And cut the smallest piece of beef and said that it was 'right.'

She glanced at him at times and cough'd an awkward little cough;
He stared at anything but her and said, 'I must be off.'
That evening he went riding north — a sad and lonely ride —
She locked herself inside her room, and there sat down and cried.

They'd parted but a year before, they loved each other well —
But she was such a country girl and he was such a swell;
They longed to meet in fond embrace, they hungered for a kiss —
But Mary called him 'Mister' and the idiot called her 'Miss.'

The cabbage tree hat also appears in Banjo Paterson's poetry.

River Bend

At River Bend, in New South Wales,
All alone among the whales,
Busting up some post and rails,
Sweet Belle Mahone.
In the blazing sun we stand,
Cabbage-tree hat, black velvet band,
Moleskins stiff with sweat and sand,
Sweet Belle Mahone.
In the burning sand we pine,
No one asks us to have a wine,
'Tis a jolly crooked line,
Sweet Belle Mahone.
When I am sitting on a log,
Looking like a great big frog,
Waiting for a Murray cod,
Sweet Belle Mahone.

The Shepherd

He wore an old blue shirt the night that first we met,
An old and tattered cabbage-tree concealed his locks of jet;
His footsteps had a languor, his voice a husky tone;
Both man and dog were spent with toil as they slowly wandered home.

I saw him but a moment—yet methinks I see him now
While his sheep were gently feeding 'neath the rugged mountain brow.
When next we met, the old blue shirt and cabbage-tree were gone;
A brand new suit of tweed and "Doctor Dod" he had put on;
Arm in arm with him was one who strove, and not in vain,
To ease his pockets of their load by drinking real champagne.

I saw him but a moment, and he was going a pace,
Shouting nobbler after nobbler, with a smile upon his face.
When next again I saw that man his suit of tweed was gone,
The old blue shirt and cabbage-tree once more he had put on;
Slowly he trudged along the road and took the well-known track
From the station he so lately left with a swag upon his back.

I saw him but a moment as he was walking by
With two black eyes and broken nose and a tear-drop in his eye.

The Stockmen Of Australia

The stockmen of Australia, what rowdy boys are they,
They will curse and swear an hurricane if you come in their way.
They dash along the forest on black, bay, brown, or grey,
And the stockmen of Australia, hard-riding boys are they.

By constant feats of horsemanship, they procure for us our grub,
And supply us with the fattest beef by hard work in the scrub.
To muster up the cattle they cease not night nor day,
And the stockmen of Australia, hard-riding boys are they.

Just mark him as he jogs along, his stockwhip on his knee,
His white mole pants and polished boots and jaunty cabbage- tree.
His horsey-pattern Crimean shirt of colours bright and gay,
And the stockmen of Australia, what dressy boys are they.

If you should chance to lose yourself and drop upon his camp,
He's there reclining on the ground, be it dry or be it damp.
He'll give you hearty welcome, and a stunning pot of tea,
For the stockmen of Australia, good-natured boys are they.

The poet John Barr (1809-1889) wrote 'We shrink not from the iron gangs of ruthless days of cabbage-tree hat...In famous days of cabbage-tree hat, they danced in hobnailed boots and spurs, they polka'd high, with stamp and go; they kissed the girls through whiskered furze, with smacks you'd hear at Bangalow'.

The cabbage tree hat even figured in mild exclamations! According to Green's Dictionary of Slang, "Oh, my cabbage tree" and "Why, darn my cabbage tree" were both mild oaths during the colonial period.

The Decline of the Cabbage Tree Hat

At the 1870 Inter-Colonial Exhibition held in Sydney, the cabbage tree hat was still popular. But difficult times were coming.

By the late 19th century, it had been virtually superseded by cheaper felt and machine-made straw hats. It was then that some people began to feel nostalgia for the cabbage tree hat. They associated it with the values of an older rural Australia, values which were disappearing with modernity and urbanisation.

As Dame Mary Gilmore wrote in 1922:

*It's only a rag of a cabbage tree hat
But no one could buy it for money
For it speaks of a day when the lean was the fat
With a taste of the salt in the honey
For life wasn't all of it skittles and beer
In the years when she plaited the strand
I hold like a friend, and a precious thing here
In the hollow and heart of my hand*

A Bushman's Farewell to His Cabbage Tree Hat (Federal Capital Pioneer, 1 Feb 1925).

Old hat, though I don't like a new one,
Through this war I must cast you aside;
You've proved a good friend, a true one,
Through many a blazing hot ride.

Each rip in your crown tells a story
Of our gallops o'er mountain and flat
And each patch is more to your glory,
My battered, old Cabbage-tree Hat.

We've streaked it, old hat, by the moonlight,
When the cattle were going like smoke,
We've heard the wild bull's distant bellow
In his stronghold 'mid the brigalows and oak.

You've been soaked in the floods of the Darling,
Cut to ribbons and tramped nearly flat
By the bullocks when they broke at "The Crossing,"
My hardy old Cabbage-tree Hat.

Though your crown be patched up with leather,
Though I've sewn you with horse-hair and string,
No more shall we travel together
When the mustering comes next spring.

For your work is ended--Rest peacefully there--
And should I through this war come to that,
I trust life may close with a record as true
As that of my Cabbage-tree Hat.

And more...

“Where now are the men who wore them – the lean, tall, silent men, with hands, arms, face and neck tanned mahogany-color; tireless in the saddle, sleepless on watch, to whom a smoke, a drink of water, and two holes taken up in the belt were as good as a feed? – Gone with the cabbage-tree hats... It is a hideous possibility that there are native-born youths of this free and democratic colony, grown to manhood, without having ever seen a cabbage-tree hat built on the old orthodox pattern.” (Ernest Favene, *Evening News*, Sydney, 7 November 1896)

“There will be few, if any, of the old cabbage tree hats that in days gone by were such a feature of rural life. They were home-made. They have been displaced because factory-made hats that provide good shade and give long service can be obtained so cheaply. These cabbage tree hats were light and gave one the necessary protection from the glaring sun. Few bushmen’s wives could not make one of these hats.” (*Newcastle Sun*, 21 October 1935)

In more recent years the cabbage tree hat has been recognized as an important Australian cultural icon, and any surviving colonial examples are highly cherished. A cabbage tree hat which had once been owned by settler Francis John White (1854-1934) is now held in the Armidale Regional History Museum. An 1880 hat is held in the Castlemaine Art Museum. In 1943 a nineteenth century cabbage tree hat was one of the first acquisitions of what is now the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (Powerhouse Museum).



The Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences hat