Timber Worker

The timber industry grew to be the most important source of income for the Busselton settlement, however it relied heavily on the strength and stamina of the timber workers. Prior to the establishment of mills, the timber was hand pit-sawn or hewn into squared logs with broad axes and adze.

Life was difficult for these men who worked long hours under very trying conditions. The pit sawyers have been described as a race apart, a hardy breed who earned for themselves a special place among the forgotten pioneers of the timber industry. The man in the pit, was caked in sawdust, tormented by flies, and often knelt all day in water. The worker at the top of the pit says,

’I had to lift the dead weight of a seven or eight foot saw about a thousand times a day, and I developed shoulder muscles and biceps bigger that any bloody village blacksmith. The only spell I’d get was between finishing one cut and getting the next one set up, and that usually involved levering and turning the log over and the frequent touching up of the teeth with a file. No such thing as a breather, and we had to work from daylight to dusk to make our dough.

About the bloke in the pit….all he had to do, once the cut was started, was to go: head down and tail up. The pull wasn’t all muscle; the greater part of it was just using his body weight. As for sawdust, all he had to do was to wear a big hat or pull a bag over his head, and make sure he didn’t get any in his eyes. We both pulled bags over our heads if it rained. I admit he had it bad in winter, kneeling in the water, but here was nothing that a couple of tots of rum couldn’t fix. Anyhow the flies would drive you mad and with both hands full of saw-handle, it was bloody hard to brush them off. The bottom bloke would be sweating like a pig of course, and soon every exposed part of his body had a coating of sawdust like a suit or armour. No fly could have bit him unless it had a sting an inch long!’

“The Forgotten Pioneers, Axemen – their Work, Times and Sport” (JP Gabbedy)

This work shows the timber worker squaring a log and presents a lesson on the use of a broad axe and the method employed.

Sculpture by Greg James
Image by J Happ