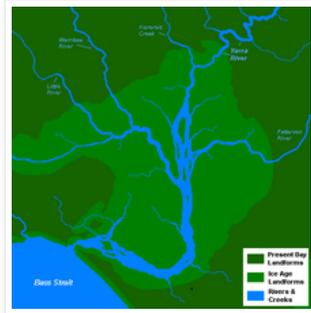# Blairgowrie

Some Blairgowrie History

Brief History of the Sorrento - Portsea - Point Nepean Area

Geology

Sometime before 6000 BC, (after the end of the most recent Ice Age about 8000 BC), the Yarra river was probably joined with other tributaries such as rivers now called the Patterson, Kororoit, Werribee, Little, and drained directly into Bass Strait through what is now called the Rip. Between 8000 BC and 6000 BC, the basin flooded forming Port Phillip Bay and moving the "mouth" of the Yarra over 50 km inland.[6]
A dry period combined with sand bar formation may have dried the bay out as recently as between 800 BC and 1000 AD extending the yarra to bass strait during this period.[7]

The Nepean peninsula, even mainly composed of compacted sand dunes, is partially protected against erosion by the reefs along is southern sea border.

PreHistory

Aborigines used the peninsula on a seasonal basis for collecting and cooking shellfish. The Bunurong tribe had a semi-permanent camp near the present corner of Boneo Road and Cape Schanck Road. Members of the tribe traveled up and down the coast in search of shellfish and other foods such as kangaroos, possum, goannas (up to 10 ft. long and called "Gippsland crocodiles").
The ocean beaches were used as feasting grounds and "**middens**" have been exposed by the eroding sand on cliff tops in many places.
The estimated population was about 200. Low numbers are most likely to be due to tribal fights, murders, infanticide despite the practice of polygamy.

European discovery of Bass Strait

It was a shipwreck that first gave the hint that there was a strait separating Australia from **Van Dieman's Land** (now **Tasmania**). When the master of the wrecked ship, The **Sydney Cove**, reached Sydney, after being rescued from preservation island in 1797, he reported that the strong south-westerly swell and tides and currents suggested that there was a channel linking the Pacific and Southern Indian Oceans.

Late in 1797, Governor **Hunter** sent George **Bass** to investigate the area. Bass could not explore the entire strait as it was a rough stretch of water and his craft was only a 28 foot whaleboat with 6 strong oarsmen.

Matthew **Flinders** later explored the strait in a larger vessel. Further exploration and surveying was done later by Flinders who also rowed across the bay to the Bellarine Peninsula. Flinders encountered French ships on scientific research.
In April 1802, he wrote "There are many marks of natives such as deserted fireplaces and heaps of oyster shells".

Practical importance of Bass Strait

The strait provided a safer, less boisterous route to the west saving 700 miles around the south of Van Diemen's land. Governor **King** noted in 1803 that ships "saved much time, bad weather, and most probably lives by that passage".
Governor King sent Lieutenant **Murray** in the **Lady Nelson** to explore Bass Strait on three occasions. **Cape Schanck** was named after the designer of the Lady Nelson who was also a friend of Bass & Flinders.
On Sunday, February 14, 1802, during the third voyage, she entered the "**Rip**" (as the narrow entrance to the bay has come to be called) to anchor off what is now **Sorrento**.
Lieutenant Murray wrote on February 15, 1802 "Away to the eastward at the distance of 20 miles the land is mountainous, in particular there is one very high mountain which in the meantime I named **Arthur's Seat** from its resemblance to a mountain of that name a few miles from Edinburgh" (Scotland).
Murray named the bay **Port King** (after the governor of NSW. Phillip King. King later changed it to **Port Phillip** in honour of Australia's first governor, Captain Arthur Phillip) and spent 25 days surveying the area.

