

Lightly Wooded with Beautiful Grass ... History of the Coastal Vegetation.

Before non-Indigenous people arrived in the traditional lands of the Gunditjmara and Keeraywurrong people, the sand dunes were covered in sheoaks, and many thousands of hectares of wetlands, forests, woodlands, heaths and grasslands teemed with wildlife. Unfortunately the colonisers did not respect the Traditional Owners, or how their practices maintained the integrity and value of these complex ecosystems. The few written records we have of the original native vegetation were mostly made by colonists, surveyors, and government officials during their other duties. By the time botanists could visit, much of the land had been cleared.



Cattle Grazing, Portland Bay, Victoria (mid-1800s) Samuel Thomas Gill .
Photo: State Library of New South Wales.

Making a place - Portland area and westward

Whalers and sealers arrived in the early 1800s. William Dutton hunted whales, gardened, and kept pigs near Narrawong (Carroll 1989). He was followed by the Henty brothers who arrived at Portland Bay in 1834. Within a day they began building a hut from imported materials, within a week men were digging vegetable gardens, and within two weeks they were felling trees and planting seeds (Peel, 1996). The foreign livestock trampled the soft ground with hard hooves, and tore out whole tussocks of native grasses with plier-like teeth. Only three days after Edward Henty arrived he wrote to his brother Charles; ‘Send some rabbits and potatoes and a few carrots. The kangaroos are getting thin, being much hunted by Dutton ... The grass is very luxuriant, hundreds of tons of hay might be cut’ (Learmonth 1934). The colonials cleared trees, burnt forests, dug out grass and stumps, chipped the ground, ploughed, planted, and drained standing pools of water (Peel 1996).

The first farming provided food for the whalers, but soon the Hentys directed profits from whaling to establish commercial agriculture (Bassett 1954). Wealth was gathered from the land and exchanged for money or goods, and they valued land for its capacity to provide exports. In December 1834, a Henty expedition rowed eastwards to the Fitzroy River. They saw the land and plants through graziers' eyes; 'beautiful' sheep hills with plenty of grass and only thinly timbered, even on the rocky land. There were many marshes too. In a single day they saw more than 50 'Native Huts', but the Aboriginal owners kept out of sight; perhaps because some of the Henty men had set their dogs onto an Aboriginal man the day before. On top of Mount Clay the Kangaroo Grass grew thick like grain and there were extensive views. At the foot of the hill were grassy plains (Peel 1996).

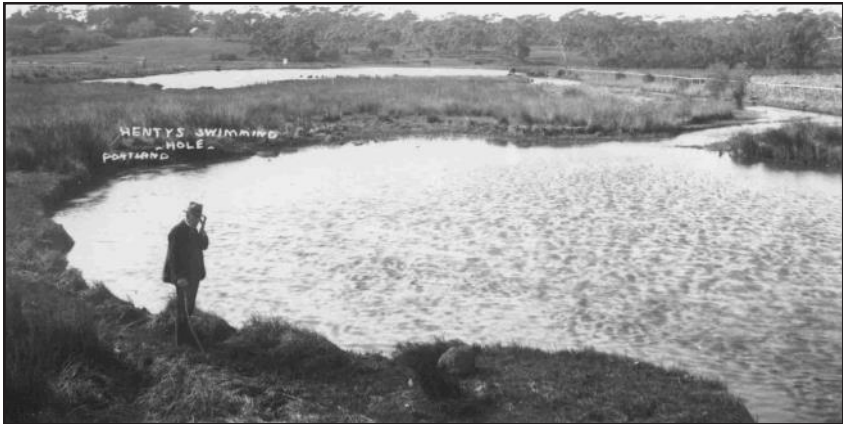


Cape Bridgewater with remnants of sheoak woodland on the horizon.
Photo: Vern McCallum Collection

At Cape Bridgewater in 1835 there were lightly timbered hills covered in Kangaroo Grass (suitable for sheep). The Bridgewater Lakes provided a natural barrier, and only a mile of fence was needed to enclose 3000 acres of 'useful land' (Peel 1996). The Hentys later constructed a ditch fence that could still be seen in the 1970s (Savill 1978), and put 60 acres under crop. North of Cape Bridgewater were five miles of heath, and a thick stringybark forest (Peel 1996).

The colonial authorities were unaware of what was happening at Portland Bay when Major Thomas Mitchell visited in 1836. He was impressed by the parallel ridges of sand covered in 'excellent grass', and topped by sheoaks at the mouth of the Glenelg River. Further east he unexpectedly found the Hentys, and also learned of the killings of Aboriginal people that had already taken place (Mitchell 1839).

