

Blairgowrie

Some Blairgowrie History

Back Beach - Blairgowrie (Koonya to the Divide) - 1966 - Jack Ritchie

Author: **Jack Ritchie**. Posted to Eric Wills on 22/9/1966 after Jack Ritchie gave "a talk" to the Nepean Historical Society with a request for corrections or additions. (Original copy of typed manuscript and map obtained from Heather Harper 2011)

Introduction

It was the rock fishing and the love of nature which attracted many of the early settlers and visitors to the Sorrento back Beach and it is interesting to reflect that one of the first rock fishermen must have been John Pascoe Fawcner, who, as a boy of 11 years, was with his father at Collins First Settlement in 1803.

The settlement at Sullivan's Bay was very close to the narrowest point on the Nepean Peninsula - namely from Cameron's Bay to Koonya Ocean Beach. Fawcner speaks of hearing the continuous roar of the breakers. However, in spite of the dangers from the heavy seas, he apparently spent many an hour catching crayfish and mutton fish on the reefs ("A Pioneer of Two colonies: John Pascoe Fawcner, 1792-1869" A.J.Hopton, The Victorian Historical Magazine, Volume 30, February 1960. page 3). The attractions on the ocean beach, less than half an hours walk from the camp, even kept the convicts away from Sunday service parades until the threat of half rations ensured their attendance. Fawcner and others of the settlement must almost certainly have done their fishing from the reefs at Fairy Dell at the west end of Koonya Beach.

The Aboriginals

However, there were already fishermen on the ocean when Collins arrived in 1803 and even today we can find plenty of evidence of their activities.

While, the main camps must have been at positions where there was surface water, the aboriginals on the peninsula roamed right along the coast collecting shell fish and they have left numerous kitchen middens, both on the cliffs and sometimes in more sheltered positions behind the sandhills.

The middens or cooking areas consist of accumulations of broken shells - generally periwinkles, mutton fish and limpets - often mixed with traces of charcoal remaining from the fires. After cooking, the shells were broken to extract the fish and, in an undisturbed midden, one can sometimes find elongated "breaking stones", which were held in the hand and used as a hammer to break the shells against a flat stone anvil. There are some particularly large middens on the cliffs approaching Cape Schanck, but they could be found at many positions along the coast. Above Bridgewater, there are distinct strata sowing broken shells and charcoal running through the sand hammocks at the top of the cliff.

From the shells in the middens, it is clear that the periwinkles must have been much larger and more numerous than they are today and one also gets a useful guide as to which of the shellfish are edible. A limpet does not look a very attractive proposition, for example, but, having seen the number on the middens, I decided to try cooking them and find the soft part of the fish has a quite distinctive flavour.

One point of interest is that Mr. J.C. Le Soef tells me that numerous emu egg shell fragments have been found recently in one of the middens, indicating there were emus on the peninsula at one time.

Geological Features

Anyone interested in detail of the Mornington peninsula should refer to a very comprehensive report published first in 1950 by the Department of Mines (memoirs of the Geological Survey of Victoria, No.17 "The Mornington Peninsula", Department of Mines, Melbourne, 1950), but there are a few points of particular interest in the Blairgowrie area to be mentioned.

Firstly, dune limestone occurs throughout the area, the beds near the surface being generally of the order of 5' or 6' in thickness and worked extensively in the early lime burning days.

In the sand dunes, particularly the dunes behind Wreckage Bay, there are well formed incrustations which appear like fossil trees. In the early 1920's, I can remember these

standing up to 3' in height in thickets over the dunes and one particular spot was described as the "desert of dry bones". Although these incrustations are still easily found, they have suffered extensive damage over the years from people walking over the dunes.

An incrustation is not a true fossil. It originates from a limestone shell built up around a tree buried in the sand and the tree subsequently rots away, leaving its form as a shell with a hollow centre. Such incrustations are only formed in lime bearing sands, such as those in Sorrento.

From the nature of the dune sandstones, fossils are rare, but just east of Spray point there were bones embedded in the reef and described by T.S.Hall ("Victorian Hill and Dale - a series of geological Rambles" T.S.Hall, Lothin 1911) as being from a giant extinct Kangaroo. Traces of these were still detectable a few years ago.

Perhaps the final point of interest is that at one time there was another entrance or tideway to Port Phillip through the Koonya Beach - Camerons Bay neck. There is evidence for this in a deep scour hole in Capel Sound and the cliff formation at the west end of Koonya Beach suggests that this is where it may have entered Bass Strait.

Lime burning

A fairly complete account of the early Lime burning activities in the Portsea-Sorrento-Rye area has been given by Hollingshed ("The Nepean Peninsula in the Nineteenth Century", C.N.Hollingshed: The Victorian Historical Magazine, Vol 28, December 1958, page 145), his information being largely derived from the personal reminiscences of the late Mr. Harry Watts. My purpose here is to record what I know of the location of kilns in the Blairgowrie and Canterbury areas and to add a little to Hollingshed's paper of the personalities involved in working them - this being largely derived from the remembrances of Mrs. James Watson of Blairgowrie, Mr. & Mrs. Barney Cain, and Mr. and Mrs. W. Hill, all of Rye. Unfortunately when most of the kilns ceased burning, their structures were dismantled to provide either stone or bricks for building or road construction and little remains today to indicate their location, but some surrounding earthworks and the limestone surfaced tracks.

However, what is left is still of interest in giving some glimpse of a very different and colourful period on the peninsula.

While the main purpose of the limestone quarrying was for lime burning, the stone was also used for road construction. Many of the roads around Sorrento, including the old Point Nepean road, were surfaced with limestone. They were glary and dusty in the hot weather and, as children in the 1920's, we always referred to the highway between Sorrento and Blairgowrie as "The White Road".

While many of the kilns have gone, the evidence of quarrying activities in the form of shallow holes and mounds remain throughout many parts of the scrub in the Back Beach area. In particular, they will be found south of the Old Melbourne road and from St. Johns Wood Road to beyond Canterbury Jetty Road - all this land having been owned originally by the Cain family.