In a "**Ceremony of Possession**" on March 1802 at a spot on Point King (now marked by a cairn,) he declaring it to be the property of "His Sacred Majesty, King George the Third" (of England). This may have been the first of these ceremonies in Australia that used the
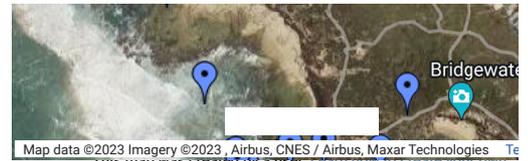
"**Union Jack**" Flag. The Union Jack combining the crosses of Saints George (England), Andrew (Scotland) and Patrick (Ireland). Previously the Flag showed only the crosses of Saints George and Andrew.

Government Support for a British Settlement

 In 1800, Britain occupied only Botany Bay (Sydney) and Norfolk island. From 1803 until 1824, a series of isolated settlements were made on the north, west and south coasts to guard trade routes and promote British expansion as an alternative to the **French**. For example, in 1803, orders were made for settlements in Port Phillip Bay (Sullivan's Bay, later Sorrento), the north coast of Van Diemens Land (later Tamar, Tasmania) and on King Island in Bass Strait. None of these was a success. The strait was strategically important as a potential place for privateers or raiders. It also had recognised potential as a sealing and whaling station. There was a desire to seek out sources of supply for timber and flax fro rebuilding the British fleets from war losses. It would also be a convenient support base on a trade route to Sydney.

France was at war with Britain during much of the 1800's - The Napoleonic Wars. French traders were beginning to compete with the British in India. The French held the Island of Maritious from which they attacked British merchant ships during these years. Specifically, the French were showing interest in Australia and Bass Strait. St Allouran had claimed Western Australia for France in 1772. The expeditions of the Geographe and the Naturaliste in 1802 had been allowed peaceful passage due to their scientific purpose. Nevertheless, the British were alarmed at the detail of the interest they showed in the coastline.

Deciding on a Location for a British Settlement. Governor King dispatched another ship under the command of acting Lieutenant **Robbins** and several "specialists" Charles **Grime**, Surveyor-General; and James **Fleming** a soil specialist, to make a detailed report on the suitability for a settlement. During this exploration, Grimes discovered two huts, apparently built by Europeans near Boniyong (now Boneo). The origin of these huts has never been explained.

Robbin and Grimes reported favourably on the peninsula. Fleming suggested the most appropriate settlement location was on the Yarra River.

Unsuccessful settlement at Sullivan's Bay 1803-1804

 Lieutenant-Colonel David **Collins** of the Royal Marines was ordered to establish a settlement on Port Phillip Bay and act as Lieutenant Governor. He sailed from Portsmouth in April 1803 in two ships.

HMS **Calcutta** was a Royal Navy vessel of 1200 tons carrying 50 guns under Captain Daniel **Woodrif**. Its passengers were Collins, the Chaplain, the Reverend Robert **Knopwood**; the marines and wives, and the convicts.

The **Ocean** was a merchant vessel of only 481 tons commanded by Captain J **Mertho**. It carried the civil officers, 18 free settlers with their wives and children and most of the stores for the new colony.

The 299 **convicts** (not including the 9 who dies on the voyage) whose ages ranged from 9 to 57, came mainly from England and about two-thirds were serving sentences for larceny. 43 were women. Collins, like a number of his fellow officers, had taken a mistress from among them.

The location was probably more related to the need to guard the entrance to the bay than to its long term suitability for a colony. In October 1803, Collins, commanding the Calcutta and Ocean, entered Port Phillip Bay and landed at Sullivan bay (between the headlands called the "Sisters" near present day Rye).

The settlement location suffered from sandy soil not ideal for cultivation and lack of fresh water. Brackish water could be obtained only by digging in the sand above the high water mark on Cameron's Bight immediately north of the eastern "Sister" (the name given to the headland) and placing perforated barrels in the holes.

The news of Grimes' discovery of the **Yarra** on February 2, 1803 had traveled to London via Sydney and was not known to Collins.

Collins wished to cultivate friendly relations with the aborigines and he expected everyone on the settlement to follow his example.

While the new settlers were beginning to clear land and plant crops, Collins dispatched parties to explore Port Phillip bay, in particular to survey the timber resources and to harvest as much as possible. Lieutenant James Tuckey failed to find the Yarra River or to locate and substantial supplies of timber suitable for navy use. Captain Woodriff cut 185 lengths of timber, mainly honeysuckle and black gum at Arthur's Seat.

