

THE WIMMERA AND MALLEE



THE NORTHWESTERN SECTOR of Victoria between the Murray River and the South Australian border is dominated by extensive, semiarid and gently undulating lowlands. Whether viewed locally or from a statewide perspective, the distinguishing environmental features are rainfall, vegetation, soils and topography. Rainfall is relatively low and variable across the region. The Mallee generally receives between 130 and 380 millimetres, whereas the average for **Horsham** in the southern Wimmera is about 450 millimetres; in addition, rainfall reliability generally increases towards the south. The obscure Aboriginal term 'mallee' describes a form of eucalyptus scrub characterised by stunted trees, with multiple stems rising from a resilient underground root stock. This hardy vegetation originally covered an area of over 40 000 square kilometres in this part of Victoria, reinforcing the marked homogeneity of a monotonous topography seldom rising above 150 metres; it is relieved mainly by a multiplicity of salt lakes and various stabilised or highly active sand dune systems.

The Wimmera was named by the first white explorer, Thomas Mitchell, after an Aboriginal term for a boomerang or throwing-stick. Its rolling plains are predominantly 100–200 metres above sea level and the mixture of deep grey clays (Wimmera black soils), sands, and red-brown loams supported a pre-European vegetation of open woodlands and grasses. Soil erosion and excessive soil salinity are hazards throughout the northwest, and there are serious surface water deficiencies, although underground aquifers and deeper artesian supplies are invaluable resources for livestock. Apart from Mitchell (1836) and Edward Eyre (1838), the major exploration of the northwest was conducted by pioneer surveyors, pastoralists and farmers. The Wimmera was first occupied by squatters, primarily for extensive sheep farming, in the 1840s and 1850s. With the exception of the Murray River frontages, the squatting settlement of the Mallee was comparatively more superficial and generally took place about ten years later. In the process only slight modifications were made to the Mallee lands, much of which later became a noted system of parks, wilderness areas and specialised fauna, flora and wildlife reserves, since these localities proved unrewarding for the overriding commercial purposes of the day. Thus far, the most significant evidence of Aboriginal occupation has been located on the margins of the region, notably along the Murray and its major tributaries, but the discovery of wells and campsites elsewhere suggests that the Aborigines adapted to more arid conditions on the surrounding plains.

Small-scale farming began in earnest in the Wimmera during the 1860s and 1870s when the foundations of the area's reputation for wheat and sheep farming were laid. Most of the pioneers were land selectors from two main sources: the Western District to the south, where the government's earlier attempts to oust the pastoralists had met with limited success, and the well-established farming communities in South Australia that supplied significant numbers of German Lutherans who eventually prospered in several localities in the Wimmera and Mallee. From the last quarter of the nineteenth century, more sophisticated land legislation and improved administrative practices, introduction of drought resistant wheats, innovations in clearing techniques and agricultural machinery, correction of trace element deficiencies in the soils, intensifications of the road and rail networks, application of superphosphate, and diversification of crop rotations all helped to consolidate the wheat and sheep belt in the south and extend the farming frontier into the Mallee.



Twelve-bullock team pulling a roller to clear mallee scrub in preparation for agriculture. Engraving from The Mallee country of Victoria and its wonderful resources, 1893.

PETER ARNOLD ANTIQUARIAN BOOKSELLER

In the interwar years economic depression and severe soil erosion ruined many small farmers, and soldier settlers in the Mallee proper suffered great distress. Relatively greater success was predicted for irrigation and in general the various postwar schemes showed that useful lessons had been learned at every level. Even so, the imperative of rural development had lost little of its political appeal, and in the early 1970s a celebrated conservation crusade successfully challenged the government's plan to establish still more small farmers in a largely 'underused' area, the present **Little Desert National Park**.

The current landscape and economy of the region is the product of this characteristic sequence of Victorian rural settlement as applied to the northwest. This region now contains many of the state's largest farms (over 1000 ha) and many of the smallest (below 50 ha), yet in addition vast areas of crown land are reserved as sanctuaries or for public recreation. Its towns have gained directly and indirectly from an increasing tourist trade since the 1960s, but their continued dependence on rural hinterlands is reflected in the common presence of small-scale industries such as flour milling, wine making and fruit packing in the northern settlements and dairy products manufacturing, flour milling and meat freezing works in the southern towns. Notwithstanding the broadened economic base of such important regional cities as **Mildura** and **Horsham**, the continuing trend towards further farm amalgamation poses important questions for the smaller centres of this rural region.