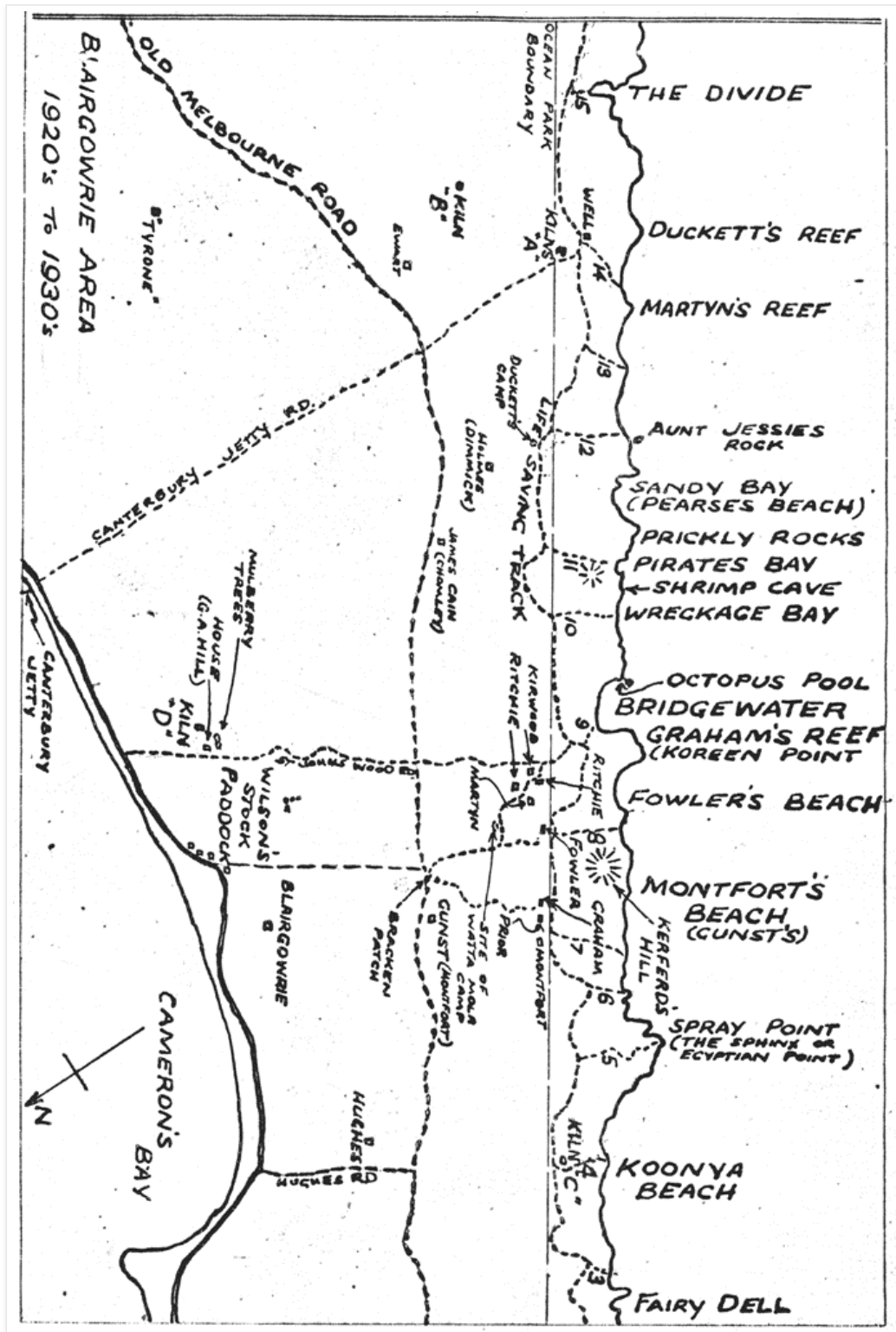
The limestone was close to the surface and the strata worked varied from 3' up to 5' or 6' in thickness. The stone was extracted with bars, picks and shovels or forks and loaded into heavy two wheel horse drawn drays. The impressions made by the heavy square-rimmed dray wheels could still be readily detected in many of the bush tracks in the 1920's.

Charging up the kilns was carried out with stone forks. These had numerous closely spaced tynes and screened out fine material. The screenings built up around the top of the kilns.

The Cain family, who have played such a prominent part in the early history of the peninsula, originated from Owen Cain of "Tyrone", who apparently settled there in 1842. I understand that he kept a store at "Tyrone" and a number of early lime burners quarried and burnt stone on his behalf, receiving stores and cash in exchange for the burnt lime.

The lime was originally loaded from the beach into small craft between Whitecliffs and Canterbury Jetty and the track providing access from "Tyrone" to the beach was referred to as "the landing road".

The kilns were always constructed in the side of the hill and consisted of vertical shafts lined with limestone and faced with hand made bricks, varying in diameter from perhaps 6' up to 8' or 10' and up to 25' or more in height. At the top was a flat loading platform, paved with limestone, and an access track up the hill for the drays. At the bottom of the shaft was a grate through which the burnt lime was raked to be bagged. The working floor in front of the grate was flanked by limestone wing walls holding back the earth and cut into the hillside. In one kiln I remember (see D below) these wing walls were buttressed with timber beams and the working floor area was roofed with galvanized iron sheets.



On the attached map have been marked the location of the kilns in the Blairgowrie back Beach area and the noted below refer to what I have been able to find of their history.

- A - There were two or three kilns at the end of Canterbury Jetty Road, and just inside the Ocean Park boundary. While these were dismantled to provide materials for a building in Rye, the loading platform is still clearly defined, half the form of the shaft of one kiln and the track to a working floor which presumably served all the kilns. What remains is immediately on the south west corner of the junction of the present Canterbury Jetty road and Ocean Drive. There are also numerous holes remaining from quarrying operations in the vicinity, and close by, at the junction of the old No. 14 Life Saving Track, a square limestone lined well. This perhaps provided water for the lime carters and their horses.
According to Hollinshead, these kilns were worked from about 1888 by Hughes for Messrs. Campbell, Youle and Walker and the Canterbury Jetty was built in 1887 for shipping the lime. These kilns are said to have worked until about 1900 when another kiln ("C") at the end of Hughes road was opened and worked by Hughs' sons. Amongst those that worked on the kilns at the end of Canterbury Jetty road was George Alexander Hill who later leased and worked a kiln ("D") near the bay end of St Johns Wood road. There was quite a settlement in the 1880's and 1890's at the

Canterbury Jetty road kilns and this was known as "Canvas Town". It apparently included some very colourful characters and amongst the limeburners and carters were included a fair number of Aborigines and Portuguese. Amongst those in the area at that time were Jim Ralph, Dan Doran and Joe Oliver ("Black Joe"). Several of them lived on there when the limeburning ceased. Jim Ralph had a hut just south-east of the Canterbury Jetty Road-Old Melbourne road junction.

On the opposite side of Canterbury Jetty Road was Joe Oliver. He is described as a big wild man, very dark skinned, from Terra del Fuego off the southern tip of South America. He lived with a young girl said to have been his wife (?), and existed mainly by fishing off the rocks. He is said to have been a particularly successful crayfisherman and he supplied the Sorrento hotels. Mr. Barney Cain remembers him grinding his own flour in a stone pestle and mortar.