Reports soon reached Collins of the existence of much better supplies of timber in Van Diemen's land.

Additionally, it was obvious that the treacherous entrance to Port Phillip Bay made it quite unsuitable for a whaling base, and after the marines had been recalled to Britain to join the new war against France. Collins felt very vulnerable to attacks by the French or by Aborigines, and threats by rebellious convicts.

Faced with all these difficulties including fresh water supplies, Collins decided to **abandon the site** (even after knowing of the existence of the Yarra River). He moved to Van Diemens land and established Hobart, serving as Lieutenant Governor until his death in March 1810.

The ships Ocean and Lady Nelson left Sullivan Bay with most of the convicts and officers on **January 30 1804**. The free settlers stayed until May 19 then they too left for Hobart in the Ocean.

The settlement was the site of **many firsts** for Victoria: first marriage, birth (William James Hobart Thorn born to Sergeant Thorn. The name Hobart included at the suggestion of Collins in honour of Lord Hobart, secretary of State for the Colonies), death, school lessons, use of a printing press, application of skills such as stonemasonry.

John Pascoe **Fawkner**, a founder of Melbourne, was 11 years old and one of the settlers of Sullivan Bay with his parents. He later received 500 lashes as a young man in Van Diemen's land for attempting to help 7 convicts escape in a lugger.

27 **convicts escaped** from Sullivan's Bay, 20 were recaptured, 6 died and one, William **Buckley**, remained at large.

William Buckley, a convict, escaped from the settlement in 1803 and lived with the aboriginals for 32 years before surrendering himself to John Batman's party at Indented Heads in 1835. Buckley said that he heard the aborigines plotting to murder the entire party and decided to warn and join them.

The term "Buckley's Chance" or "Buckley's and None" meaning a very small chance, is sometimes thought to originate from William Buckley's name. Other authorities ascribe it to the Melbourne Store "Buckley and Nunn"

Another settlement was attempted in Westerport in 1826.

In 1834, Thomas **Henty**, a Sussex (England) farmer and banker, moved from Launceston across Bass Strait to **Portland** Bay and began the first pastoral settlement of what is now Victoria.

This success induced John **Batman**, to form the Port Phillip Association and sailed of to explore the area. He reached the mouth of the Yarra and negotiated a notorious treaty with the aborigines. This involved the "purchase" of 243 000 hectares of land for blankets, tools and trinkets. He had no British authority to establish a colony or negotiate the purchase of land. Nevertheless, his initiative began the city of Melbourne.

Batman was a "currency lad" born in Parramatta (Sydney) in 1801. His father was a transported convict. His mother had paid her own passage to Australia. Batman married Eliza, a convict girl and became a farmer and a "jack-of-all-trades", dreaming of exploring and performing daring exploits such as the capture of the notorious bushranger, Matthew Brady. He built a large weatherboard house on Batman's Hill by the Yarra and lived with his wife and 7 daughters. Within few years he became a helpless invalid due to alcoholism and syphilis. He died in 1839. Eliza married again, became a woman "of loose character" and was murdered in Geelong in 1852.

The first **permanent European settlers on the peninsula** arrived in late 1830's. They included fishermen, graziers, lime burners and woodcutters who cut sheoak and wattles to fire lime kilns and ovens. Lime was used to cement bricks and stone in Melbourne's early buildings.

Edward and Harriet **Skelton** were the first recorded residents. Harriet was renowned for her medical skills and devotion to the sick, and she was the local midwife.

In 1836, Edward **Hobson** took out squatters rights for an area described as rolling hills covered in grass from Boneo (east of Rosebud) to point Nepean. Some ecologists believe that the grassy hills and sheoaks were maintained by aboriginal burning practice, when when this ceased the ti-tree gradually took over the peninsula.

In 1840, John **Ford** settled in the area and grazed down to Point Nepean. he built a homestead near Portsea back beach and planted a row of cypresses now in the main street of Portsea.

