

Beltana History

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Beltana was first occupied by pastoralists at the beginning of 1855, when John Haines took up grazing land around Warioota Creek. The land was subsequently amalgamated into the holdings of Thomas Elder and Samuel Stuckey in 1867, becoming part of the large and influential Beltana Pastoral Company, which still exists today.

A reliable water supply ensured that the Beltana area would function for over a century as a transport and communication node. In 1863 a regular mail coach service was opened between Port Augusta and Yudnamutana. Beltana Homestead became a horse change station, and in 1866 a Post Office was established. In that same year Elder and Stuckey imported over 100 camels, with Afghan drivers. The camels formed the basis of transport in the district for decades and many central Australian exploring expeditions were equipped by the Beltana Pastoral Company. Afghan Well, near Beltana Homestead, owes its name to this era.

In 1870 copper was discovered at nearby Sliding Rock, 25km east of Beltana Station, and the township of Cadnia was established there by 1871. It was at this time that the site of Beltana township was first occupied, when Martin's Eating House was established at the crossing of Warioota Creek, about three kilometres east of Beltana Homestead on the Cadnia track. Probably the choice of site was influenced by the fact that the crossing, with its reliable water, had already been chosen as the site of the repeater station for the Overland Telegraph. John Ross, appointed by Charles Todd as leader of the survey team for the telegraph, was manager of Beltana Station, and his party had surveyed the area in July 1870.

By June 1871 the telegraph line was constructed and operating from Port Augusta to a point north of Beltana and a repeater station was established in temporary iron buildings the following year, in time for the opening of the Overland Telegraph in August 1872.

To this point the new settlement consisted of a timber-framed eating house and telegraph office near the creek crossing. However in the 1870s it rapidly took on a more substantial form. The township was surveyed in 1873, but Martin's establishment had apparently already been rebuilt in stone (as the Beltana Hotel), for it stands today in conspicuous disregard of the allotment boundaries and street alignment. The hotel was licensed in 1874.

The following year, the telegraph station was also rebuilt as a substantial stone building. To what extent these institutions attracted settlement in the short term is uncertain, for it seems to have been only after the failure of Sliding Rock, during the copper price fall of 1877, that Beltana expanded. There was apparently an exodus from the town of Cadnia to Beltana, and a period of small-scale activity in the mines of the vicinity.

Certainly by 1878 there had been sufficient transfer of population for the timber school building from Cadnia to be relocated at Beltana, and for a new stone hotel, the Royal Victoria, to be licensed. In 1879 a police station was gazetted, to open in 1881. These expressions of confidence in the young town were prompted by the approach of the transcontinental railway, which left Port Augusta in 1878 and, after a lengthy journey via Quorn and Hawker, was opened to Beltana in July 1881.

The arrival of the railway transformed Beltana's economy, ensuring its short-term prosperity and its survival as a transportation centre for the following 75 years. The town boomed with an influx of construction workers, sleeper cutters and teamsters. A railway station, goods shed, train crew quarters and a five-million-gallon-capacity dam were constructed. Even after the railway construction boom moved on, a permanent railway workforce remained to boost the town's population. Until the line reached Farina, Beltana was the official railhead, and for decades to

come was the node for a network of roads serving the North Flinders mines and pastoral properties.

By the mid-1880s, Beltana merited its own brewery, and a regular circuit court sat at the police station. Buttfield's store was built in 1887, and a stone school in 1893 replaced the temporary one brought from Cadnia 15 years before. The town's population stabilised at about 150, and remained fairly constant until the 1920s.

Having established its credentials as a permanent, although hardly imposing, transport and administrative centre, Beltana next became the scene of humanitarian initiatives. In 1894, the Reverend Robert Mitchell established a Presbyterian manse in Beltana, which was to be the base for a travelling mission throughout much of the north-east of South Australia. Funded by a bequest from the Free Church of Scotland, this became known as the Smith of Dunesk Mission, in honour of its donor.

In 1911 the minister at Beltana for a time was the Reverend John Flynn, who established the Australian Inland Mission the following year. In 1919 the A.I.M. opened a nursing home in the Presbyterian Manse and the older mission moved to a more prominent building in First Street, which had previously been Doig's carriage builder's shop. The availability of such a building signalled the beginning of Beltana's slow decline, although the mission operated until 1933, and the nursing home until 1952.

The death of Beltana was caused by the rise of Leigh Creek, 40km north. Coal had been discovered there as early as 1888, but it was not until 1941 that serious development commenced on the coal deposit.

The slow growth of Leigh Creek in the 1940s and 50s caused a corresponding decline in the demand for services in the town of Beltana, for the sparsely populated North Flinders region could not support two rival centres in such close proximity. Then in 1956 the railway was upgraded to standard gauge and, to ease gradients, was realigned 10km west of Beltana. The new diesel locomotives no longer needed to take on water at the dam at Warioota Creek.

Beltana shrank rapidly when the railway employees left. The Royal Victoria closed its doors in 1957, and Buttfield's store followed ten years later. The old railway station building became both pub and store for road travellers until 1983, when the final blow fell and the road was realigned close to the railway. Beltana now has only a few full-time residents, and no services to offer travellers.