- (B) There was another small kiln at this point east of Canterbury Jetty road. For many years it was a prominent land mark, and from a distance looked like a ruined castle on the skyline. We photographed it several years ago before the company subdividing the land took a road right through the centre of it.
- (C) At the end of Hughes road there was a kiln located, according to Mr. G. A. Watts, just above the lower parking area. I remember the loading platform of this just adjacent to the old No. 4 Life Saving track in the late 1920's and there is still evidence of the operations in the lime stone surfaced tracks approaching the site.
- (D) On John Cain's estate, and in the hill just north of the present Byron street, Blairgowrie, there was a large and perfectly preserved kiln right up to the late 1930's. At this time the wing walls fell in, and, when the land was subdivided after the war, the kiln shaft was filled in prior to erecting a residence on the site. This kiln was leased and worked by Mr. G.A. Hill up to about 1916, although he did not originally build it. Mr. Hill with his family lived in a four roomed galvanised iron cottage close to where St John Woods road now runs and immediately in front of the two ancient mulberry trees which still mark the site. These were still of majestic size as I remember them in the 1920's, and Mrs James Watson (daughter of Mr. G A. Hill) says that they were old when she first lived there as a girl. Mr. Hill also farmed this country under lease from Mr. Cain. The mulberry trees were part of an orchard, and immediately behind them were two wells.

After limeburning stopped, Benjamin Stenigain of Rye used to cut ti-tree firewood which was shipped to Melbourne bakeries from the Canterbury Jetty. In the 1920's, wood cutting was carried on throughout the Back Beach area to supply this trade.

Dr. George Graham

The story of the Blairgowrie Back Beach as a holiday resort starts with Dr. George Graham, a graduate in medicine from Dublin University, who first arrived in Perth in June 1853 as surgeon on the "labrina" with 320 emigrants. On the voyage, typhus broke out only two days after sailing, but thanks to Dr. Graham's efforts, there were only seven deaths on the ninety day voyage. On arrival in Perth, Dr. Graham was complimented by the Immigration Agent and this letter is still in the possession of his grandson, Dr. JWE Graham.

Dr. Graham must have returned again to England as there is another testimonial to him signed by all the emigrants on the ship "Utopia" written off Adelaide and dated July 9, 1858.

On settling in Australia, Dr. Graham lived for a short time in Adelaide and then moved to Melbourne where he practiced from his residence at Church Street where a number of other famous medicos of the time also resided and gave the area the name "doctor's hill". While in Melbourne, Dr. Graham completed post graduate studies at Melbourne University and was the first to complete the MD (Doctor of medicine) Degree, which was conferred on him in 1862. There is a brass plaque commemorating Dr. Graham in the University Medical Library.

How Dr. Graham came to take up land at Sorrento we do not know. However, it was at the period when Sorrento was being first promoted as a holiday resort by George Coppin and others and we must assume that he became interested at about the time land was first being selected in the late 1860's. Be that as it may, the fact is that he selected Crown Allotments 59A and 59B between the Ocean Park and the Old Melbourne Road and immediately behind the beach now known as Fowler's. These allotments are covered by Crown Grants made on 21/7/1873 and 17/12/1873, but we believe Dr. Graham may have held them under Crown Deed prior to these dates - possible back to about 1868-1870.

There is evidence for this in a testimonial he supplied to "A Guide in Sorrento" printed in 1876 a copy of which is held by the Nepean Historical society. Dr. Graham writes as follows: "I have the pleasure in stating that my family have resided periodically during the past six years on the Back Beach at Sorrento and have experienced the greatest amount of benefit by their sojourn there in the summer months. As the temperature is much lower than Melbourne, the effects of the north wind are not felt to be oppressive. As a residence for invalids, particularly children of a strumous or delicate constitution, I know of no other place in Victoria equal to it, more particularly on account of the water holding lime in solution in such quantities as renders it most beneficial to children whose bones are soft. One of my little ones was cured during the first month's stay at Sorrento."

The little one referred to was the late Mr. WAE Graham who, as a child was in irons for many years with bone trouble.

The dates of the Crown Grants and the testimonials lead us to conclude that Dr. Graham must have built on the back beach about 1870, although I believe the Flinders Shire Council Rate Books suggest that the date may have been as late as 1875-6. He built a wattle and daub house on the back beach boundary of this land and on a rise behind the sand dunes with an extensive view across to the bay. On the flat below the house was the well, lined with limestone and referred to in his testimonial. This well can still be identified.

The original house built by Dr. Graham forms half of the present house owned by the Fowler family.

Traveling to Sorrento must have been quite an undertaking in the 1870's. Dr. Graham used to speak of taking a vessel called the "Golden Crown" to Dromana and then driving by horse and trap along the beach. While in residence in Sorrento, the Graham's had some help in the house from a local Irish woman, whose husband was a lover of the bottle. She is reported to have said "he is as comfortable to live with as a porcupine".

Dr. Graham's neighbours as landowners in 1873 are also interesting. Crown Allotment 44 to the east running to the now St. John's Wood Road was held by JT Harcourt. To the west, Crown Allotment 50A was taken up by Judge GB Kerferd and Crown Allotment 50B by Dr. JW Gunst of whom there is more to say later. Kerferd had been one of the law officers in the Francis Cabinet of 1872, was later Attorney General and then appointed to the Supreme court in 1885. As far as we know, he never resided at the back beach, but a prominent sand hill immediately behind his original allotment has been known by local residents for many years as Kerferd Hill. (Note Kerferd died while on holiday at Sorrento)

Mr. Harcourt also never resided on his own land, but he almost certainly would have stayed with Dr. Graham. His testimonial also appears in the 1876 Guide to Sorrento as follows:

"Of all places visited by Victorians for pleasure, or as a resort to recoup from the exhaustion of town life or of the confirmed invalid, none, in my opinion, equals Sorrento."

Mr. Harcourt's address was Cremorne Private Retreat for the Insane and Inebriate.

My own house is on portion of Mr. Harcourt's original allotment and some of my friends think that the address he gave is still an appropriate one.

The connection with Harcourt is clear from the Obituary to Dr. George Graham, in the Australian Medical Journal of 1893 (Obituary - George Graham MD MRCS" The Australian Medical Journal Vol XV No.7 July 15, 1893, page 360). This states that he (Dr. Graham) was for some years medical officer of Mr. Harcourt's Private Lunatic Asylum and there he had the opportunity of exercising the special knowledge he had of mental disease. Mr. Harcourt's asylum was built on the site formerly known as Cremorne Gardens.

There are other points of interest concerning Dr. Graham's medical career. As indicated previously, he practiced first in Adelaide, but then moved to Melbourne and settled in Richmond. The Australian Medical Journal (Obituary - George Graham MD MRCS" The Australian Medical Journal Vol XV No.7 July 15, 1893, page 360) has this to say:

"Here (in Richmond) he was completely identified with it; his progress and had become in fact one of its local institutions. Perhaps no practitioner ever more completely gained the confidence of those who came under his care..... he had the happy art of making his patients his friends....."

