

PLOD ESSAY:

Early Planning in Wonthaggi from the 1910 *Argus*

You may recall an early essay I wrote with the help of the *Powlett Express* about the wonderful things we were finding in our Newspaper Archive. The article I quoted from, which was published 25 March 1910 under the title "Powlett Coal Mine", never left my mind. I was reminded of it when the Pioneer Mine Trail was opened last November and we had to make our way through thick tea-tree to get to the first mine shafts. The photographs shown to us that day were of a cleared, dusty, almost desolate industrial space, yet here we were doing our best to push back the bush that had overtaken it.

Here is part of that article written by Mr Cranage, who later became the first editor of the *Powlett Express*:

"Last spring, the Powlett plains were a wilderness. Scarcely a fence was seen and the lonely horseman might gallop for miles across the sword grass seeing no life but the flocks of plover rising and circling over the solitary marshes.

"Summer is not yet gone, but the whistle and clank of the coal trains drive the plover screaming from their ancient sanctuaries. The kingdom of silence is shattered by an industrial army. Progress has struck a long arm of iron far into the solitudes and grasped with a vice grip upon a treasure trove beneath the peaty earth. The iron arm is a rail road thirty miles in length; the grasping hand is a mining engine and the treasure is coal.

"The change to one, who has ridden on the tenantless plains but six short months ago, appears miraculous..."

Recently, Terri Allen compiled some entries she discovered in the *Argus Newspaper* from 1910. They depict some interesting early planning to replace the newly cleared wilderness with an organised town called Wonthaggi. They reminded me once again of Mr Cranage's article:

23 April 1910: "The planting of trees in the streets of the town is a work which will shortly be undertaken and Mr Stanley Hunter has mapped out a number of small reserves as children's playgrounds. Swimming baths are to be established, and Mr Hunter has under consideration a scheme for pumping seawater into the baths. As each street is formed it will be reticulated, though a permanent reservoir has yet to be provided and a roadway to be constructed to the beach."

7 May 1910: "Special attention is being directed to tree planting at the new State township of Wonthaggi at the Powlett Coalfield. It is probable that each street will have one kind of tree throughout its length, though the species will vary in the different Streets. Mr J. Johnson, superintendent of the State plantations, has recommended that the trees be placed in the middle of the principal business thoroughfares, while he considers that the residential streets should be lined on each side. He advises also that no house be permitted within 9ft of the footpath so that every home

may have space in front for a garden, which will blend with the trees in the street. ...Near the eastern and western bounds of Wonthaggi, the rising ground ascends to two knolls, which Mr Johnson says can with advantage be planted with trees and converted into attractive pleasure grounds."

[20,000 trees were to be planted in the streets and plantations: deciduous, Oriental plane, Western plane, English elm, evergreens and Australian trees.]

1 June 1910 at the first Progress Association meeting: "It was agreed that measures should be taken to prevent the present wholesale destruction of native game in the district."

20 August 1910: "Tree planting in the principal streets is now almost completed and the officer in charge reports that before more can be planted it will be necessary to re-grade one or two of the business streets. About 350 trees have been planted and preparations are being made for 6000 in a plantation on the west side of the town. About 30,000 trees in all will be planted."

23 April 1910: "The streets of Wonthaggi, named mostly after State Ministers, are now in the course of formation. The bayonet grass is being ploughed up and road metal is being trucked in from a quarry close to the town."

22 April 1910: "A National Park, which it was intended to reserve for pleasure of the residents, has to be sacrificed for residential sites. By night the glow of fire on the hills, and by day the ringing of 40 axes, indicate the work of clearing which is in progress amongst the messmate trees."

Now in 2010, we are no longer bent on cutting down our native vegetation; it is not so difficult today to imagine what Wonthaggi would have been like before the clearing and replanting of "desirable" trees for the residents in the new State Town. We actively encourage the bush to re-grow partly because we appreciate its unique beauty and suitability to our area. Regeneration of the foreshore here is an inspiration. The Healthland with its orchids each spring is wonderful, the parks and walking tracks in the area fought for by members in our Society like Terri Allen and Nola Thorpe make Wonthaggi a paradise to live in. So, we begin to get a taste for what might have been here once. We can see how, when the bush is left alone, it can grow back to its old tea-tree self and get a feeling of how the first to walk on this land must have felt.

It is difficult to imagine what it must have been like to watch the native trees come down in their thousands. I wonder how many people back then were actually aware of what they were destroying. One can only dream of the clouds of plover that once rose from the native grasses as a horseman rode by. The birds have not returned to what they once were. Indeed, the *Sentinel-Times* reported this week that from only 50 nests (115 eggs) 9 fledglings survived this year. Mr Cranage in the *Powlett Express* has nothing but praise for progress on the Coalfields even as he misses the plover.

Ibis Writers Workshop
at
Wonthaggi Historical Society Railway Station Museum
26 May 2010, 10am – 3pm

A local historical society can be seen as a musty old place filled with miscellaneous paraphernalia from past eras that have lost their meaning. Or it can be seen as a place of treasure and wonder if only we know how to enter and use it.

Writers – whether you be novelists, biographers, historians, poets, playwrights, memoirists – are invited to participate in a workshop offered jointly by Ibis Writers and the Wonthaggi Historical Society which aims to show the richness and texture of a place that lends itself to Story.

Gill will aim to demonstrate how an inner landscape provides meaning and context. Petrea will convey her response to certain artifacts in the museum and use them as metaphor to distill deep meaning. Carolyn will focus on the use of language in the early newspapers and how it can be used to create immediacy and authenticity in storytelling.

There is much more that writers will discover during the day using the different aspects of the archive – through demonstration, hands-on activities, **Gill Heal** (playwright, theatrical adventurer), **Carolyn Landon** (memoirist, oral historian) and **Petrea Savige** (poet) will run a one day workshop to introduce writers in the Bass Coast area to possible uses of the archive. discussion, writing and sharing.

Venue: Railway Station Museum, next to Safeway, Murray Street, Wonthaggi on Wednesday 26 May 2010, 10 am to 3 pm.

Cost: \$10 (includes lunch and a few goodies to take home).

Bookings: Phone Marian Quigley on 0430274666 by **Monday May 24.**

This is a Wonthaggi Centenary Event.