Aboriginal fires were noted along of the coast by mariners between 1800 and 1802 (Grant 1803, Flinders 1774-1814, Baudin 1974). Traditional burning maintained openings in the forest, green grass for kangaroos and wallabies, and encouraged lilies and orchids with edible tubers (Zola & Gott 1992). But in the summer of 1838/39 the colonisers saw Aboriginal burning as a nuisance, or an attack on them. On three days the Aborigines lit grass fires close to where shearers were working, and each time the Europeans worked hard to put the fires out. Aboriginal burning was noted again the following summer (Peel 1996), but the colonisers were intent on changing land management to suit their European appetites, and Aboriginal land management did not fit. The violent war of invasion continued until the 1850s (Clark 1995), and the care of this land was changed.



Fawthrop Lagoon, Portland. The forested hill is the site of the present-day Portland Secondary College. Photo: Vern McCallum Collection.

Port Fairy

In the 1830s when whalers came to what is now Port Fairy, it was home to hundreds of Aboriginal people who fished and hunted for emu, kangaroo, wild turkey, swans and ducks in the swamps and forest (Powling 1980). The crews whaled in winter, then turned to the land in summer; stripping wattlebark and establishing 'The Farm' east of Tower Hill (Carroll 1989). Before the Farm went broke in 1843, 10,000 sheep and 2,500 head of cattle had free run of the coast between Port Fairy and the Merri River (MacKenzie 1976). The forest trees at Port Fairy were not suitable for milling, so the whalers tried to collect timber from the legendary Mahogany ship, before being warned off by Aboriginal people. Eventually some large timber from the Portland forest was sent over by the Hentys (Carroll 1989). In later years Portland would develop numerous sawmills (Kerr 1995), whereas Port Fairy's newspapers carried advertisements for milled timber, palings, laths and shingles from Tasmania; different soils grow different trees.

In 1841 George Augustus Robinson, Protector of Aborigines, travelled between Port Fairy and the Merri River, meeting with Aboriginal people and colonisers. Robinson hoped to prevent the bloodshed that had occurred elsewhere during settlement (Presland 1977). He noted kangaroos, numerous wombat holes and an open forest of stunted banksia, 'lightwood' (*Acacia melanoxylon*), eucalyptus and native cherry tree (*Exocarpos cupressiformis*), with abundant 'currajong' (perhaps *Pandorea* vine). There were patches of stunted 'tea-tree scrub' which could have been Coastal Beard Heath, Prickly Teatree, Woolly Teatree, or other shrubs.



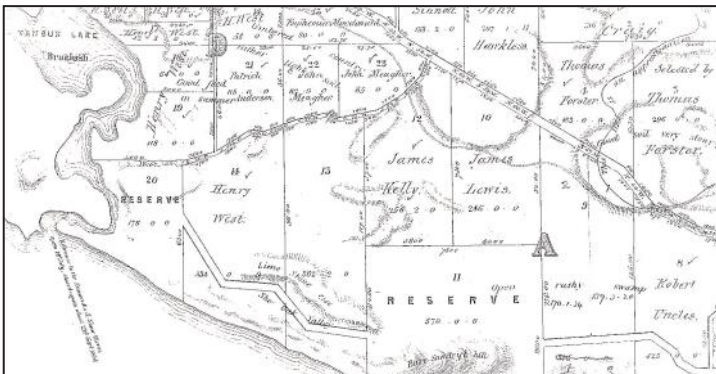
Between the Moyne River and a native village on the Tower Hill rise was a large wetland where Aboriginal people collected most of their food, including roots, abundant waterbirds and other wildlife (Presland 1977) from the rich black soil of the Moyne River floodplain. The wetland was drained in the 1870s by the Knight brothers who spent £20,000 blasting a channel through basalt with 150 men working by hand to redirect the Moyne River, and create the Korongah Drain into Belfast Lough (Powling 1980). It was applauded as turning 3,000 acres of 'worthless waste' into 'splendid agricultural land' (Sutherland 1888, Powling 1980). But the rich wetland and its reeds, flora and fauna were lost.

North of Port Fairy, Robinson saw many wattle trees had been stripped by the Port Fairy whalers, otherwise the land was a well-grassed, but closed forest of dwarfed banksia, wattle, stringybark, 'lightwood', and some native cherry (Presland 1977).

