

History of Goolwa

adapted from *Port Elliot and Goolwa Heritage Study (1981), PART 1: Summary History*

1802-1839

The main themes of this period are:

- exploration
- Aboriginal-European contact and conflict
- pastoral development

This region has a rich Aboriginal heritage as a result of thousands of years of occupation, evidence for which includes the famous canoe and shield trees and the extensive remains of middens in the coastal dunes and near Goolwa.

However this study is concerned with the heritage of the district since the period of initial contact by Europeans.

The first formal European contact with the region was deliberately planned, as part of Captain Charles Sturt's discovery of the River Murray and his voyage downstream in 1829-1830 to find the outlet of this impressive river. Sturt named the Murray and Lake Alexandrina, where the river ended. His last campsite was made near the present site of Goolwa. From there he made the disappointing discovery of the dangerous river outlet to the sea. Sturt's expedition as a whole was of enormous significance to the subsequent colonisation of the vast Murrumbidgee, and of South Australia as a distinct Province.

Captain Collett Barker was sent by the New South Wales Governor in 1831, to further investigate the area between Gulf St Vincent and the Murray. Although he was speared by Aborigines after swimming the Murray Mouth (their hostility probably a result of previous encounters with abusive sealers from Kangaroo Island), his survey, and Sturt's favourable published reports, greatly encouraged the proponents of the new colony. The South Coast / Lower Murray region became a focus for attention, prior to the dispatch of the first colonist ships, and the first Surveyor-General, Colonel William Light, was given instructions to consider this region for the main settlement.

Light dismissed this region as the site for the capital without bothering to visit the area, having decided that the Murray outlet would not be navigable and that the coast was too exposed to the Southern Ocean to provide a safe harbour. Although Adelaide was sited near Gulf St Vincent instead, its early years were disturbed by arguments about the suitability of the site, as opposed to other sites at Port Lincoln and Encounter Bay. The debate hinged always on the navigability of the Murray Mouth and the suitability of the harbours on the southern coast.

The first systematic exploration of the area was made by Strangways and Hutchinson in December 1837. The party was sent by Governor Hindmarsh to see whether Sturt's channel (past the present site of Goolwa) was the only outlet to the sea. They also visited, and named, Currency Creek and Hindmarsh Island.

This region was given considerable attention by speculators who founded the colony – both those who emigrated and those who remained in Britain as absentee land-owners. This led to the country around Currency Creek, abutting Lake Alexandrina and including part of the present Goolwa, becoming one of the 36 areas in South Australia selected for 'special survey'. This was carried out between December 1839 to January 1840. An elaborate town was laid out at Currency Creek and a smaller town called 'Town on the Goolwa' was drawn up as a river port, in what is now the northern part of Goolwa. The special survey was made on behalf of a consortium of speculators, calling themselves the Currency Creek Association. Neither Currency Creek, nor Town on the Goolwa, were developed as town blocks, although much of the country land was in use.

By 1839-1840 parts of the district were being used by pastoralists who were virtually squatters, although they also included such men as Dr John Rankine. Rankine settled at Strathalbyn in 1839 and grazed sheep and cattle over a wide area, including Hindmarsh Island, which he leased, transporting the stock across the river on his private ferry.

1840-1890

The main themes for this period are:

- river trade and harbour development
- township development; houses, government agencies, industries, community facilities
- agriculture
- railways

This was by far the most significant period in the town's history, and was directly linked to the dramatic rise and decline of the river trade along the Murray and its tributaries, and the industries and facilities which were developed in response. Permanent structures, attesting to the town's important role during those years, still stand – in part thanks to their decline once the river trade had ended, and in part thanks to some of the townspeople's pride in their heritage. The preservation of Goolwa's Railway Superintendent's House is a good example of this.

Police were stationed at Goolwa from 1840 and a police station was built there in 1850. The real stimulus for the development of the township came when work began on the port and railway facilities to serve the hoped-for river trade.

