

BROGDEN NAVVIES

John Brogden senior died in 1869 having retired from the company in 1858. His eldest sons John and Alexander had been taken into partnership in 1846, followed by sons Henry and James. John junior had died in 1856 and on John senior's retirement, Alexander and James ran the company, Alexander as chairman and James as managing director. As railway construction in the UK was coming to an end, they looked for contracts overseas to maintain the company's success and this led them into partnership with the New Zealand government.

By the end of the 1860s, New Zealand was in a commercial depression and in an adventurous programme to change the country's fortunes, the government mounted an immigration drive and sought to improve internal communications with improved roads and an expanded railway system. They met with little success in their immigration programme having set unrealistic charges which few potential immigrants could find, especially those who were agricultural labourers. When the charges were replaced by loans, repayable at twice the amount loaned, there still few takers.

Julius Vogel, the New Zealand Colonial Treasurer, began a more dynamic programme by negotiating a deal with John Brogden and Sons: Brogdens were awarded a £500000 railway construction contract in 1871 plus the option of a second contract in which they would receive 3 million acres of land in return for £4 million worth of railways and 10 thousand immigrants. The New Zealand government rejected the second deal but perhaps in the hope of bigger contracts to come, Brogdens began to ship immigrants in 1872.

The Brogden scheme placed more of the financial burden of emigration on the company: the emigrants were guaranteed two years of work on Brogden railway construction at not less than 5 shillings per day (about twice the UK agricultural rate) with the costs of fares to London for embarkation, ship's "kit" and the voyage all met by the company. The recruits promised to pay Brogdens £16 per adult at a future date.

*John Brogden junior met the first shipment of recruits as they reached Wellington and transferred to a coastal steamer for the last part of the journey to Picton, across the Cook Strait, on the tip of South Island. He set the tone for future dealings with the company's recruits by trying to get the immigrants to agree to the minimum wages in their contracts but they had learned that wages and conditions in New Zealand were even better than they had expected and refused to settle for anything less than 6 shillings for a 9 hour day. In fact, 8 hour days were already the norm in New Zealand. Even so, the recruits sent letters home about the relatively good wages and hours, prompting increased interest in the Brogden scheme.

Brogdens had miscalculated, however. There was less work than they had bargained for, recruits arrived faster than they had imagined and, meanwhile, the New Zealand government improved their own scheme to include free passage which put the Brogden recruits at a disadvantage. Many refused to honour their promissory notes and gained work with other employers. By 1873 Brogdens had retained only 287 out of 1299 recruits and were owed £40000 in promissory notes. Attempts to take non-paying recruits to court failed to enforce the agreements and Brogdens didn't impress the courts when it became clear that the company had reneged on aspects of its agreements with the men. Brogdens had by now six contracts to fulfil and were obliged to offer higher wages and even to pay weekly subsistence to wives left in the UK.

Rollo Arnold concludes that despite the disputes with the company, the Brogden recruits settled well and gained successful employment. They often wrote home in very positive terms and sent for their families to join them. Many of these recruits were not navvies (ie railway or canal workers) but agricultural workers from rural areas in the UK such as Oxfordshire. Their emigration was to a large extent the result of Brogdens' recruitment campaigns and coincided with a period of unrest, low wages and poor working conditions at home. Agricultural prices were in a depression and many farmers were refusing to co-operate with the expanding agricultural labourers' unions. The shorter working week and much higher wages in New Zealand were very attractive to people who were expected to work at least 12 hours a day and keep their families on 2 or 3 shillings per week in the UK. When they got to New Zealand they also found a markedly different social structure, free of the forelock-tugging required by English farmers and their landlords. The Brogdens probably misunderstood how readily their recruits would absorb the New Zealand way of life, having made their fortunes in UK coal mines and railway building – industries not renowned at the time for good employer/employee relations.

The Brogdens' New Zealand enterprises were financially disastrous and they lost most of their contracts at the same time as their mining interests in the UK were in decline. By 1878 the Brogden coal mines in Wales went into receivership and in 1880 the company was dissolved. Alexander filed for bankruptcy in 1884 with debts of £724000 and died in 1892.

Mike Brogden
May 2002

Sources:

- Rollo Arnold; *The Farthest Promised Land*, Victoria University Press; 1981
- Les Gilpin; *The Bustling Alexander*, *Cumbrian Railways*, Vol 4 No 6, Oct 1989

*The source for this information is Rollo Arnold (see above) but Les Gilpin (also see above) says that John Brogden junior died in 1856, that the New Zealand contracts were managed by James and that Alexander was happy to send him overseas as they did not get on well!