

Goolwa State Heritage Area

Goolwa was declared a State Heritage Area on 24 September 1987.

HISTORY OF GOOLWA

Goolwa, during its heyday from the 1850s to the 1880s, was one of Australia's most important river ports dominating South Australia's intercolonial river trade with Victoria and New South Wales. It was originally intended to become the 'New Orleans of Australia' because of its location at the mouth of Australia's one system of navigable inland rivers.

This dream never came to pass. Goolwa functioned as a river port from 1854, sending river goods at first by horse tram to Port Elliot, then later by steam train to Port Victor. But after the Morgan to Port Adelaide railway opened in 1878, the river trade on the lower reaches dwindled. Goolwa never became more than a small regional town with an economy based on transport and light industry.

An immediate stimulus for the development of the river trade was the construction of the single track horse-powered tramway between Goolwa and Port Elliot, opened in 1854, as an alternative to navigating the treacherous Murray Mouth. It is now acclaimed as Australia's first public iron-tracked railway. In 1864 the tramway was extended four miles to Port Victor as Port Elliot proved to be unsafe following a series of shipwrecks. The original Goolwa wharf, built in 1852 was extended in 1866 and rebuilt in 1874.

With the enormous increase in the volume of trade, Goolwa became the nexus in a cargo transport system between the river and the sea. Paddle steamers towed barges carrying supplies to upriver markets and returned laden with wool. Like other thriving country towns, Goolwa's industries included breweries, a saw mill and a flour mill, as well as an industry which was virtually unique, that of shipbuilding and repairs. Goolwa was the first Australian river port where vessels were built and became the second most productive after Echuca in Victoria. Between 1853 and 1913, thirty seven paddle steamers and twenty three barges were built at Goolwa. The Goolwa Patent Slip and Iron Works, established in 1864, employed 30 to 40 tradespeople by the 1870s.

From the late nineteenth century to the present day, Goolwa's main focus has been as a tourist resort. However, the River Murray also functions as part of an important irrigation system and a series of barrages were constructed along the lower River Murray to maintain fresh water in the river and lakes. This included the Goolwa Barrage completed in 1940 as part of an extensive public works project.

GOOLWA STATE HERITAGE AREA

In 1987 the inner part of the town of Goolwa was declared a State Heritage Area because of its historical importance as a bustling river port between the 1850s and 1880s. There are a remarkably representative group of buildings and relics surviving from this era in the present townscape and on the waterfront. These include the wharf and tramway precinct which handled river boat cargo, a central core of well preserved public and commercial buildings which serviced a growing community, and a unique residential precinct of densely spaced cottages, still known locally as 'Little Scotland' because it was occupied by a number of Scottish riverboat employees.

The declaration of the Goolwa State Heritage Area ensures that the town's historic fabric is preserved, while at the same time encouraging sympathetic development to promote tourism in one of South Australia's most important regional centres.



Further Information

For further information please contact the State Heritage Unit

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