A succession of South Australia's early Governors had great personal interest in the south coast region, particularly its role in the development of the Murray trade. Hindmarsh wanted Adelaide moved there. Gawler explored along the river as far as the site of Morgan, and Sir Henry Fox Young thoroughly examined the river in 1850. His party returned by boat to Goolwa, from there to Horseshoe Bay and then Adelaide, convinced that vessels on the river could open up the interior. In Adelaide, Young proclaimed a bonus of £4 000 to the first two iron steamboats to successfully navigate the river from Goolwa to the Darling Junction.

As cargoes would have to be moved from the river to the sea, the only alternative to the dangerous passage of the Murray Mouth was the construction of a canal, railway or road between Goolwa and the nearest safe anchorage on Encounter Bay. Governor Young decreed this to be at Horseshoe Bay (Port Elliot), despite much criticism of its obvious dangers. He also proposed a railway between Goolwa and the seaport.

The necessary public works were started before the first paddle-steamer had even started up the river. Governor Young decided to finance the work from the Land Fund (again despite much opposition), approving what were the first extensive public works in the colony.

By 1852 the Government had completed a jetty at Goolwa and other works at Port Elliot. Construction of the Goolwa to Port Elliot railway, as well as the Railway Superintendent's House at Goolwa had also commenced.

In 1853 the first two river steamers paddled the route upriver. Captain Francis Cadell (with Governor Young on board) took the *Lady Augusta*, while William Randell, in an earlier, independent trip took the *Mary Ann*. Cadell had brought his steamer through the Murray Mouth and departed from Goolwa with a locally-made barge, *Eureka*. Randell had steamed from Mannum for clearance at Goolwa, before proceeding upstream. Their spectacular successes and remunerative cargoes provided an immediate stimulus to further inland settlement, and to the development of a massive river trade in South Australia, New South Wales and Victoria. Goolwa was the final port at the 'bottom end' of the river system, with Port Elliot as the sea port.

Port Elliot and Goolwa were soon linked by the railway which, to save costs, had been reduced to a single-track, horse-drawn tramway. This was operating by 1854, with the associated works and all port facilities virtually complete. The railway, together with the activities associated with the river trade, attracted an influx of settlers. They include farmers, who cleared the dense scrub, and townspeople who built houses, stores, schools, hotels, churches, mills and kilns within an astonishingly short time.

A new government town, known as Goolwa, was surveyed during 1853. It was south of the 1840 'Town on the Goolwa' survey and had an interesting layout focussed entirely on the river. The

quarter-acre blocks were auctioned in that year, and by 1857 were all taken up. Adjoining sections were also privately subdivided during those years, including Goolwa Extension and Goolwa North. Goolwa extension was also an interesting design, incorporating public walkways and a carriage-way, both features a rarity in Australian town subdivisions.

With the river opened, and the railway and wharf established, the volume of trade increased enormously. Paddle-steamers towed barges carrying supplies upriver to pastoralists, to the Victorian gold-diggings and to newly-established towns, and returned laden with wool. Extensions to the Goolwa wharf were soon necessary, and a few determined captains ran vessels directly through the Murray Mouth. Regular direct services between Goolwa and Port Adelaide started in 1857. A signal and pilot station were set up at the outlet, and beacons provided along the safest channel to Goolwa. Port Goolwa was proclaimed in 1857, and was made a customs point and a survey centre.

The river crews were a skilled lot who could turn their hands to almost anything, and whose visits to Goolwa provided business for the police, the shops and the three hotels. The captains operated also as traders, storekeepers, builders and speculators – all of which had a marked impact on the town. This was apparent in the career of Cadell himself, and of the men he brought out from his home in Cockenzie, Scotland. For example, Captain George Bain Johnston built Cockenzie House at Goolwa and benevolently provided several plain Scottish cottages for his employees in Goolwa Extension, which became known accordingly as Little Scotland.