Dr. Graham was one of the early members of the medical Society of Victoria and he was one of the original promoters (Victoria and Its metropolis - Past and Present, Volume II: The colony and its people in 1888") of the establishment of a branch in Victoria of the British medical Association. In 1883, he was its president.

In 1890 Dr. Graham sold his property at Sorrento to Mr. TW Fowler.

In 1893 he left Melbourne in the steamer "Thermopylae" to visit Great Britain and also to attend an international medical congress in Rome. He died suddenly during the voyage and was buried at sea.

"Henry Handel" Richardson

"Henry Handel" Richardson, famous Australian authoress of 'The fortunes of Richard Mahoney', was born in 1870 in Melbourne, her real name being Ethel Florence Lindsay Richardson. Her father, Dr. Walter Richardson, was a Dublin doctor who settled in Ballarat during the gold rush and made a substantial amount of money. He then retired and took his family, including Ethel, aged 4 years, on a trip to Europe. While away he lost his investments and had to start life again, embittered and alienated from society, as a general practitioner in Hawthorn, then Chiltern and finally Queenscliff. In Queenscliff, where he died, signs of madness had become obvious.

After his death his widow sent Ethel to Presbyterian Ladies College (Melbourne) as a boarder. Her book, "The Getting of Wisdom" first published in 1910, gives fictional treatment to her own childhood during this period. Laura in the book appears to be Henry Handel Richardson herself.

The point of particular interest here is the description in "The Getting of Wisdom" of a holiday spent by Laura at what could only be Sorrento and at a house, the description of which can only fit Dr. Graham's. At the time Laura would have been about 15 and as Ethel Richardson was born in 1870, this would place the date around 1885. Laura describes the trip as follows:

"Old Anne was waiting on the jetty, having hitched the horse to a post; she had driven in, in the "shandrydan" (Light two wheeled cart or any old, rickety conveyance) to meet Laura. For the cottage was not on the front beach it stood in the bush on the back beach, which gave to the open sea.

Laura took her seat beside the old woman in her linen sun bonnet, the body of the vehicle being packed full of groceries and other stores; and the drive began. Directly they were

clear of the township the road as good as ceased, became a mere sandy track, running through a scrub of ti-tree About a couple of miles out, the old woman alighted and slipped a rail, and having passed the only house within cooee (I believe this would have been Dr. Gunst's house) they drove through a paddock Another slip rail lowered, they drew up at the foot of a steepish hill, beside a sandy little vegetable garden, a shed and a pump. The house was perched on the top of a hill

The four-roomed, weather board cottage faced the bush; from the verandah was a wide view of the surrounding country. Between the back of the house and the beach rose a huge sandhill, sparsely grown with rushes and coarse grass, When you had laboriously attained the summit of the great dune, the sight that met you almost took your breath away; as far as the eye could reach, the bluest of sky melting into the bluest of seas, which broke its foam flecked edge against against the flat brown reefs"

In 1885 Dr. Graham still owned the property at Sorrento and it seems that with his interest in mental illness, he must certainly, in the small medical community of the 1880's, have known of Dr. Richardson. Furthermore they had both originally come from Dublin. It is not hard to conclude that Henry Handel Richardson's holiday at Sorrento could well have been arranged by Dr. Graham.

Dr J W Gunst

Dr. Gunst, who selected Crown Allotment 50B immediately west of Dr. Graham and Judge Kerferd, was a homeopathic doctor in East St. Kilda and doctor to my grandfather and his family. He also was the contributor of a testimonial in the Guide to Sorrento of 1876 and speaks of the benefit of the lime impregnated well water in the treatment of "longstanding diseases of the glands and bones". He said ".....when feeling broken down in health from overwork, a few days at Sorrento gives me strength....".

Dr. Graham and Dr. Gunst must certainly have been acquaintances and there is some suggestion that these two with Dr. James Blair, who built Blairgowrie, planned at one time to establish a Sanitarium at Sorrento.

The location of Dr. Gunst's house brings out an interesting point. The attached map shows it to be located close to the Old Melbourne Road i.e. a considerable distance from either beach. It is believed that the selection was based on a proposal to build a railway to Sorrento and the house would have been close to a projected station.

I understand that Dr. Gunst's land first appears in the Flinders Shire Council Rate Book in 1870 and a house is added in 1875.

However the reference in the 1876 Guide to Sorrento suggests to me that he may have built earlier. Certainly his reference to the well water suggests this. Dr. Gunst's house now named Longford Cottage, is still there on the Melbourne Road. His well also is still there in the hollow east of the house and holding water.

After Dr. Gunst's death, my grandmother, Mr. FH Ritchie, and one of her daughters, who had previously spent holidays in Sorrento, stayed with Mrs. Gunst - this would have been about 1900. This daughter, Mrs. JH Irving, remembers being driven out from the boat by "old black Joe" in a two wheeled cart. I believe "old black Joe" was the Joe Oliver referred to earlier.

"Old Black Joe" described one wreck at the divide on a wild night when they climbed down the western point to rescue the crew by basket on a rope - this would be the old rocket lifesaving apparatus. The story went that the last man was so drunk that he couldn't guide himself properly on the rope and was sucked by a wave out of the basket under the reef. I am certain this refers to the "Craigburn" a barque which was wrecked on May 8, 1891.

From the Gunst's house, it was necessary to walk into Sorrento for stores. Mrs. Gunst was apparently satisfied with a diet of potatoes and onions and there was a certain difference of opinion with my grandmother on the adequacy of this menu.

A year or so prior to 1900, a family of five - O'Donnells, friends of Mrs. Gunst - were washed in and drowned while fishing from the reefs east of Spray point. I was always told as a boy that they failed to observe the first rule for a rock fisherman - never fish with your back to the sea.

The Gunst house has passed to the Monfort family who resided there for many years. Their name has been given to the beach wets of Fowler's by local residents, although I think in the last century it was referred to as Gunst's beach.

Thomas Walker Fowler

It was in 1890 that Dr. George Graham sold his property to Mr.T.W.Fowler - giant of a man, 6'6" in height and broad in proportion - a man with high qualifications as an engineer and with wide interests.

Mr. and Mrs. Fowler are understood to have visited the Graham's at Sorrento in their courting days and, no doubt, the cushion bushes of the sand dunes contributed to the successful completion of this operation.

The small wattle and daub house originally erected by Dr. Graham had been supplemented with a second weather board house added on to the eastern end. Legend says the second house was originally on the flat below the hill. We believe it was moved in Dr. Graham's day.

The house is still held in the Fowler family and on one of the doorways are marked the family heights over four generations. Towering above all and just below the lintel is the 6'6" mark of Thomas Walker Fowler.