Between Port Fairy and Portland

Police Magistrate Foster Fyans and surveyor George Smythe travelled westward in June 1839 to investigate conflicts between the colonisers and Aboriginal people. West of Port Fairy they found an immense marsh with gigantic rushes and many small paths through it. They gathered water from a native well. They couldn't cross a narrow swift stream (probably the Eumeralla River) as its steep banks were covered with 'long blade grass and nettles', so instead they followed it towards the sea (Brown 1986). Closer to the coast, a sheoak woodland opened into coastal scrub stunted by the wind, and the river ran into a large coastal lagoon backed by sand hummocks. Smythe wanted to see if they could cross the river at its mouth, so he disrobed, placed a sabre between his teeth, and crossed the lagoon. Convinced they would be unable to cross, they backtracked up river (Brown 1986).

For days they had eaten very poorly, camped in 'miserable' places, and morale had been low. But then they found an Aboriginal camp on the river with a native fish trap. They caught and cooked fish, watered and grazed their horses, shot and ate cranes. Fyans wrote that this Aboriginal camp '... afforded us more rest and comfort than we had experienced for fourteen days'. The Aboriginals had left when they heard the group approaching (Brown 1986).



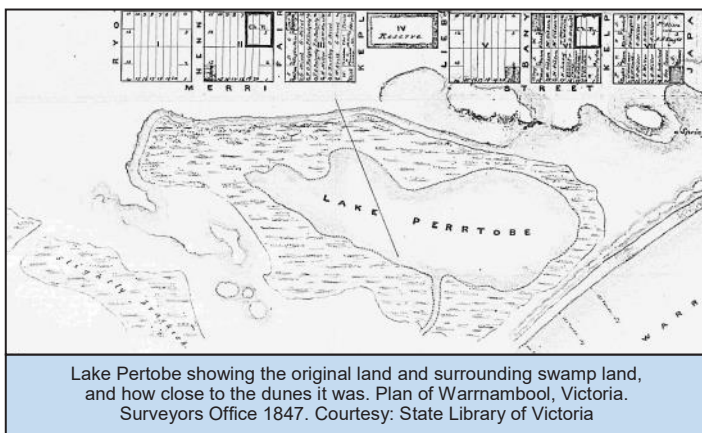
Land west of Yambuk Lake showing 'She Oak Valley' and Bare Sandrift Hill'.
Plan of the Parish of Yambuk, County of Villiers, Victoria.
Surveyor Generals Office 1855. Courtesy: State Library of Victoria.

Much of the coastline between Portland and the Eumeralla River had several rows of sand dunes with thick sheoaks, banksia and numerous wombat holes. Further inland were patches of wattle and blackwood trees, marshes surrounded by tall teatree scrub, and small lagoons with a thick covering of dark-brown reeds (Boldrewood 1884). This was considered inferior 'heathy' country, unsuitable for grazing. The soil was sandy, the grass 'indifferent'. The pink and white heath at least gave the eye a rest from the close eucalypt forest (Boldrewood 1884).

James Bonwick described the Yambuk district in 1857 as having blackwoods of unparalleled beauty, and gigantic wattles and native cherry trees. But some settlers disliked the closeness of the bush and not being able to see what, or who, was around. In the 1850s Annie Baxter described her 10,000 acre Yambuk run as very thickly timbered and ugly, without any views, but good country for fattening livestock (Powling 1980).

Warrnambool, Port Fairy and the coastal crisis.

Warrnambool was colonised by farmers rather than whalers. In the early 1840s the Bolden brothers came overland to Grassmere and built a three-mile fence between the Merri and Hopkins Rivers. This enclosed 16,000 acres including present-day Warrnambool (Boldewood 1884, Sayers & Yule 1987, MacKenzie 1976). In both Warrnambool and Port Fairy, Drooping Sheoaks were the main tree on the coast. The 1858 Sailing Directions described Warrnambool Hill (now Cannon Hill) as topped by large bushy trees that looked like a cock’s comb from the sea. The sand hummocks along the beach were covered by green scrub. The main road between Warrnambool and Port Fairy (Belfast) ran along the dunes through the rushes and grasses. Further inland was a forest of gum, sheoak and ‘lightwood’. Travelers between Warrnambool and Yangery Grange (near Tower Hill) in the 1850s had to negotiate a maze of interwoven tracks through forest (McCorkell 1967).



