

PLOD ESSAY: PAPERBARK THICKET



Terri Allen is a naturalist who will crawl through any swamp or thicket or over acres of heathland to find a

new orchid; she is a collector of seeds, a propagator and a planter of trees. She walks the wetlands near the rifle range almost every morning at dawn to observe and take note of the birds and wildlife. She is a maker of lists, and an unstoppable researcher who has infinite curiosity about a place called The Paperbark Thicket or The Clump before it was named Wonthaggi. She grew up in Wonthaggi in the house her grandfather, Cliff Gitsham, a miner, built at "the bush end of Broome Crescent" in 1915. She attended the Primary School on Billson Street and the "Tech" on the corner of McBride and Watt Streets where she was one of only a few students in the academic stream, which meant she was headed for higher education, unlike most of her peers. Teaching was the usual direction undergraduates from the bush were pointed towards in the late 60s. Upon achieving her Arts degree at Melbourne University and her Dip. Ed., Terri found herself placed at Lake Bolac, but soon was promoted to Hopetoun High School in the Mallee. Teaching so far from home, from anywhere, really, was an isolating experience. Terri had time on her hands in the evenings, and she found herself dreaming of her old life as a youngster exploring the beaches, dunes and Paperbark/Tea-tree swamps of Wonthaggi. Luckily, it wasn't long before a lifeline came her way. It was the mobile library run by the State Library of Victoria (SLV) that swung through the Mallee every fortnight. Once she discovered she could order any book she wanted, she was never at a loss as to how to spend her time. She began researching the history of The Paperbark Thicket. What follows is some of the information she has dug up over the years. Most of this PLOD essay comes from that research and some of it – in italics – has been edited and/or enhanced by the PLOD editor:

Swamp Paperbark, *Melaleuca ericifolia*, is a fairly uninspiring plant, but surely, writes Terri, it should be Wonthaggi's floral emblem. There was a sea of this plant at The Clump in 1909-10, impenetrable, thickets, which impeded man and beast, indicative of vast muddy swampland. This is the vegetation with which the miners contended at Tent Town. So, what is the history of the Wonthaggi area? About 115 million years ago during the Cretaceous Period, the Strzelecki beds were laid down in a great rift valley as Gondwana broke up and Australia separated from Antarctica. Gondwana had begun to break up in the Jurassic Period, which spanned 56 million years from the end of the Triassic Period to the beginning of the Cretaceous Period, which began 145 million years ago.

Over at least 30 million years Australia slowly drifted to 76° South and found its place on the Globe. The landmass was populated with large-eyed polar dinosaurs and the first tiny mammals, including small herbivorous dinosaurs, gigantic carnivores, huge amphibians, turtles, flying dinosaurs, lungfish and birds. Vegetation was composed of mosses, ferns, primitive trees and, perhaps, the earliest flowering plants – all had to endure three months of winter darkness. *Humans arrived in Australia about 80-65,000 years ago, but have been in Gippsland only about 12000 years. The South Bunurong tribe of the Kulin Nation inhabited the Gippsland area to the South of the Strzeleckies long enough to have witnessed the ice-melt filling the Tamar Trough and cutting Tasmania from the Mainland with the formation of Bass Strait.* The new coastal area of Gippsland was rich, providing shellfish, fish, birds, beached whales and seals while the hinterland lagoons enriched the diet with yabbies, fish, game and waterbirds for the thriving Bunurong population. English and French explorers competed with each other to survey the Gippsland Coast and claim ownership in the late 18th Century, but they did not penetrate far inland. In order to harvest the bounty of the great Southern continent – whale and seal oil, skins, swan down, wattlebark¹ – ship's captains deposited crews on Bass Strait islands and remote beaches to provide for the London markets. These rough gangs of men, often isolated for up to a year with scant provisions... assuaged their loneliness and harsh life... by stealing native women from local camps, using their sexual favours and putting them to work cooking, gardening, harvesting, clubbing seals, stripping bark and tending cauldrons of blubber essentially enslaving the women and causing intolerable anger amongst the First Nations people. This situation eventually resulted in murder, which led to hue and cry and the first hangings in the Melbourne gaol. Unlike Batman and Faulkner, who landed on the banks of the Yarra and went west in 1835, Samuel Anderson turned east and settled in Westernport... He took up an area along the Bass River from Powlett to the Gurdies, the first run in the eastern part of the colonies. As well as grazing, he farmed, planting and harvesting wheat, which he milled in a flourmill designed by his partner, Robert Massie. [In her papers, Terri has lists of all the people who followed Anderson into the area and where they established 'runs'².]