An interesting historic relics in the house is a door and door handle, said to have come from

the steamer "Alert" which foundered December 28, 1893 (Battling with Waves and Lawyers" J. Arbuckle Reid, Melbourne 1896) off what would now be Gunnamatta or Rye beach and from which the sole survivor, Robert Panting, was washed up near Jubilee Point. It was the loss of the "Alert" which it is believed resulted in the construction of the Life Saving track. Mr. Fowler's interests covered an amazing wide field. He was a lecturer in Engineering at the University of Melbourne, for a period served as Shire Engineer for the Shire of Flinders, and about 1913 had been appointed Engineer-in-Chief of the City of Hobart, Tasmania. After retirement, he lived at Sorrento until his death in 1929.

During his years of retirement, he erected a lookout platform at the back of the house and was most meticulous in his taking of daily weather readings and observations. He was also one of the first to realise the problems of erosion of the sand dunes in the Ocean Park Reserve and was responsible for the planting of marram grass over many of the dunes. This has only just been started again and current plantings still do not approach what was done in his day.

His interests were not, however, confined to the engineering field. The volumes of the Victorian Historical magazine ("The charting of the Victorian Coast Line: A Reply to Mr. Ernest Scott". Thomas Walker Fowler. The Victorian Historical Magazine, Volume 5, December 1916, page 49.) show that he made a critical study of the history of charting of the Victorian Coastline. In this work, he crossed swords with Mr. Ernest Scott (later Professor of History at Melbourne University). The point particularly at issue being whether Captain Cook in naming Point Hicks really referred to what is now Cape Everard.

A lecturer in Engineering, Mr. Fowler used to bring down parties of students for surveying exercises who camped in a shack on the flat below his house. It was on one of these occasions that the Octopus pool at Bridgewater is said to have acquired its name. This pool is at the east end of the beach nestling under a towering rock with convenient ledges for diving and running right to the sand on one side. It is about 14' in depth. On this historic morning it was hot and the students had broken their surveying work for a swim. All had come out except J. G. McKinley, one of the McKinley family of Brighton, all renowned in their day as strong swimmers. Suddenly McKinley was seen sprinting for the side of the pool with, it turned out an octopus in strong pursuit. He is said to have rolled out on the reef entangled with the octopus, which in due course was dispatched. The span over the tentacles is said to have been 12' - with a surveyor's measuring staff and not a fisherman's rule.

In the 1890's, I understand it was always Mr. Fowler's practice to take down a cow with them for the Christmas holiday period. The cow was shipped to Sorrento on the "Charlotte Fenwick" and then led to the back beach. Who would think of a cow as an item of luggage for the Christmas holidays?

In the period 1900-1912, a number of families, who shortly after acquired land and built houses or camps in the area, either stayed with the Fowler's or leased their house for the holidays. Amongst these were the Ritchies, Kirwood's, Mr. W.A.E. Graham, Mr. H.E. Prior. Mr. W.A.E. Graham, a dentist, was a son of Dr. Graham. He bought the land originally owned by Judge Kerferd and in about 1912, Mr. W. Clark of Sorrento built "Coote Hill" for him. This is immediately west of Dr. Graham's original house (now Fowler's). In the first days of cars, Mr. Graham and his sons would drive down, leave the car at Mr. George Hill's farm (and lime kiln) and walk by bush tracks across to the back beach. "Coote Hill" is now owned by Mr. B.A. Graham.

The Life Saving Track

The story of the life saving track along the ocean coast begins with two wrecks in the 1890's. The first was the barque "Craigburn" and the second, the small steamer "Alert". Let us picture Friday afternoon, May 8, 1891, in the days when lime burning at "Canvas Town" at the end of Canterbury jetty was still a thriving industry. It was a cold grey day, with a wild gale blowing from the south-west when the lime burners saw the four masted barque "Craigburn" loom up out of the mist and spray only two miles off shore. Her anchors had been thrown out in a desperate attempt to avoid being driven onto the reefs.

The "Craigburn", bound for New Zealand, had been towed out through the heads, but the howser slipped when she was only just outside. A factual account of what happened from a navigational viewpoint is given in "Shipwrecks at Port Phillip Heads 1840-1963" (Williams and Serle, Melbourne 1963) which I do not purpose to repeat in detail. It is sufficient to say that there was difference of opinion between the captain and the pilot and assistance from three tugs was refused, as the captain considered that the fees asked were exorbitant.

The vessel was off "Back Beach, Canterbury" (Sorrento Police Duty Book 9/5/1891.

Information from Mrs. McCraw) and all afternoon the lime burners watched from the cliff around the Divide. According to the Argus reporter of the day (The Argus, Monday, May 11, 1891 pages 7 & 8) many made no secret of their hopes for grog and plunder if the vessel was driven onto the reefs. As night approached, fires were lit around the top of the cliffs. About 8:15 pm, one boat left the ship and an attempt was made with fires to guide it in to the now "Blairgowrie back Beach". Meanwhile rockets were fired and blue lights burned to attract the lifeboat from Queenscliff. A second boat got away, but after being nearly swamped was finally capsized in the breakers and the survivors scrambled over the reefs to the foot of the cliffs.

The Argus carried full accounts (9/5/1891 and 11/5/1891) from eye witnesses, but the following report (9/5/1891) gives a vivid picture:

"A number of men who were employed at the lime works saw the boats leave the ship and lit fires on the sandy beach to attract them.... the men were watching the vessel from the

cliffs, when above the roar of the waves was heard a man's cry.... Presently the cry was heard again and, with the aid of a lantern, the boat's crew was found in a bay called The Divide. The men lit fires all along the brow of the cliffs, so that they could see into the waters of the inlets, and took the survivors to their houses."

By 11 pm on the Friday night, the "Craigburn" was bumping and next morning was broadside onto the reef and going to pieces.

The tragedy was certainly due, very largely, to disagreement between the pilot and the captain and the refusal of the captain to pay a high towing fee when the hawser was first slipped. However once it became obvious that the vessel would go ashore there was a long delay before life saving gear arrived.

At this time the lifeboat was based at Queenscliff and there was no life saving apparatus kept at Sorrento. Although the "Craigburn" started firing distress rockets at 8pm, it was not until 11pm that the lifeboat left Queenscliff and it then took until 2:30am on Saturday morning to reach Sorrento. A horse and dray then had to be found and, with Superintendent Dickson of the Sorrento police, there was a long slow trek over the sand bush tracks to reach the Divide Bay (The Argus, Saturday May 9, 1891). On arrival with the life saving equipment, there was then further delay in setting up the tripod at the shore end and getting lines to the ship, on which 4 men still remained. Three, including the Captain, were brought safely to shore, but the Chief Officer, Muir, was sucked or washed out of the "bosun's chair" and drowned.

The Argus of Monday May 11 carried a leading article on the scandal of the wreck and included a plea for improved life saving service on shore.

Apparently here was no action to improve the position immediately, as 2 and a half years later the same delays arose in searching the coast for survivors of the "Alert".