A Borough of Warrnambool tender in 1879 specified clearing of the roads west of Ryot Street:

All trees, stumps, logs, scrub or other rubbish growing standing, or lying in the line of any of the roads or streets at the western end of the Borough to be grubbed and cleared, all roots that are within six inches of the surface of the ground to be ... extracted ... All timber, scrub, or roots to be burned off or removed and all stump holes to be filled up with dry soil and well rammed.

Around Port Fairy, the trees were rapidly cleared to provide firewood, including for whalers' tryposts. The whalers also ringbarked many black wattle trees, and from the late 1840s (Carroll 1989) the steam-driven flour mills burned sheoak rather than the more expensive imported coal (Syme 1991).

When Margaret Emily Brown arrived as a child in 1849 she could see no houses and wondered where she would live because there was nothing but sand (Griffith 1990). James Bonwick on his educational tour of 1857 found very few gardens and naked country with no flowers or trees. By 1857 sand was covering fences near the coast. Firewood was so scarce that the entire village would go to the beach to drag back driftwood (Griffith 1990). In 1885 Julian Thomas, a journalist for the *Argus*, wrote of Belfast East: 'a series of sand hummocks...the land is valueless, either for residence or as an investment,' (Powling 1990).

In both Warrnambool and Port Fairy, the dunes were used by householders for grazing their livestock and to collect firewood; by the 1860s the sand hummocks were showing the pressure. The coast had always had a few dune blow outs, but the unprotected sand was at the wind's mercy.



Battery Hill, Port Fairy with sheoaks dying off. Photo: Port Fairy Historical Society

At Yambuk there were reports of a barley crop buried by a sand storm (Yambuk Book Committee 1988); at Narrawong, so much sand blew over the coast road that it was nearly impassable.

In Port Fairy, fencing was constructed at Battery Hill on the East Beach. Some sheoaks regrew in the late 1800s, but the trees died back in the early 1900s, and were later replaced by introduced Coastal Teatree. The rest of the Port Fairy dunes were relatively unprotected. Goats were a major problem: they were banned from Griffiths Island, had eaten all the shrubs and trees at the new St John's Church grounds, and consumed the first street trees planted

by Council (Powling 1980). Warrnambool had over 2000 residents, and the public cut down trees as they saw fit with little regard for the common good (Osburne 1887).

In 1866 a commission (approved by Council) recommended fencing off the sand hummocks between the Hopkins and Merri Rivers to exclude stock. Ten years before similar fencing had been undertaken at Allandale and the hummocks' vegetation had regenerated well. By 1874 sand movement had become so alarming that the Lands Department voted 240 pounds for dune protection, and continued to fund protection works for several years. A three-rail fence was built along the dunes, and seeds were sent by the Government Botanist, Baron von Mueller, to stabilise the dunes. Pigface, couch, lime grass, shrubs and conifers were planted with mixed success. In 1881 the Shire of Warrnambool appointed three rabbit inspectors.

While the dunes were at risk, some considered the vegetation a nuisance. In 1883 the Minister of Works was told that the Merri River: '... is effectually dammed back by ... the growth of vegetation at the foot of an immense sand dune known as Levy's Point, and the intercepted water flows back over thousands of acres of crown land below the western sand hummocks'. This was thought to impede scour in Lady Bay, and disposal of effluent by industry on the river.

It was only in 1883 that the South African Marram Grass arrived and, under the guidance of Samuel Avery of Port Fairy, the dunes were planted out. Permanent reserves were created 'For Prevention of Irruption of Sand' west of the Merri River and elsewhere along the coast. Grazing management was important; the Herdsman in 1883 earned more than the Town Clerk. In the Warrnambool Borough, the Common allowed cattle, horses and branded goats, but; 'Any person destroying growing timber on the Common, will forfeit his privilege of depasturing under the above rules and will be liable to prosecution'. Few private fences were built and livestock were allowed to roam. Warrnambool and Port Fairy papers carried regular lists of impounded horses, bullocks and other livestock.

Editorials in the Warrnambool Standard in 1884 suggested that: 'Nature will avenge herself on man for all transgressions of her laws, and we are already beginning to experience the silent reprisals of Nature for depriving a large portion of the Australian continent of its forestal treasures'. The editorial envisioned a forest of introduced pine, to provide fuel, timber and resin, growing on the sand hills:

Green grasses will cover them, green pines wave over them. The harmless fauna of the Australian bush will find a home there, and bright-winged birds flit among the branches of the trees ... invalids will flock to the sanatorium which is somewhat too bracing now at some seasons of the year ... snug farms, and cosy cottages may nestle under shelter of the woods.