J.M. Powell

SUGGESTED READING

- L.J. Blake and K.H. Lovett, *Wimmera Shire centenary: an historical account* (4th edn), Horsham 1970.
 J.M. Powell, *The public lands of Australia Felix: settlement and land appraisal in Victoria 1834-91 with special reference to the Western Plains*, Melbourne 1970.

**BIRCHIP** [35°57'S 142°57'E]

Popn: 1208 (1911), 740 (1947), 1147 (1966), 895 (1981). Named Wirrimbirchip after station taken up in 1847: Aborig = 'one way' or 'the ear'. Township estab c1882, became camp for surveyors and those clearing mallee scrub when district opened for subdivision and selection by 1883 Mallee Pastoral Leases Act. In 1885 vermin proof fence built through district from SA border to Murray River near **Swan Hill**. Town site surveyed in 1887. Rlwy opened in 1893 and town acted as railhead for wheat farmers for a few yrs until line extended further. Water supply channels built to north of town in the 1900s and district became important wheat area.

DIMBOOLA [36°25'S 142°03'E]

Popn: 78 (1871), 1923 (1961), 1675 (1981). Name from Sri Lankan = 'land of figs'. Earlier known as Nine Creeks. Station taken up in 1845, settlement of Nine Creeks began on part of it in 1859. Township surveyed in 1862, named in 1863. German settlers in district in the 1870s. Mallee leaf distilleries operated in district from 1883 to 1905 or later. Much mallee land in district taken up for agric in the 1900s. Once large Aborig camp on river west of town — several canoe trees along river and Western Hwy follows ancient

Aborig track. Ebenezer Aborig mission station (RNE, Nat T) founded at Antwerp to the north in 1859 by Moravian missionaries, closed in 1903.

DONALD [36°20'S 143°00'E]

Popn: 841 (1891), 1613 (1933), 1480 (1954), 1626 (1966), 1448 (1971), 1609 (1981). Named after the Donald brothers who were squatters. Formerly known as the Bridge or Richardson Bridge. District first settled by Europeans in 1844 after area explored by Thomas Mitchell in 1836. Town grew from store and grog shanty estab on river in 1863. Shire of Donald proclaimed in 1864, name also used for settlement after 1866 survey. Town proclaimed in 1872. Most of land in district selected by the mid-1870s.

EDENHOPE [37°01'S 141°19'E]

Popn: 219 (1871), 985 (1954), 827 (1981). Name from Hope's Eden as first European settlers, the Hopes, were from River Eden in Scotland. Lake Wallace reached by Europeans in 1843. Hopes took up Lake Wallace station in 1845. Township surveyed and gazetted in 1862. First Aborig cricket team to tour England trained here in 1868. Focus of developing closer settlement area in the 1930s.

GRAMPIANS [37°10'S 142°30'E]

Thomas Mitchell and party climbed mountains in 1836 and named them after Scottish mountains. Squatters took up runs to east and south from 1840. In 1841 Charles Hall drove 1300 cattle from the Monaro district of NSW (see Cooma) to Mt William Creek area and estab three runs: Halls Gap named after him. Historical marker at Troopers' Creek marks site of police camp set up in the 1850s to intercept Chinese miners landing at **Robe** (SA) and coming overland to avoid paying Vic poll tax. Ferdinand von Mueller explored region in 1853, collecting specimens of its rich flora. Glenisla shelter Aborig art site found in 1859, many others since including Bunjil's Cave in 1957. Grampians State Forest under Forestry Commission from 1907. Many reservoirs for Wimmera-Mallee water supply system built in mountains, beginning with Lake Wartook, opened in 1887. Halls Gap has grown as tourist centre for mountains since c1920.

HATTAH LAKES [34°45'S 142°18'E]

Named after 1856 station. Crown land in district leased from c1847; conflict with Aborigs over access to lake. Large area of mallee country added to Kulkyne State Forest in 1941 with nat pk in mind. Adverse effects of heavy grazing in lakes area evident in the 1950s and declared illegal, but continued. Hattah Lakes Nat Pk estab in 1960, Kulkyne Forest added in 1980. Rabbit plague in nat pk in the 1960s and 1000 feral goats removed in 1974-75.

