

Murrabinna (Blackford Reserve), near Kingston SE

Peter Bell and Susan Marsden

Blackford Reserve consists of a large area of land bisected by Rowney Road, within the District Council of Kingston in South Australia's South East. There are two stone cottages standing on the east side of the road, and one of stone and mixed materials on the west side. Most of the reserve is covered by native scrub, in a district where most land has been cleared for farming.

Blackford Reserve, or Murrabinna, is a place which expresses - and has helped to sustain - a distinctive, post-contact Aboriginal history in South Australia's South-East. The longevity of occupation at Blackford, for up to a century, until the 1970s, was helped by the construction of several stone and iron cottages, an unusual, if not unique feature of such small Aboriginal reserves.

Before European settlement began in the 1840s, the South-East around Lacepede Bay was the land of the Aboriginal people known as the Meintangk, the southern-most members of the Ngarrindjeri people, whose country stretched from Lacepede Bay north through the Coorong to Cape Jervis, and around the lakes and along the lower River Murray. (Jenkin 1969) According to Tindale (1974) and Watson (2002), Meintangk territory at the time of European contact stretched from Lacepede Bay; north to the Granite Rocks 19 kilometres north of Kingston; south to Cape Jaffa; east to Lucindale, Blackford, Keilira, and Naracoorte; and inland from Lake Hawdon to Mosquito Creek. Having advantage of the foods to be gathered along the coast, in the wetlands and along Maria Creek, including millions of waterbirds, their territory was smaller in extent than the inland tribes. The Meintangk were divided into seven migratory groups but there were seasonal concentrations at places with permanent water, such as Blackford Creek.

With the passing of the Waste Lands Act of 1842 the South Australian Governor gained the power to set land aside 'for the use or benefit of the Aboriginal inhabitants of the country'. Many small reserves were created between then and the 1913-15 Royal Commission on Aborigines, including Blackford Reserve, established near Blackford Creek inland from Kingston. Most historical accounts (including the *Atlas of South Australia*) suggest that these 'pockets of land were generally small and totally inappropriate for Aboriginal methods of land-use. On the excuse Aborigines were not properly using the land, much of it was subsequently resumed and then leased or sold to European settlers.'

However, it is clear from Aboriginal histories of the Kingston and Coorong districts that the Blackford Reserve and other areas permitting Aboriginal occupation provided an impoverished, but at least secure base for them to continue to live in their homeland. They could also combine station and domestic work with traditional hunting, gathering and cultural activities, including the women's much-admired weaving, using local grasses and reeds. The women were also valuable workers as midwives, cooks, nurses and servants. Mary Jane Watson at Blackford was the local midwife in the early 1900s, and around the same time Ethel Watson was nursemaid in Kingston for the young Norman Tindale - an association that may have played a part in his work with her when he became an anthropologist at the South Australian Museum. (Mattingley and Hampton, p. 153).

The district's small and scattered European population, the natural resources, and the Aboriginal camps and houses at Kingston and in the Coorong, as well as at Blackford, also enabled some traditional seasonal movement to continue from summer on the coast inland to higher ground, at Blackford, beyond the winter swamps. (Watson, p 53) The largest Aboriginal population lived at Kingston (Tangalun), along Maria Creek near the (still existing) Aboriginal Burial Ground, and in Rosetown. Rations were issued by the police at Kingston, and there was also labouring, fishing and domestic work available. Early residents recalled that 'hundreds of blacks dwelt along the banks of Maria Creek', but as Kingston enjoyed booming trade in the 1880s, the European residents proposed to 'improve' the town by removing the Aboriginal camp to Blackford Reserve. (Watson, p 130) Possibly, one or more of the surviving stone cottages at Blackford was built around that time. In the event, Aboriginal residents continued to move between both places until well within living memory.

The continued existence of Blackford Reserve also reflected the value of Aboriginal labour to the surrounding pastoralists, who continued to control most of the surrounding land, unlike in other settled districts where pastoralism gave way to farming. Police and Protectors' reports from the mid-nineteenth century onwards describe the men of the Lacepede district leaving their camps 'to seek work on sheep stations' (Protector's report, *SA Government Gazette*, 1865, pp. 7-8). Apart from shearing, they were also engaged in kangaroo shooting, sheep washing, horse-breaking, wattle bark stripping, and other labouring work.