1 Wattlebark was used for tanning leather.

These runs were broken up in 1869 Land Act when station leases were cancelled, the land unlocked and there was free selection before survey, 320 acres selections pegged and crown land alienated. As settlers moved in the difficulties they faced seemed endless and insurmountable: tracks, transport, finding suitable clothing and footwear, getting supplies, packing/sledging produce out, clearing land, fencing, building houses and shedding, water supply, depredations of dingoes/wallabies/caterpillars/grasshoppers, floods, bushfires, footrot, leaches, snakes, getting lost. And perhaps the hardest to bear: isolation, loneliness, lack of communication, and, later, lack of schools for growing families. Towns sprang up to accommodate the needs of the settlers: Bass (Woolamai North), Corinella (Griffiths Point), Grantville, Queensferry, Rhyll, Cowes, Kilcunda, Inverloch, Dalyston, Kongwak, Powlett River, Archies Creek... This was the general area, but what of Wonthaggi's site? In 1888 Alford cut a dray track from the Powlett at Kongwak to Buffalo Swamp near Wonthaggi. Then Thomas surveyed and cleared a track from Leongatha South to The Clump five miles from Wonthaggi... Settlers from the Clyde/Tooradin/Cranbourne area arrived c1890, among them the Aitkin Brothers... Settlers found the roads so bad it was difficult to transport produce to butter factories such as the Melbourne Chilled Butter & Produce Co at Archies Creek... Although there was no official township, Wonthaggi was recognised as an area by the Victoria Post Office by 1895-6, stating in The Victoria Post Office Commercial Directory that Wonthaggi was in Mornington County, 76 miles south-east from Melbourne, an agricultural and pastoral district... additional industries listed were timber milling and creameries. There was, at Powlett River, a blacksmith, a sawmiller, a storekeeper and postmaster, a creamery and a hotel. To reach the district a traveller had to take a train from Melbourne to Stony Creek, embark on a streamer to San Remo and ride horseback 17 miles. Glen Alvie was then known at Wonthaggi North. Peter Dwyer ran the government mail coach between San Remo and Powlett for 40 years. When the Powlett flooded he unyoked and swam the horses across with the mail on their backs. The area, referred to by locals as the Paperbark Thicket, had its ups and downs. In the summer of 1897-98 raging bushfires swept the countryside. The Holbles wrote, "I regret to state that owing to severe losses by recent bushfires...left with on 15 acres of grass out of 320, all fences burnt, cattle had to be fed on oilcake and chaff." Many who were burnt out moved to Inverloch to eke out a living by fishing.



In 1909 No.1 Shaft was sunk and the State Coal Mine established followed by a rush of a thousand men (and some women), who set up camp called Tent Town right in the densest parts of impenetrable Swamp Paperbark thicket. On 22 October 1910, shortly after the Railway was established, Wonthaggi's first newspaper, The Criterion, included the following article headlined "Journey by Train to Wonthaggi": "...The roads in the vicinity of Dalyston are roads in name only. The powers that be have put drains here and there on either side of the track, and the soil from this is placed in the centre to form the crown of the road. If it fails to settle so as to make a firm track, well – Kismet! It is fate. Good roads are not intended for these parts. As it is, travellers over them can rely on getting a good supply of first class mud in the wet weather and an even more superior quality of dust in the summertime. The soil of which the surface is composed breaks up very finely when a vehicle passes over it... The tracks of land upon which the nucleus of the township is situated... is undulating and drainage good. However, the sand ridges to the right of the railway line here extend much further inland than previously met with and there is a greater succession of them between swampland and the coast... after the Brickworks have been passed, the sand ridges recede a short distance towards the coast, and in the enclosure (or as it were, strip of flat country) running parallel with this ridge, to where it curves sharply round again to the east, the principal shaft of the State Mine is placed, its poppet heads being almost level with the crests of sand hills which flank it on two sides."

2 In a second part to this essay, to be published next month, all these towns and their make-up will be explained; Terri's lists are vast.