The Alert was a small iron ship that ran between Melbourne and Bairnsdale (East Gippsland). It was a steamship rigged with fore sails (on front half of ship). Aft sails can be used to turn a ship into bad weather if her motor was unable to counteract the wind, but fore sails were no use for this. She was carrying general cargo, mainly wattle bark, on a voyage from Metung to Melbourne. Again there was a strong south-westerly blowing and she was soon in difficulty after passing Cape Schanck. A full account will be found in "Battling the Waves and Lawyers" (Battling with Waves and Lawyers" J. Arbuckle Reid, Melbourne 1896). Suffice to say that about 3 miles south-west of the Schanck, Alert foundered, leaving the survivors clinging as best they could to whatever planks and debris remained floating. There was only one survivor, Robert Panting, washed up on the beach near Jubilee Point. It was not until he was found that anyone knew of the loss of the vessel. A search was immediately made for other possible survivors and, again, there was serious delay in reaching points along the coast, because the lifesaving equipment was located in Queenscliff.

A column in the Argus Monday January 1, 1894 carried the following paragraph:

"the disaster brings into prominence the necessity for improving the means of communication between Sorrento and the Back Beach. New tracks are required, while it is evident that existing roads should be more closely connected with the shore."

It was as a result of the loss of the Alert that steps were taken, firstly to locate lifesaving equipment at Sorrento and, secondly to cut a track to provide access to points along the coast.

At this stage, I have not been able to establish the date that the Life Saving Track was first cut, but Mr. GA Watts thinks that Constable Rawlings advised on its location and that the date was probably between 1900 and 1910. Rocket apparatus was provided and located in Sorrento, where I believe, it is still housed and inspected annually.

A rocket attached to a string was fired out to a wreck, and hopefully, a heavier rope was then pulled out to the wreck. passengers and then crew were helped ashore by various methods e.g. attached to a rope and hauled in; flying fox etc. Rocket equipment used at wrecks often came under heavy criticism. Lack of maintenance often left rescuers with obsolete equipment in poor repair. There is also an annual grant still made for the maintenance of the Life Saving Track. Mr. SV Kirwood remembers that, around 1910, the rocket apparatus used to be brought out for practice along the back beach.

In view of the loss of the Alert in 1894, it would not be surprising to find that a section of the track, at any rate, was established around the turn of the century, but it could well have been widened and extended later. As my aunts remember it about 1910, the signposts on the track were all freshly painted and appeared comparatively new. As I recall it in the 1920's, the signs were all still standing and we were familiar with its full length from No. 1 (St. Paul's) up to No. 16 (now Blairgowrie Ocean Beach).

The location of the Life Saving Track, with its access tracks to the coast, is shown on the attached map. The main track ran behind the sand dunes and each access track was numbered e.g. Life saving Track No.9. Other than the section between No.10 and No.12, where it entered private property, the track can still be followed by anyone familiar with the country.

It is one of my objectives to see if steps can be taken to re-open the Life Saving track as a walking track only and to arrange for marking of points of historic interest along the coast.

The Camps 1900-1914

Mrs. FH Ritchie (my grandmother) and her family had holidayed for several years at Sorrento in the 1890's, each year, walking further east on the ocean coast, to escape the crowds !! Then Mrs. Gunst, widow of the family doctor, invited them to stay with her, which Mrs. Ritchie and her daughters did on two occasions about 1900 and 1901. It was a long

walk from the Gunst house to the Back Beach and this led Mrs. Ritchie to look for something closer and to also see if she could buy some land. The Fowler's house was rented on several occasions and during this time Mr. DO Ritchie heard of and bought it on behalf of the family. Crown Allotment 44 is the land originally selected by Mr. Harcourt.

This land was then divided, one piece going to Mrs. FH Ritchie, one to Mr. William Kirwood, one to my father Mr.E.G. Ritchie, with Mr.DO Ritchie retaining the balance. Mr.William Kirwood was a brother of Mrs.FH Ritchie (who had been Mrs.Eliza Kirwood) and he had also been seeking land at the request of his son, Mr.SV Kirwood, who with Messrs, Harry and Alex McKinley, had started camping in the area. They had established a semi-permanent camp near the sight of the Kirwood's present home, with three tents and boxes for storage of crockery etc.

In 1909, Mr. Alex Russell erected a "camp house" for the Ritchies and this was known as "Bridgewater Camp". It consisted of an unlined house with and eight bunk bedroom for the girls, a living room, kitchen and small room for Mrs. FH Ritchie. The men camped in tents. This house was first occupied at Christmas 1909.

Mrs.Jean Ritchie (now Mrs. JH Irving), her two sisters (Mrs. Enid Ritchie and Mrs.G. Weatherstone) and Miss Lizzie McKinley, firstly at the Fowler's and subsequently at Bridgewater Camp, were responsible for bringing down parties of girls, a number of whom were fellow students at the University Conservatorium. The early housekeeping records are interesting. At Christmas 1908 at the Fowler's, total cost including rent and food worked out at 1 shilling and a halfpenny a day each.

Meantime, Mr.Fowler had subdivided a portion of his land, one allotment being sold to Mr HE Prior of Brown, Prior and Anderson, Printers. Mr. Henry Prior and a syndicate of friends, amongst whom were Messrs. Price, W Chitty, P Chitty, Gowar and Baker, established Watta-mola (by the sound of the sea) camp essentially a bachelor establishment, but with selected girls welcome (judging by some early photographs). An account of the camp written by HE Prior and published in the printers' journal of 1909 gives an interesting account of the traveling and camping at the time:

"This new Year, the "Call of the Wild", in the shape of an invitation to Camp Watta-mola near Sorrento, tempts a few of us....

A pleasant trip down the bay, but two long for the advanced ideas of one member who.... looks forward to the time when, during summer months, one will leave Melbourne at 5:30pm, have his evening meal at 7pm in his seaside house at Sorrento, leave there at 8am and be at business in the city by 9:30am.

There is much summer girl and summer boy on Queenscliff and Sorrento piers and our cynic remarks how many present day young men, instead of taking to gun and rod or other manly sports, hang about the piers and esplanades posing for effect and admiration. Yachtsmen are here also, too neat and trim to be over workmanlike and various bands of town-lot campers, whose chief object seems to be roaming about in hordes and making the air resound with hideous noises. Vehicles are in great demand, but we secure an ancient looking concern drawn by a pair of mature steeds.....

A drive of about 3 miles over a road winding in and out the thickly clustered ti-tree and we reach Watta-mola prettily situated in a small clearing, surrounded by ti-tree, honeysuckles and sheoaks.

The dining room, an outdoor apartment, consists of a rood comprised of shingles and flattened kerosene tins and showing more roof angles than a Queen Anne Villa, with a number of boxes in tiers at one end to serve as cupboards.... The sleeping apartment is a much more pretentious structure, being weatherboard with galvanised iron roof, and contained six bunks."