However, the life was hard, and at best, marginal, and many people died from the illnesses first introduced by European settlers. In the 1940s, the Minutes of the District Council of Lacepede record the deaths of two former residents of Blackford from tubercular meningitis (Minutes 30 November 1940), and note a letter from the Board of Health, writing that 'action be taken at Blackford to put natives camp in a sanitary condition' (Minutes, 25 January 1941).

Blackford is associated with several significant individuals and families, notably the renowned weaver and 'Queen', Ethel Watson, nee Ethel Wympie. Mrs Watson lived for much of her life at Blackford Reserve in a stone and iron cottage which stands on the opposite side of the road to the other houses. Her memorial, erected by the Kingston Branch of the National Trust at the town's entrance in 1971, was the first memorial dedicated to an Aboriginal person in South Australia, and commemorated her as "Queen" Ethel, the 'last full-blood' Aboriginal person in the district when she died, aged 100, in 1954.

Athanasia Blessios (nee Hilda Bonney) recalls her grandparents Ethel and Harry Watson living at Blackford on their own block of land, where they ran some sheep, two cows and two horses. They sheared their sheep with hand blades, bagged the wool, and carried it by horse and cart to Kingston. They had three children who reached adulthood, but Ethel also gave birth to triplets who died as babies and 'are buried at the Reserve at Blackford, where their tiny graves are marked by sea shells from the Coorong.' (Blessios, p. 8).

Like other families at the reserve, the Watsons also accommodated other family members in their small home, including Hilda Bonney's family before they moved into Kingston. During the 1930s they were followed by other family members who also wanted to move away from Blackford and buy their own homes in Kingston.

Gradually, from that time, the reserve was emptied of permanent residents, which was also reflected in the closure of the nearby school. The children living on the reserve had formed the mainstay of the local one-teacher provisional school, Blackford School, which was built on a nearby pastoral property, operated from 1907 until 1948, and still stands. Some of the

Aboriginal children's initials, for example, FA (Freddie A'Hang), and BW (Bill Watson) are carved in the school's stone wall.

Blackford Reserve is also a significant site illustrating the recent history of Aboriginal people acquiring tenure to the land in South Australia. Between 1966-86 this was achieved in three ways: firstly, by the establishment of the South Australian Aboriginal Lands Trust; then through legislation; and by direct purchase. The establishment of the Aboriginal Lands Trust in 1966 was the first step taken by an Australian state or Commonwealth government to grant Aborigines title to land. The Trust was created as a statutory body to hold certain lands in trust for the economic and cultural benefit of Aboriginal people, and could not sell the land without the approval of both houses of Parliament. These lands were former missions, farming properties and reserves with heritage and cultural significance to local Aboriginal communities. Titles for the nine missions and reserves still operating in South Australia in 1966 were vested in the Trust. They included Blackford Reserve. The Trust then leased these lands back to the local Aboriginal communities for 99 years with rights of renewal. Kingston's Aboriginal community, including the Kungari Association, cares for and maintains the reserve and its surviving buildings and sites.

There are a number of places on the South Australian Heritage Register, or nominated, because of their role in the interaction between European and Aboriginal South Australians. They include all or part of the settlements at Poonindie, Moorundie, Point Pearce, Raukkan (Point Macleay), Killalpaninna, Kopperamanna, Hermannsburg and Finniss Springs. However, all these settlements differ from Blackford Reserve in one fundamental respect; all were created, administered and supervised on a day-to-day basis by European staff. Most were run by church missionaries, Moorundie and Point Pearce by government officers, and Finniss Springs by a benevolent patriarch, but all were white.

Blackford is fundamentally different in being a settlement run entirely by and for its Aboriginal residents. There was never a white missionary, teacher or administrator in residence. Those services were available in Kingston or at the Blackford School nearby if needed, but their provision was not the reason the settlement existed. In this sense Blackford is quite distinct from the other places in its general class.

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