

WHITE SETTLEMENT FAR FROM PEACEFUL

By JENNY-LEE GRAY

Early records suggest that by the time the European Captain Bacchus first came to Bacchus Marsh the Aborigines were well aware of white men and their nature.

Historians suggest the Aborigines knew of the approach of white settlers through their contact with coastal Aborigines from related tribes.

Extracts of early accounts provided by the Wathaurung Aboriginal Co-op in Geelong point out that the Aborigines already had "perfect knowledge" of firearms: they were terrified at the sight of them.

"There is so little known about the social organisation of them. It bespeaks the rapidity with which they were physically destroyed by settlers seeking undisputed possession of

their land," one extract reads.

The extracts, compiled by researchers from Monash University, question suggestions that Bacchus Marsh and surrounding districts enjoyed a peaceful settlement.

One small group of Aborigines did settle on district farms. They were regarded as peaceful and eventually moved on or died. This is where the accepted history of Bacchus Marsh racial relations and factual evidence part ways.

An early settler from the district is quoted in a letter as stating: "A more detestable race of beings approximating to human I have never encountered. They have been very annoying, attacking our stations."

Pentland Hills was listed continually as one site where conflict was fierce. Records state that property owners had problems getting indentured convicts to remain with stock because of their fear they would be murdered by Aborigines.

Early settlers went so far as to suggest Aborigines, apart from servants, be prevented from entering towns. They also suggested the removal of all children between the ages of two and four years from families to mission sites.

Sadly, they were successful. The children were placed in missions as far as possible from their original homes to ensure no contact with relatives — a policy that continued with tragic effect down to recent times.

An 1856 edition of *The Argus* published a private pamphlet receiving quiet support throughout Victoria at the time.

It suggested all Aborigines be placed on one of the islands in the straits, claiming their removal would be no hardship to the Aborigines because they had "little or no attachment to localities."

The journals of the Aborigines' "protector" George Augustus Robinson, appointed in 1839, offer the full force of the reality of what became of the Bacchus

Marsh Marpeang and the entire Wada Wurrung tribe.

Robinson known for his efforts in "resetting" the Tasmanian Aborigines, carried out an investigation of the region. Various estimates suggest there were between 40 and 120 Aborigines to each clan and a total of between 1630 and 3240 in the Wada Wurrung Tribe.

Robinson described the tensions between early settlers and Aborigines as a case of "individuals having 280 miles of country and still thinking it a hardship if a native appears on their run, imagining a 10 pound licence gives them legal right to expel the blacks."

"I have not seen any natives since I have been out. Reports say blacks were shot down for stealing sheep and flour. The view of many settlers is to keep the natives in subjection by fear."

Robinson recounted how early settlers in Western Victoria including Bacchus Marsh, had the opinion that "it was never intended that a few miserable savages were to have this fine country."

He listed extermination by Europeans as one of the main reasons for the demise of the Aboriginal population of the Bacchus Marsh region along with a "lessening of the chances of obtaining food caused by the entire occupation of the best of their country, influenza and other diseases brought by colonists, tobacco and alcohol."

Despite the loss of much of the history of the Marpeang, Bacchus Marsh has at least 48 recognised artifact sites. A number of them are of considerable significance not only to the Marpeang, but to the Aboriginal history of the entire state.

One site in the small patch of Mallee in the Long Forest rivals the Werribee burial site, renowned for its wealth of information.

Another in the same area may provide yet another link in the time line of Aboriginal population of

Australia. It includes the discovery of grinding grooves high in granite rock deposits.

District Conservation and Environment officers work closely with members of the Victorian Archaeological Survey to protect and investigate the findings in Bacchus Marsh.

Sadly, until these sites are fully investigated the Victorian Archaeological Survey will not release details. While Conservation and Environment is working to educate residents, particularly those who live near or own property on which sites are found, both institutions are extremely wary of releasing any information.

Previous experience with ignorant people and the loss of some important finds has promoted this attitude of secrecy.

There is also considerable frustration. Bacchus Marsh basin, site of the present township, is expected to hold vital information on the Marpeang. Sadly, much of this information, if not all, is now lost due to development of the area.

Other areas of note face a similar fate. However, many in the district are becoming aware of the importance of Aboriginal sites. Residents on properties containing artifacts are working with archeologists and Aborigines to protect them from further disturbance.

The language of the Marpeang lives on in the names of local communities and rivers: Werribee, Coimadai, Balliang and Myrniong.



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