Mr. Percy Chitty, one of the original "Watta-molas", kept a full record as a Watta-mola log of the times and this, now in the possession of his son Mr. John W. Chitty, is full of interest. The area, referred to in Sorrento at the time as "The Camps" was quite isolated at this time. The story goes that, on one occasion, Mr. Percy Chitty and a friend had been camping for 6 weeks at Watta-mola living off the land by fishing and shooting. One morning Mr. Chitty's friend came running back, full of excitement from a shooting expedition, saying, "Perc, I saw a man".

Mr. Fowler had also rented the shack, previously used for his parties of surveying students, to the Price family. One of them, Miss Nellie Price, was drowned on the Back Beach after going to the assistance of her sister, Miss Ethel Price, who got into difficulties while swimming.. The Prices never returned after this tragedy.

About the same period, but further along the coast Near No.12 Life Saving Track, a fishing camp had been set up by Messrs. Albert and Arthur Duckett of Edward Duckett & Sons, well known Melbourne hardware merchants of the time. Albert was short and known as "the little bloke" while his brother Arthur "the big bloke" was a great sportsman - tall and very strong. The Duckett's were great fishermen and, as with all the other rock fishermen of the time, delighted in a uniform consisting of the most ancient and disreputable clothing. I can well remember my own father's fishing clothes, green with mildew and so stiff with salt that the trousers would almost stand up unaided.

The Duckett's used to store their camping gear with Ted Chomley, an old pensioner and rabbit trapper, who lived in James Cain's old house.

The Duckett's also remember "Black Joe Oliver" and gave him a wide berth when he was drunk, which was apparently not infrequent after he had sold his crayfish on the pier or to the Continental Hotel. Mr. Noel Duckett speaks of him living under the most primitive of conditions with his wife, Eva, and on one occasion, participating in the dispatching of a whale on the Back Beach. He would bite the head off a fish as the quickest way of removing it from his hook.

The Fire January 1910

On the Saturday of the Australian Day weekend at the end of January 1910, a fire sweeping through the scrub from the east burnt out the Ritchie's house (completed only a few weeks previously), Kirwood's, and Watta-mola camps and threatened both the Fowler's and Gunst's houses.

At Bridgewater Camp four of the girls, Misses Annie Kennedy, Stella and Eileen Lewis, and Ella McNeil, had packed ready to go on the afternoon boat. During the morning a message from Mr. Fowler told them not to worry about a fire at the back of Rye as he was watching it with his telescope.

As they were having lunch at Bridgewater, Ella McNeil exclaimed "where are those black smuts coming from?", and at that moment, Mr. & Mrs. Fowler burst in and said "Get out at once, the fire is right on you!". As they ran with their luggage and what bedding could be picked up, along the track to the Fowler's, the flames were licking along each side of them. Miss Stella Lewis was a National Gallery student and her basket was filled with paints and too heavy to manage alone. Miss Kennedy dropped her own basket and came to her assistance.

After the fire had passed, the remains of Annie Kennedy's dress basket were found. Included in the basket was a crayfish she had packed to take home. Everything was burnt excepting the crayfish, which, now perfectly cooked, reposed in the centre of the track. Meantime, Messrs. EG and DO Ritchie, Percy Chitty, H Prior and Miss E Ritchie had come to Sorrento on the boat for the weekend. Approaching Sorrento, they saw the smoke and were informed there that the camps had been burned. They were able to get as far as the Gunst's in the trap, where Miss E Ritchie stayed and then went on to spend the rest of the afternoon beating out the smouldering ruins.

Bridgewater was rebuilt during 1910 on the same site, as was Watta-mola camp. Shortly afterwards, Mr. William Kirwood built on his land, and on his retirement lived at Sorrento. Meanwhile, Mr WAE Graham had built "Coote Hill" and persuaded Mr. Henry Prior to build adjacent to him. Mr. Prior named his new home "Watta-mola" and the old camp below the Fowler's was dismantled.

The 1920's

My own memory of the back Beach goes back to 1920, when, at the age of 5, my father took me for the first of my holidays to Bridgewater camp.

We would travel down (by water) on the Weeroona and then drive out, loaded with stores and luggage, in Mr. Bill Clark's trap. Those were the days when the steam tram still ran from the point above the pier to the Sorrento Ocean Beach.

The trip to the camp seemed to take hours; firstly along the white road and then from Hughes road corner, through deep black sand tracks with the horses struggling up each rise. The daily routine at the camp did not vary. There were always fish for breakfast - great mountains of fried fillets of sweep, leather jackets, butter fish and so on. After breakfast, lunch and tea were packed and the rest of the day was spent on the beach at Bridgewater. In those days we had the beach completely to ourselves and the odd day picnickers were looked on as trespassers.

In the centre of the bay was a shallow cave, which was our headquarters and in which we kept clothing, cooking utensils and rough driftwood tables throughout the summer holidays. The whole day, irrespective of whether the tide was in or out, was spent at the beach, swimming, fishing and exploring the coastline and reefs.

All the reefs and inlets carried names, most of them associated with fishing exploits - sharks point, the weedy crack, Jimmy's point, the face, the crevice, sprained ankle reef, Ritchies reef and many more.

Most of our swimming was in the octopus pool where we all learnt to swim and dive. Costumes in the early 1920's were, of course, all neck to knee. I can well remember my own, a two piece outfit with horizontal black and white stripes, in which I fondly imagined I looked like a striped perch in the water.

In 1925, my father EG Ritchie, the Engineer of Water Supply for Melbourne, built the first section of my present house, "Carrmaar" (in the shade of the trees"). This was built by Mr. Harry Watts, famous in Sorrento history, and a year or so later he added a second wing, making it's present L shape. At "Carramar from 1925 onwards, we would spend six weeks at Christmas and the school holidays at Easter, May and September.

With cars and roads today the area is only minutes from Sorrento, but in the 1920's we were really quite isolated. The only contact with Sorrento was a bi-weekly visit by Mr. Jack Thorpe, a great character from stringers Stores, who would deliver bread, groceries and meat. Milk was obtained from Mrs. James Watson, now of Blairgowrie and later from Mr. Reg Dimmick, who farmed a property formerly owned by Mr. Ernie Holmes. Rabbits were bought from Ted Chomley.

Catering must have presented some problems. Butter for the holidays used to be taken down from Melbourne and preserved in brine and our only means of keeping food cold was a Coolgardie safe. My mother's records show that it cost about 8' (pennies ?) per person per meal in those days.

Naturally, of course, we depended very largely on the sea. Invariably in the summer at least one meal would be fish and crayfish was also regularly on the menu. In May and September, we often found mushrooms in the bush. I can remember one fortnight in September when we had mushrooms every day. Later, when the track was opened along St. Johns Wood Road, Mr. George Hill's mulberry trees made their contribution to our diet.

