

Mintaro State Heritage Area

Mintaro was declared a State Heritage Area on 20 September 1984.

HISTORY

The area north of Gawler was officially opened by a series of special surveys in the early 1840s. The Barossa and Clare Valleys were quickly taken up, while the discovery of copper at Kapunda (1844) and then Burra (1845) made the area even more attractive to both settlers and investors. In 1848 the Patent Copper Company established the 'Gulf Road' between the Burra Mine and Port Wakefield.

The village of Mintaro was originally intended as a stopping place for the bullock teams (and later muleteers) carting the copper ore from the mine to the port, and returning with coal and supplies. The first allotments in Mintaro were sold in 1849, facing the Gulf Road (now Burra Street) that cut directly through the surveyed village. As a result, Mintaro's early layout reflects the copper route, with streets aligned at 45 degrees to the north-south grid of the surveyed sections and Government roads.

The Magpie and Stump Hotel, at the entrance to the village, was first licensed (as the Mintaro Hotel) in December 1850, though it may have been operating earlier. The period from 1850-1860 was a prosperous one. A large proportion of the town's buildings date from this time and are located on the original subdivision.

Slate deposits were discovered in the 1850s and the Mintaro Slate Quarry opened in 1854, using Cornish Methodist miners brought from England for the purpose. By the early 1860s Mintaro slate was famous.

The town's development was set back when the railway was built from Adelaide to Gawler in 1857, and the copper teams were re-routed through Saddleworth and Riverton. However the slate quarries were being expanded at this time, a flour mill was built in 1858, and Mintaro developed as a service centre for the surrounding farming districts, which provided supplies for the mining townships at Burra. The population grew, and in 1866 the village expanded to an adjacent section.

During the 1860s and 1870s public buildings appeared in the town, and during this period a substantial number of Irish Catholics settled in and around Mintaro. In 1876 the population was recorded as 400. The Burra Mine closed in 1877, but Mintaro continued to develop as a rural service centre during the 1870s and early 1880s, when pastoral and agricultural activities boomed in the state's mid north.

Until the 1900s the main religions of Mintaro were the various Methodist groups and Catholicism, reflecting the background of most townspeople. However, under the patronage of the Mortlock family, the Church of England bought the Primitive Methodist Church in 1905.

The early 20th century, until the 1929 Depression, was a relatively prosperous period for the lower and mid north regions. After 1930 though, there was a general decline in rural populations. The continuing function of the slate quarry helped Mintaro survive, but little development took place within the town. Consequently, Mintaro has retained its historic village character, and is now a popular cultural tourism destination.

THE SPANISH CONNECTION

According to historical sources, the name 'Mintaro' is of Spanish origin, meaning 'camping place' or 'resting place'. It is interesting to note however, that Geoffrey Manning, in his *Place Names of South Australia*, attributes the town's name to a local Aboriginal word 'mintinadlu' meaning 'netted water'. Whatever the true derivation of its name, Mintaro is historically recognised as a regular camping place for the many Spanish-speaking muleteers who, in the 1850s, carted copper ore from the Burra Mine to Port Wakefield.

Initially the copper ore mined at Burra was carted to Port Adelaide by bullock teams, but this was a long and costly journey over largely unmade roads. The mine's management soon established the 'Gulf Road', which shortened the journey by linking the mine to a shipping point at Port Wakefield. They also decided to use mules as the beasts of burden, rather than bullocks or horses.

In 1853 an agent was sent to South America, on the chartered ship *Malacea*, to purchase the mules and to engage muleteers to drive them. The first load of mules was shipped from Montevideo (Uruguay), and arrived at Port Wakefield in July. The 70 day



voyage was a rough one, and of the 180 mules originally loaded, only 70 were landed – 110 animals having died during the 'boisterous passage'. In 1854 the Malacea made a second, calmer voyage, for another cargo of mules.

