

State Heritage Areas of South Australia



Burra State Heritage Area Creebank Dwellers – former Dugout sites State Heritage Places entered in the South Australian Register

Former Miners' Dugouts, tributary of Burra Creek

Blyth Street, Burra

SAHR 10050 – confirmed as a State Heritage Place 24 July 1980

&

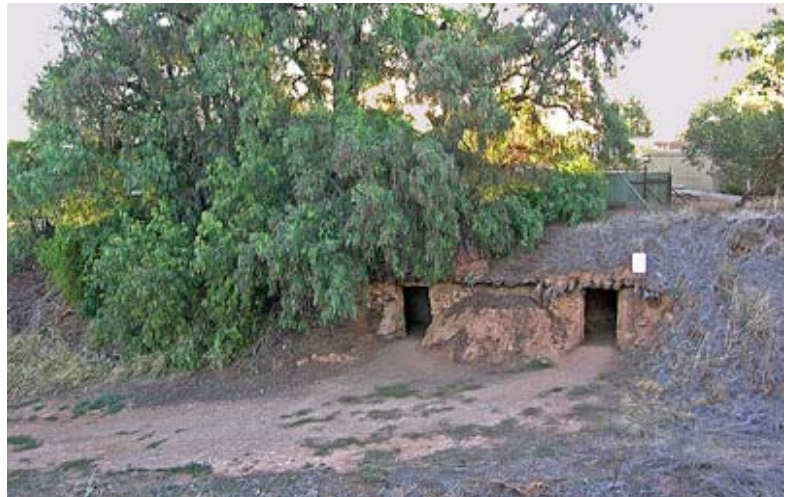
Former Dugout Sites, Burra Creek

Mitchell Flat, Burra

SAHR 11187 – confirmed as a State Heritage Place 28 November 1985

Many Cornish miners and their families made their first homes in Burra by digging into the banks of the Burra Burra Creek and its tributaries.

This was a cheap form of accommodation for needy families, although some sources state that it was actually the result of the rapidly increasing population and a subsequent housing shortage. It has also been suggested that this accommodation choice may have been a protest at the South Australian Mining Association's high rents and their refusal to provide freehold land to miners.



Creebank Dwellings, 2005



Dugout interior, 1994

Some of the dug-outs were simply one-roomed caves with holes for doors and windows, and sleeping recesses hollowed out of clay.

Others were relatively luxurious, including carpets, timber doors, glazed windows and papered walls.

All homes had chimneys, most were whitewashed and a few had shingled verandahs.

A visitor to Burra in 1851 vividly described life in the creek:

In these strange dwelling places, which take up two miles of the creek on both sides, the great bulk of miners and their families reside, being permitted by the Burra Company to do so rent free. A busy hum pervades the creek, swarms of children are at every door, here and there a knot of gossips is collected, and every now and then the scene is diversified by the chatter of a tame magpie, the barking of quarrelsome curs, the neighing of horses stabled alongside the huts, or the fluttering of red skirts and other apparel drying in the open air.

Heritage Branch files

Another description, by old-timer William Copley MP, relates his memories of the dugouts in the early 1850s:

The Burra Creek when I first knew it was a chain of deep waterholes and magnificent gum trees. On, or rather in, both banks, for more than a mile length, it was as densely populated as a rabbit warren. The first thing a new-chum did, no houses being available, was to excavate in the banks of the creek, a dwelling of one or more rooms according to the size of his family.

These underground abodes were cosy in winter and cool in summer, most of them nicely furnished, and all were kept scrupulously clean and sweet by frequent whitewashings. Light was admitted by a window on each side of the door. Of course, there could only be one entrance, the 'house' having neither back nor sides. A hole from the fireplace to the surface carried off the smoke; but as the road from the township to the mine passed over these dwellings, it was usual to place over these holes a cask with the ends knocked out, so as to prevent nocturnal travellers from falling into the kitchen below. Practical jokers, however, would sometimes remove these protections; and then the family at supper would probably be startled by the hurried and undignified entrance of an unbidden guest, whose language would often be more scriptural than religious.

Observer, 22 January 1898



Dugouts near Blythe Street, 2005

Despite threats from mine managers, up to 2 000 families at a time lived along the creek and its tributaries for many years, until a series of floods in 1851 drove most of them out.

The South Australian Mining Association refused to offer any flood relief to the victims, and discouraged the continuance of the creek bed dugouts, by refusing to hire people who lived in the creek.

A great flood in 1859 finally expelled the few remaining occupants who had not yet shifted to cottages within the townships.

Today two pairs of restored dugouts remain near Blyth Street and are in the care of the National Trust. Depressions along the creek bed, adjacent to the south section of Mitchell Flat, are evidence of other dwellings that were once so plentiful in the area.



National Trust site, 2005