Our nearest neighbours were the Kirwood's. Mr. William Kirwood had retired to Sorrento and, after his death, Mrs. Jessie Kirwood lived on there with her daughter for some years. In those days she had a stable and a phaeton with a brown mare. Like most others there at the time, she was a keen fisherwoman and one of her favourite spots - a rock at No12 from which one can fish at high tide - has always been known to us as Aunt Jessie's rock. In the late 1920's, Mr. PL Martyn, and old family friend of the Kirwood's, also built. Annual cricket and swimming competitions were held regularly between Carrmaar and the Martyns. Swimming in the octopus pool and cricket in the Kirwood's horse paddock. Further west, Mr. TW Fowler had retired to Sorrento and lived there until he died in 1929. It was his son-in-law, Mr. Eric W Wills, who was responsible for a memorial plaque which has intrigued many visitors to Koreen Point (Graham's Reef).

Mrs. Wills (who had been Miss Madge Fowler) was a renowned fisherwoman and the memorial plaque referred to was inserted in the cliffs of Graham's reef, looking out over the fishing spots which she knew so well.

Mr. Wills was also responsible for the concrete "aquariums" built at the base of the cliff at the point. These were simply pools in which fish could be kept and then removed when needed. In the days before refrigeration, it was a very practical way of keeping fish. The construction of these was no mean feat. Mr. Wills would lay as much quick-setting cement as he dared between tides and then cover with a layer of Plaster of Paris. This would harden quickly and provide protection for a sufficient period until the cement set. Only a small section could be erected at a time.

Beyond the Fowler's was Mr. WAE Graham at "Coote Hill" and then Mr. & Mrs Prior at "Wattamola". In the early 1920's, Dr. JWE Graham can well remember driving a jinker on shooting expeditions along the Life Saving Track, with morning tea and an exchange of rabbits for fish at Duckett's camp.

Looking back it seems hard to believe that one could spend such long holidays, isolated with four or five neighboring houses and no desire to visit with the township of Sorrento. In fact, there was always something to do - fishing, swimming or cray fishing, walks along coast on the Life saving Track, trips to George's Hill's lime kiln and mulberry trees, possums to be caught and tamed as pets, shooting expeditions and competitions and so on.

Acknowledgements:

This paper is very largely a collection of personal reminiscences and it could not have been done without the help of a number of people.

Apart from members of my own family, I would like to record my thanks to:

Dr. JWE and Mr. BA Graham (Grandsons of Dr. G Graham)

Mr. Eric W. Wills (Son in law of Mr. TW Fowler)

Mr. SV Kirwood

Mr. Noel Duckett

Mr. Gilbert A Watts (of Sorrento)

Mrs. James Watson (of Blairgowrie)

Mr. & Mrs. Barney Cain (of Rye)

Mr. & Mrs. W Hill (of Rye)

Mr. J D Doyle (Grandson of Mr. TW Fowler)

References:

1. "A Pioneer of two Colonies : John Pascoe.Fawkner, 1792 -1869" A.J. Hopton, The Victorians Historical Magazine, Vol. 30, Feb 1960, p 3.
2. Memoirs of the Geological Survey of Victoria, No. 17 "The Mornington Peninsula", "Department of Mines, Melbourne, 1950.
3. "Victorian Hill and Dale -A series of Geological Rambles" T.S. Hall, Lothian 1911.
4. The Nepean Peninsula in the Nineteenth Century" C.N. Hollinshed; The Victorian Historical Magazine, Vol.28, Dec. 1958, p 145.
5. "A Guide to Sorrento". Published in 1876.
6. "Obituary - George Graham M.D., M.R. C. S. "The Australian Medical Journal Vol. XV No.7, July 15, 1893, p 360.
7. "Death of Dr. Graham -One of Victoria's Prominent Men" : The Sun - The Society Courier. Vol VI -No.27. Friday, July 7, 1893, p 11.
8. "Victoria and Its Metropolis - Past and Present, Vol. II : The Colony and Its People in 1888"
9. "Battling with Waves and Lawyers" - J . Arbuckle Reid Melbourne 1896.
10. "The Charting of the Victorian Coast Line : A Reply to Mr . Ernest Scott" : Thomas Walker Fowler: The Victorian Historical Magazine, Vol 5, Dec 1916, p 49.
11. "Shipwrecks at Port Philli p Heads 1840-1963". Williams and Serle, Melbourne 1963.
12. Sorrento Police Duty Book - 9.5.91 (Information from Mrs. McCraw.)
13. "The Argus", Saturday 9th May 1891.
14. "The Argus", Monday 11th May, 1891, Pages 7 and 8.
15. "The Argus", Monday 1st January, 1894.



Email ThisBlogThis!Share to TwitterShare to FacebookShare to Pinterest

No comments:

[Post a Comment](#)

[Older Post](#) [Home](#)

Subscribe to: [Post Comments \(Atom\)](#)

[Search This Blog](#)

Popular Posts

[Blairgowrie History \(Jack Ritchie\)](#)
[Brief History of the Sorrento - Portsea - Point Nepean Area](#)
[Back Beach - Blairgowrie \(Koonya to the Divide\) - 1966 - Jack Ritchie](#)
[1803 Collins Settlement, Sullivan Bay, Sorrento](#)

View [Roseville @ Blairgowrie](#) in a larger map

Read and Visit

- [Brief History of the Sorrento - Portsea - Point Nepean Area](#)
- [Blairgowrie Back Beach - Koonya to the Divide \(Jack Ritchie\)](#)
- [Blairgowrie History \(Jack Ritchie\)](#)
- [Walking Tracks Around Roseville \(full peninsula \(PDF\)\)](#)
- [Blairgowrie Travel Guide](#)
- [Arthurs Seat - The Enchanted Maze](#)
- [Blairgowrie, Victoria \(Wikipedia\)](#)
- [Bridgewater Bay \(Parks Vic\)](#)
- [Cape Schank Light House](#)
- [Collins Settlement Site \(First Vic Settlement\) \(Parks Vic\)](#)
- [Mornington Peninsula \(WikiVoyage\)](#)
- [Photo of Bridgewater Bay \(probably 1920s\) \(SLV\)](#)
- [Photo of Fowlers Beach \(probably 1920s\) \(SLV\)](#)
- [Point Nepean National Park](#)
- [Portsea Quarantine Station](#)
- [Sorrento Beachside Visitors centre](#)
- [Sorrento Museum - Nepean Historical Society](#)
- [Sorrento, Victoria \(Wikipedia\)](#)
- [SS Alert Foundered off Cape Schanck: December 28th 1893](#)
- [1803 Collins Settlement Site, Sullivan Bay, Sorrento](#)
- [Sullivans Bay \(First Vic Settlement\) \(Wikipedia\)](#)
- [Tourist WebSite: Visit Mornington Peninsula](#)

Simple theme. Theme images by konradlew. Powered by Blogger.