Transport to Mornington peninsula from Melbourne was fastest by sea. Other contact was made by dray and bullocks (which took about 4 days) and a little later by the "fish carts" (spring cart drawn by 3 horses) from Flinders & Hastings.

Melbourne market became inflated during the 1840's due to the constant arrival of new settlers, most stock had to be driven overland from NSW e.g. a horse whose true value was 20 pound would sell for 80 pound.

In 1841, to supply the building needs of Melbourne, a l**ime burning** industry was set up on **Nepean** peninsula, where there were limestone deposits, and a fleet of 40 vessels was recruited to transport the lime across the bay to Melbourne.

Original buildings of the settlers were very primitive. From the Journal of Georgina McCrae:

"For a beginning, we had a main hut apart, some distance from two others. The walls were of wattle and daub, and the roof covering rolls of bark. Two windows gave us light, whilst a mud floor and chimney of turf completed the structure.

The **second duel in Victoria** was held about 1943 near the turn off to the present Cape Schanck lighthouse. the two duelists were Edward barker and Maurice Mayrick. the reason for their argument is obscure: "Mayrick fired first but missed. Barker got such a fight that he fired into the air, and as the story has it, hit a passing seagull, and thus the duel was over. Everyone agreed that honour had been satisfied, and the bloodless encounter was celebrated with a "booze up" at Mayrick's house nearby at Boneo.

In 1843, Dennis **Sullivan** took up land along the shore where the Portsea Quarantine Station now stands. He built a homestead and other buildings.

The original **Sanitary Station** for entry to Victoria was at Red Bluff (now Point Ormonde near Melbourne). Those with infectious diseases were kept on board. When the gold rush began in 1851, many infected passengers began to jump ship to try their luck on the goldfields.

Also, **discovery of gold** created labour shortages, and the Victorian Government asked London immigration to speed up the immigration program so that the 1852 harvest could be brought in. Larger ships were chartered to bring out greater numbers and hygiene standards were not as good resulting in more disease.

Up to 30 ships a day were passing in and out of the heads during the peak of the rush.

On November 6, 1852, **Ticonderoga** arrived off the Heads. Of the 800 passengers leaving England, 100 had died at sea. Typhus, measles, scarlatina and dysentery were widespread on board. The ship was ordered to anchor off Point Nepean and facilities were moved out from Melbourne to deal with the problem.

The death rate was so high that the authorities ran out of coffins and proper grave sites. Many bodies were interned in cliff edges and crevasses which at later times broke off and washed into the sea. The official quarantine station cemetery was also placed too near the eroding cliffs. Skulls and bones of those who died were occasionally washed up on the bay beaches of Portsea and Sorrento for years afterwards.

The "**Sanitary Station**" (Portsea Quarantine Station) was established in 1854 with a permanent government staff. This introduced many men in high government positions to the possibility of Sorrento as a delightful place to spend leisure time.

By 1859, 6 hospital buildings had been erected.

The first school in **Portsea** was in the grounds of the quarantine station. When access to the station was refused due to an epidemic, the Portsea children had to receive their lessons through a barrier. People who worked in the quarantine station were shunned by the early settlers.

By 1855, the **aboriginal** population had dwindled from its pre-European number of about 200 to 30 or 40. Occasionally, the Bunurong tribe had visitors from the Tal Tal tribe (Mordialloc are) and celebrated with a corroboree on the banks of the Tanti creek below the convent (Mornington). The party usually ended up in a fight.

The **Cape Schanck Lighthouse** began operation in 1859.

In 1867, 300 children were quarantined during an outbreak of eye disease in Melbourne.

In 1872, George **Coppin**, actor and entrepreneur, established the Ocean Amphitheatre Company and encouraged "seaside" settlement. He built a hotel, sea baths and cottages for letting, and established a bay excursion service from Melbourne to Sorrento in the paddle steamer "Ozone".

In 1879, cattle quarantine and slaughter yards were added to the Point Nepean station. A leper "colony" was also in existence.

Quarantine procedures became so effective that ship owners and masters found it more effective to improve hygiene than to wait at the station.