The animals landed in a sorry condition, so on their way to Burra the muleteers camped for a few weeks on the fertile land near Mintaro. This newly surveyed village then became a regular resting place for the mule trains on their way to or from the port. Sometimes as many as 70 muleteers and their teams stayed overnight, 'with their showy dresses and lassos and knives often used in disputes'. They 'did not endear themselves to the adults of Mintaro, though small boys watched with intense interest'.

(Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of Australia. SA Branch. Vol XLI session 1939-40)

CHARACTER

Mintaro's overwhelming character is that of a small mid 19th century rural town. Its initial growth was short-lived and spontaneous, with only minimal development since the 1920s. The town has the added benefit of being off the Main North Road, and has consequently escaped the inevitable changes that occur on transportation routes. While the townscape is not a perfect time capsule of the late 19th century, it certainly provides a highly intact representation of early colonial-Victorian character.

The town's buildings, which vary from well-maintained to ruinous, are predominantly mid-nineteenth century stone and slate structures. Their basically Victorian style contributes significantly to the town's overall physical character. Timber shingles have given way to galvanised iron roofs, but otherwise early residential and commercial buildings are largely unaltered. Single-storey buildings predominate, showing variety in siting and design, but consistency of scale and materials. In fact, there is no other town in South Australia to rival Mintaro for such an extensive use of slate. This durable material has been used in a variety of ways – in features such as walls, roofs, window sills, posts, troughs, tanks, kerbs and steps.

Mintaro's character derives from more than its buildings, however. Other visual elements, such as its geographic position, vegetation, open spaces, street pattern and the minimal contribution of street amenities, all combine to enhance Mintaro's historic village atmosphere.

The town is relatively isolated with generally no surrounding development. It is set in a broad valley of crop and grazing land, and is exposed to visitors at almost every approach. Mintaro's scattered growth allows the surrounding country to meld with the settled areas and reinforces its informal village character. From its beginnings as a stop-over along the 'Gulf Road', the earliest section of the town has inherited an unusual street pattern that has resulted in numerous T-junctions, forks and oblique glimpses of the surrounding buildings, streets and country. This pattern has the original road (now Burra Street) as its axis, diagonally crossing the north-south grid of the original boundaries and the Government roads.

The historic rural atmosphere of the town is reinforced by the absence of sophisticated street amenities, such as parking bays, kerbs and guttering, street signs and repetitive street lighting. Vegetation and informal landscaping, as well as numerous dry stone slate walls, footpath edging and stone culverts, are all prominent streetscape features that contribute to Mintaro's visual character. The Wakefield River, which runs through Mintaro, is another important feature in its landscape.

FEATURES

Although the town itself spreads across a wider area, Mintaro's main commercial centre and the majority of its significant 19th century buildings are located along Burra Street, and the other main roads linking the settlement to surrounding towns.

The historic centre of Mintaro contains a predominance of early Victorian buildings and other sites that contribute to its character and designation as a state heritage area. At one time the town contained all the basic facilities needed to cater for its own population and for the surrounding area, but today many of these buildings have been converted to guest accommodation. The town had pubs (one is still licensed), a post office, a hall, a flour mill, shops, churches, a school, a police station, a blacksmith and numerous cottages. Some of these buildings are still in good repair, some have been converted and others are ruins.

24 specific sites within the Mintaro state heritage area are state heritage-listed places. These include:

- Mintaro Institute and Civic Hall
- two hotels
- mounting steps
- former police station
- Mintaro Primary School
- Mintaro cemetery



- Mintaro slate quarries
- former flour mill
- 15 dwellings, stores, workshops and offices.

VISITING

Mintaro is only a 90 minute drive north of Adelaide, and is a popular destination for day trips or for weekend getaways. Many of the restored heritage cottages offer bed and breakfast accommodation, which makes this peaceful town the ideal base for exploring the surrounding wineries or nearby towns such as Burra or Clare.

The town itself retains a nineteenth century village character, and is best enjoyed on foot.

The local hotel offers meals and refreshments, but other visitor facilities are limited. The Mintaro Slate Quarry welcomes visitors during working hours, while other attractions in the region include Martindale Hall and the Mintaro Maze.



Further Information

For further information please contact the State Heritage Unit

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