

State Heritage Areas of South Australia



THE HAHNDORF PIONEER WOMEN'S TRAIL: 25th Anniversary of the first National Trust Walk from Hahndorf to Beaumont House

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An article written for Heritage Living

The Hahndorf Pioneer Women's Trail has been enjoyed by thousands of walkers since 1980. The following article, written by Anni Luur Fox, Chairperson of the Hahndorf Branch of the National Trust of South Australia, was written in January 2005 and subsequently published in 'Heritage Living'. It celebrates the 25th Anniversary of the first National Trust Walk, from Hahndorf to Beaumont House.

If life truly is "a pudding full of plums" as Sir W.S. Gilbert once opined, the saga of the Hahndorf Pioneer Women's Trail fits into both plum and pudding categories as the following overview of our efforts will reveal. On the 20 April 1980 when the first public National Trust re-enactment took place, the Hahndorf Branch was almost four years old and overloaded with seemingly endless battles with developers, lawyers and government authorities. Gordon Young's Hahndorf Survey (1979-81) was gathering information that later substantiated our claims for the town as a heritage site. We had played a major role in stopping demolition of a group of three 19th Century buildings a developer wanted to replace with a shopping centre and we were trying to ensure that conservation principles were upheld in Neill Wallman's new Supplementary Development Plan for Hahndorf..... as well as trying to fix the windmill.

Mrs Elizabeth Simpson's enthusiasm to develop a re-enactment along an early supply trail from the Mt. Barker region to Adelaide resulted in the Beaumont House committee's invitation to join them in organising this event to mark the Silver Jubilee of the S.A. National Trust in 1980. It seemed like fun! They even supplied us with a copy of Frederick Nixon's map of 1841 showing trails in the region which would help us determine the route from Hahndorf to Crafers while they would work on the shorter section via Eagle on the Hill to Beaumont.

Our Chairman John Storey, a veteran of the Kokoda Trail during World War 2, declared it "a cinch". He rushed off to the Woodside Army camp where he and Major Ian Ferguson converted the map to the same scale as a recent one from the Department of Lands for comparison. They found that the Onkaparinga and Old Mt Barker roads were part of the original rough track but at least the route also traversed bushland where it could be possible to imagine the first group of women setting off for Adelaide at midnight with their eggs and radishes for sale soon after Hahndorf was settled in March 1839. It must have been a frightening prospect for them, given the awful tales of fierce Tiersmen, some of them outlaws living rough along the way at Crafers.

The Hahndorf Pioneer Women's Trail commemorates these first efforts to supply Adelaide with fresh farm produce from the Mt Barker region which later became the "breadbasket" of the colony. In 1839 Hahndorf had been the first village established east of Mt Lofty. Its impoverished settlers immediately cleared ground and planted seed and like their countrymen at Klemzig, were quick to take advantage of the lack of fresh food in Adelaide. Because Colonel Light's rural surveys had stalled, most immigrants had been stuck in the city speculating on town acres and patronising the many pubs. The little food grown locally had to be supplemented through importation. According to an early newspaper report flour was often contaminated with seawater and other undesirables such as whiting, bonemeal or Plaster of Paris added to the casks by unscrupulous merchants. No wonder Mrs Watts complained in her diary about bread being as hard as bricks. Fresh produce from Hahndorf's rich soil in those very early days of the colony must have been a special treat.

The women and older girls feature in early accounts of transportation of Hahndorf's produce to market, probably because the men were away working for landholders clearing the bush and fencing. The women tended the animals and the gardens, made the butter and cheese and other items they carried on their backs for sale in Adelaide to pay off their ship and land debts. Some of them are recorded as carrying 35 kilograms of farm produce before works on the Great Eastern Road had improved conditions for wheeled traffic by 1854. As more villages were developed at Grunthal (now Verdun), Mt Barker, Lobethal, Echunga and Balhannah more people joined Hahndorf's women on the produce trail to Adelaide.