Fort Nepean was planned by Colonel Peter Scratchley Royal Engineers in 1860, and constructed in 1882 at the time of the "Russian scare". Scratchley argued that any land invasion would choose Westernport Bay, but the danger lay in ships entering the bay and destroying military and industrial targets as well as shipping. He planned to prevent ships entering the bay. Forts at Point Lonsdale, Queenscliff, port Nepean, Franklin, Swan Island and Pope's Eye would guard the Heads and the rip. This combination of forts could have any shipping in range for 15 minutes. If ships survived this, mines and sunken ships across the channel could stop them. Artillery batteries stayed operational up until the end of World war II. The area was also used for training, bivouacs and camps.

Pope's Eye fort was never completed due to the success of the alternative laying of electro-contact mines in the West=t Channel.

In 1890 there was a **steam tram** linking the Sorrento main street with the back beach and the trip was the highlight of the day for many visitors. At the back Beach, there were a network of limestone paths and rotundas.

On the stormy night of October 19, 1897, the **Cheviot** ran onto rocks on what is now Cheviot Beach. The crew sent up flares which were seen in Queenscliff where a life boat was sent out but was unable to get through the rip. The life boat crew landed on the bay side of the peninsula and walked across but could see nothing in the black violence of the storm. They waited out the storm in a hut. Meanwhile inside the Cheviot were the passengers and crew helplessly waiting until the ship broke in two threw them into the boiling surf. One man was washed ashore and found his way to the hut to tell the lifeboat crew. 39 of the 59 passengers died. Only 8 bodies were recovered and only 3 were identifiable after washing up on shore days later.

In May 1900, the **Sierra Nevada** ran onto the rocks near London Bridge carrying a cargo that was thought to contain whisky. Only 4 of the 23 on board survived and only 11 bodies were recovered. All the locals turned out to scour the coast for booty. One group found an overturned barrel and rolled it back to the station. Hot and thirsty they decided to broach it immediately. A carpenter filled his pannikin, took a healthy swig, only to find that he was drinking disinfectant.

In 1910, the Commonwealth Government took over the quarantine station.

At 11:30 pm Australian Time on August 4, 1914, Britain declared **war** on Germany. The Australian Prime Minister announced Australia was at war at 11:45 pm. The German freighter **Pfaltz** had already left Melbourne but a shot across her bows at the heads warned her. On board, the captain decided he would make a run for it, and a fist fight broke out on the bridge, between the captain and the Australian pilot. The Australian won and the ship turned back and a hold full of arms were found within her. This was the first shot fired in World war I.

In 1918, returning soldiers with influenza brought back from overseas service were quarantined there.

In 1918, when peace was declared, some soldiers on Point Nepean are said to have celebrated by throwing shells off the end of the pier.

In 1919, the SS **Wauchope** caught fire while of the Quarantine station. As she was carrying a cargo of bailed hay, petrol, motor oil, acetylene gas cylinders, she was immediately abandoned and soon afterwards exploded. She drifted while burning onto a sand bar northeast of Sorrento Pier where her boiler can still be seen at low tide.

In 1939, the **first shot fired in World War II** was from the same gun (but with a different barrel fitted. when the Tasmanian Bass Strait freighter Woniora attempted to enter the harbour without a recognition signal. the signal was quickly forthcoming after a shot was put across her bows. This barrel is now at the entrance to the Officer cadet School Portsea.

In December 1967, Prime Minister Harold **Holt** was lost from Cheviot Beach while swimming. His body was never found.

In 1974, the last patient under quarantine was moved out of Point Nepean.

Marram Grass (Ammophila arenaria) is an introduced species extremely efficient at binding areas of sand and is easily transplanted. Once it has stabilised an area between in shifting sands), native vegetation takes over readily.

Acknowledgements

- Mornington Peninsula Education resource Edition 1, 1984 Reg Lipson (editor), Dept. of science Teaching, Hawthorn Institute of education, 442 Auburn Road, Hawthorn 3122 SMS/RL/84/15
- Park notes, National Parks service Victoria
- A bay begins with its own convict shackles, Martin Flanagan, The Age 3/1/1998
- Forgotten Point in History, Andrew Bock, The Age, Prior to 1997

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