Like other important country towns, Goolwa's industries included breweries, a sawmill and a flour mill. It also included an industry that 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 (Victoria). Between 1853 and 1912 thirty-seven paddle steamers and 23 barges were built at Goolwa. After its establishment in 1864, the main shipbuilding and repair works at Goolwa was the Goolwa Iron Works, to which was added a foundry, and which included a 'patent' slip in the river. The foundry produced not only ships and engines, but also other machinery, castings and railway trucks. It was greatly expanded when taken over by Abraham Graham c1867. By the 1870s the iron works employed 30 to 40 tradesmen almost continuously – its size and near-permanent employment being a rarity in South Australian industry in the nineteenth century. Unfortunately there is almost no trace of this industry left today, apart from an extremely rare old Beam engine, and the small stone chart room. After the decline of shipbuilding in the 1880s, the major machinery was sold to the Chaffey Brothers and removed to Renmark about 1888.

The development of the town, and of up-river markets, provided a further stimulus to agriculture. Wheat was also grown on Hindmarsh Island, and a jetty and a ferry service were provided. Charles Price bought land there in 1854, and imported and bred Hereford cattle and Shropshire sheep.

During these years Goolwa continued to benefit from the increasing river trade, which brought in more residents and industries, provided for the establishment of schools and churches, and increased the need for additional or enlarged public buildings, such as its first railway station (1872). It also meant further extension to the wharf and to the customs house.

Goolwa was gazetted a Municipality in 1872. The period from 1872 to 1884 was a boom time in South Australia and the eastern colonies, resulting in a peak in river trade, so much so that delays occurred with the carrying of goods by rail. This may be one of the reasons a rail link was opened between Morgan and Adelaide, so that cargoes could be diverted before reaching Goolwa. As the railway had helped develop the river port, now it aided its decline. Other railways further upstream linked the Murray to respective capital cities in other colonies, and effectively restricted the trade reaching South Australian ports. The opening of the Murray Bridge line in 1886 had a further impact, and by 1890 trade to Goolwa had virtually ceased.

1891 – present

The main themes for this period are:

- tourism, recreation and subdivision
- social change and agriculture; the impact of new techniques
- public works; the barrages.

The history of Goolwa (and other towns along the South Coast) was made by the river trade, underpinned by the railways, undermined by development up-river and a decline in trade, and sustained by agriculture and tourism.

Goolwa, Port Elliot and Victor Harbor became major resort centres, amongst the earliest outside Adelaide. Several of the larger houses and the hotels were converted to guest houses, and new accommodation places built.

The growth of Goolwa continued steadily, as the permanent residents provided for new public buildings and services, and celebrated regattas and other forms of recreation. The steady growth and the summer influx has encouraged landowners to subdivide, thereby extending the extent of the town. The 1950s saw a boom in shacks, retirement homes and caravan parks.

The development of railways elsewhere in South Australia not only stopped most of the river trade, but also opened other areas for agriculture. So, along with the empty shipyards and other workshops, flour mills in the region also closed and wheat farming died out. Gradually grazing and fodder crops assumed dominance and, from the 1890s, dairying and market gardening. Milk factories were later established at Mount Compass and Hindmarsh Island. The coastal towns provided services for the farming districts as well as the tourist industry.

The major public works carried out during this last period were, again, connected with the River Murray, and are of national significance. These were the five barrages that were built at the Murray Mouth to maintain fresh water in the river and to assist gravitational irrigation by maintaining water levels at a sufficiently high level. The River Murray Commission recommended their construction, with preparatory work starting at Goolwa in 1935. The five barrages are the Goolwa Channel, Mundoo Channel, Ewe Island, Boundary Creek and Tauwitchere Barrages. All were completed by 1940. While Goolwa was the permanent base, a temporary camp (virtually a galvanised iron township complete with school) was also created during construction, and dismantled and sold soon afterwards.

Transport played a key role in the history and development of the district, as shown in the above historical account. It was no less important in the twentieth century, as motor traffic and vastly improved roads enabled farm produce to be moved more quickly to city markets and brought more tourists to the river town.