To check the route which may also have been a means of communication between the Peramangk Aboriginal people of the hills region and the Kurna on the plain, I joined John Storey, Clare Ferguson, Lyndell Davidge and Rodney Allen on 29 March 1980 for the first hike to Beaumont House. After six hours we stumbled scratched, footsore and weary despite our "You Beaut" modern sneakers and lightweight backpacks, into the gorgeous dining room where the Committee had prepared afternoon tea for us in elegant style. A creek near the Beaumont House site had been the place where pioneer women, barefoot to save shoe leather, had stopped to rest and tidy themselves before the last stretch to Adelaide's markets. What a contrast! For us, a sumptuous spread of cucumber sandwiches and Queen Mother's Cake awaited, as well as motor cars to transport us up the hills to Hahndorf in comfort where a hot bath filled by turning a tap would ease the effects of such unaccustomed exertions. They didn't remain unaccustomed for long!

Fully expecting no more than three men and a dog to turn up at the Pioneer Park on 20 April to register and actually pay money for the privilege of following members of the Hahndorf Branch along the Trail to Beaumont, we had marked the route on the previous day but had organised few drink stops. How embarrassing! About 150 adventurous souls made the journey including a seventy year old woman and C. Warren Bonython with a huge marrow on his back in honour of the travails of the pioneers. Along the way two walkers had somehow ended up on the South Eastern Freeway median strip where a passing police patrol insisted they climb back over the high cyclone fence, which they did. Having waited a while they scaled the fence again, dashed over four lanes of traffic and jumped another high fence in search of the Old Mt. Barker Road they knew had to be there somewhere.

On reaching the "Eagle" our numbers were swelled again for the descent to Beaumont but at least the pub had a good supply of drinks. Historian Reg Butler flanked by other direct descendents of the Hahndorf women in period dress, led the throng with a flag sent him by citizens of Westerland, the birthplace of Captain Hahn who had been so influential in the founding of Hahndorf. St Michael's Lutheran Church choir entertained us with Paul Gerhardt's hymn which the first settlers had managed to sing at the top of the Beaumont spur after two days of lugging their belongings up its steep slope on the way to establish Hahndorf in the heat of summer 1839, "O sun where art thou vanished?" And we soon vanished too, for the comforts of home after gladly abandoning plans to search for two missing walkers whose encounter with the police had made them late for afternoon tea in the lush gardens of Beaumont House.

Like giving birth, the pain of it all soon passed in the euphoria of a successful event. Our Branch repeated the scenario, minus police, in 1983, 1985 and 1986 in partnership with the Beaumont House Committee. The success of these events had spawned increasing requests for more. Each time, John Storey and I virtually had to walk the route thrice to hammer in the markers, lead the walk/ensure no-one got lost, remove the markers. The Branch began supplying maps. Lyndell Davidge led the biennial walks by Hahndorf Primary School. Our persistent requests for official marking by the SA Department of Sport and Recreation came to naught until the Centenary of Women's Suffrage in 1994 when Terry Lavendar must have got sick of my nagging while following him along the Trail during WomenTrek. This marvellous event had seen women walking thousands of kilometres along the trails of South Australia, culminating in the Hahndorf Pioneer Women's Trail. It was the first time we had to walk back up the hills again (some took a bus), to take part in the closing ceremony in Mt. Lofty Gardens. "Whew!"

These were definitely "plum" events followed by what I prefer to term a "pudding" whose public dissection won't do our cause any good at all. The project to officially mark the Trail has lurched on since 1994. Various project officers have worked on it, including planner Rod Worthington who had the unenviable task of ensuring our Trail fitted departmental Trails Policy. As expected, the section from the Eagle to Hahndorf is proving difficult and the official Trail will have to stop at the road bridge over the Onkaparinga River at South Verdun where increasing pressure for more commercial development on the floodplain has sent us to the Environment Court yet again.

The road bridge, in these litigious times marked by insurance industry catastrophes, has been officially deemed too dangerous for foot traffic. We did try to improve matters by forming a partnership with the Hahndorf Community Association, Business and Tourism Association and Country Arts SA. We were successful in gaining funds for a Concept Plan for the Hahndorf Entranceway and Pioneer Women's Trail and were even shortlisted for funds by the Regional Tourism Program. Until the financial and political problems of building a footbridge over the Onkaparinga River are solved, we remain thankful for the plums that have befallen us and, as the poet W.H. Auden once put it, "stagger on rejoicing" just as Hahndorf's pioneer women first did in 1839.