

PLOD ESSAY: Wonthaggi Rifle Club



In 1910 the area known as The Powlett Coal Fields was given the name Wonthaggi, rather than Peterloo or Peterhaven or Petria, as had been seriously considered before Mr McBride declared that he thought the “present name, Wonthaggi, was not inappropriate.”

According to page 3 in the 28 February 1910 *Geelong Advertiser*, Wonthaggi was a native name with the following text book definition: borne, drag; to pull along; to get; to bring; to haul; to drag; lug; to procure; to fetch; to obtain; to convey.

Mr McBride thought that, “All these definitions, or most of them applied to a place where the coal mining industry was carried on. He would, therefore, be satisfied with the name Wonthaggi, especially as it had never been put on the plan relating to the sale of leaseholds.”

By the beginning of 1911 Wonthaggi Township was growing in leaps and bounds. The Mines Department had declared that all tents initially rented out to miners be returned to the stores branch by 29 October 1910 as Tent Town was to be demolished, and freehold blocks of land were being offered for £15 – £5 deposit and balance 2s a week without interest. Houses could be built to order from £10 deposit, balance as rent. The streets had been laid out – one of which was McBride Avenue, in lieu of naming the town after him – and the plans for tree-lined crescents were coming to fruition, although numbers of wives and children were yet to join their men at the new coastal settlement.

With the men on their own, the Wonthaggi Rifle Club was formed and became a focal point for the miners serving their time before their families arrived. At the end of Reed Crescent, the Rifle Range faced southward with a two-mile area beyond. This was Crown Land managed by the Department of Defence, who condoned the establishment of a Rifle Club, because it considered the use of firearms to be essential for would-be soldiers, not that they had any sense then that a World War was around the corner.

For a rifle club, position was everything and the reserve seemed perfect: on the edge of town, Crown Land so it would never be sold, secluded. Yet there were problems. The land was partly heathlands in the south, and the rest was swamp and dense melaleuca, which had to be partially cleared for the firing range. Thankfully, the surrounding sand ridges made easy digging for the miners intent on erecting the butts. Much later, in the 1950s the whole rifle range was cleared, revealing two watercourses, which in spite of becoming the ephemeral wetlands after rain, were sown to pasture fences and leased for grazing.

The position of the reserve, however, meant that it was buffeted by Bass Strait winds, making it one of the most challenging ranges in the State once the club started joining in on competition with other rifle clubs. Reports of the weather on competition days are evidence the challenges faced: fish tailing headwinds so strong that one of the six-foot square targets was blown from its frame; shooting cancelled because of squalls, shooting

delayed when Frank Faulisi bogged his 4WD up to the axles when putting up direction flags before a meet; a strong easterly blew smoke from the rubbish tip making sighting the target difficult; a gale buffeted shooters so that holding the rifle steady became difficult; a 1983 elimination series to select a women's team for the National Titles in Hobart was held in Wonthaggi because the windy conditions are similar to that in Hobart and a strong, gusting NW wind made coaching very difficult. In spite of the exceptional weather, WRC became a valued part of Wonthaggi's sporting scene.

From the beginning, rutted track, really a road reserve, out to what would become Wreck Beach and Harmers Haven, ran south along the eastern boundary of the site and was used well into the 1950s. It proceeded via The Pines, the local picnic area, where for generations of the local children played. Not without caution, however. The Wonthaggi children thought of Saturdays when the Rifle Club met as Red-Flag days, with pennants put up as warning that shooting was taking place. The local children crouched below the dunes as the pennants snapped in the breeze –Wonthaggi euphemism for howling wind –and shots resounded.



There was never a weekend when something wasn't happening at the WRC. Minutes from the 1980s give an idea of the work done by the members through working bees. The rifle range had catered

300-, 600-and 700-yard distances, which had to be carefully measured for competitions. In the 1980s they wished to extend to 800-, 900- and eventually 1000-yards distances to be competitive with other clubs. The Club needed a long and flat area to site the 1000-yardshoot. About this time, Wonthaggi Borough was looking for sand as that on Tank Hill was all but depleted. Crown Lands, with WRC approval, gave the permission to the Borough to remove a sand hill just inside the northern boundary. Perfect. All were happy.

Throughout its history, WRC had regular shoots at home and assiduously attended away shoots. The club was part of the District Rifle Association with Lang Lang, Leongatha and Yarram and competed as South Gippsland against Central and Western Gippsland. The shooters also competed throughout the state and Carol Hulett competed in the Victorian Women's team in Queensland, WA, NSW, and Tasmania.

In the 1980s, WRC had a policy of encouraging junior members in order to teach firearm safety and skills and to give youth and opportunity at an alternative sport and to recruit new members. Two young Scout members, Andrew Meachen and Brett Williams, needed to have skills in marksmanship and handling and maintenance of firearms as part of achieving the Duke of Edinburgh Award. WRC helped them and soon there were four more junior members. At a Junior meeting in Williamstown, WHS Students Andrew Meachen, Brett Williams and John Beckerlog finished in the top 15, and came 3rd in the team event. There was one young fellow, John Huitema, who had his first shot without a coach and scored better than the best in the district championship.

Wonthaggi Rifle Club competed continuously through the 1980s. There were some top shooters in the club. In December 1985, Ted Horn shot the first three-range possible at Wonthaggi (the first time in 75 years). WRC Veteran George Milkins confirmed this. He said, "The best I have ever know was when the late Bob Palmer, trying to decide which rifle he would use in The King's the following week, shot a 103 with one rifle and 104 with the other. IT was the first time Ted had won the top A Grade Section at an Open Prize Shoot against 77 competitors from Yarram to Warnambool. HE gained A Grade's No 1 badge and trophy money, but he took home an extra \$100 for the best 150/150.

The Wonthaggi Rifle Club held its last shoot on August 2, 1997. As the range was the property of the Defence Department, a range inspector from the army audited the WRR, found it to be unsafe for the marker to put up targets and suspended shooting because of the state of the bunkers. Remedial work would have been a huge task financially and coinciding with the backlash over the Port Arthur massacre, public out, tightening of gun laws and the gun buy-back, the club was dissolved.

Essay based on research by Terri Allan

Photos are not of Wonthaggi; if anyone has any authentic Wonthaggi Rifle Club photos, it would be good use them to replace the photos in this article for future reference.