HORSHAM [36°42'S 142°13'E]

Popn: 57 (1854), 294 (1871), 2678 (1891), 5273 (1933), 10562 (1966), 12034 (1981). Named after town in Sussex, England. In area described in 1836 by Thomas Mitchell as Australia Felix. J.M. Darlot selected runs

in area from 1841; named village that began on boundary between two of these in the mid-1840s. Store and post office opened in 1849. Surveyed in 1854, but little development until 1871–72 when land in area opened for agric. Town had popn of about 300 in 1873, five times that by 1881 when servicing about 20 000 people on plains of district. Flour mill built in 1870, foundry to build agric machinery in 1872. Became a borough in 1882, a town in 1932, a city in 1949. Rural water supply system developed in the 1880s–90s. Became important administrative centre for Wimmera this century. Vic Wheat Research Inst opened in 1968. In 1976 first Vic regional rlwy freight centre under containerisation scheme opened here. Longerenong homestead built in 1862 by Samuel Wilson, became part of agric college estab in 1889. Rev H.F. Tucker founded utopian villages Horsham No. 2 and Wonwondah East in 1892, but both failed and were taken over by govt in 1894.

JEPARIT [36°07'S 142°00'E]

Popn: 869 (1911), 538 (1981). Name: Aborig = 'place of small birds'. Edward Eyre reached Lake Hindmarsh in 1838. Area including town site taken up by William von Steiglitz in 1846. Village founded in the 1870s, officially surveyed as town site in 1883 and officially named in 1889. Robert Menzies, Aust prime minister 1939–41 and 1949–66, born (1894) and received early education here.

LITTLE DESERT [36°36'S 141°18'E]

Name from size compared to Big Desert to north, though neither a true desert. Thomas Mitchell was in area in 1836. Further exploration of district in 1844. In 1955 small Kiata Lowan Sanctuary set aside. Farmers applied for leases in 1957 after Dept of Agric investigations. Recommended in 1964 that 26 000 ha be withheld from development. AMP Soc applied for release of nearly 100 000 ha of land in 1963, planned in 1968 to form 50 farms: Vic govt reduced this to 12 farms in 1969, but bowed to public pressure and scheme completely abandoned. Sanctuary became nat pk and was enlarged in 1968; further enlarged in 1970.

MILDURA [34°12'S 142°09'E]

Popn: 1243 (1891), 4608 (1911), 10 972 (1954), 15 763 (1981). Name: Aborig = 'red earth' or 'sore eyes caused by flies'. Charles Sturt passed town site while travelling down Murray River in 1830. Mildura station held by Jamieson brothers from 1847: they planted grapes that hinted at potential. Settlement attempts failed due to aridity, however. Alfred Deakin invited George and William Chaffey to develop irrigation system in the 1880s: they signed agreement with Vic govt in 1886. First irrigation water pumped from Murray R here in 1887. Closer settlement began in Mildura area in 1888 and first fruit for drying was harvested and first wine made in 1891. Mildura Fruit Preserving Co estab in 1892. Important river port. Chaffey's scheme suffered setback in depression of the mid-1890s. Rlwy from Melbourne opened in 1903. Township estab as temperance settlement: coffee palace obtained wine licence in 1906, first



Until the coming of mass car ownership in the late 1960s most state railways had active tourist promotion campaigns. Poster for the Victorian Railways by James Northfield, c1937.

SPEARRITT COLLECTION

hotel opened after local poll in 1918. Became a borough in 1920, a town (with William Chaffey as first mayor) in 1922, and a city in 1934. Large soldier settlement scheme in district after World War I, included new areas at Merbein and Red Cliffs, the latter the largest such scheme in Aust. Post-World War I publicity campaign devised by Jack De Garis led to whole district becoming known as Sunraysia. Aust Balloon Launching Station estab in 1960 to take part in NASA study of X-ray and gamma ray astronomy. William Chaffey's 1892 Rio Vista home now a museum.

MURTOA [36°36'S 142°30'E]

Popn: 644 (1891), 1233 (1933), 946 (1981). Name: Aborig = 'home of lizard'. Known as Marma Gully until 1873. Store (RNE) built in 1874–78, replacing primitive iron-clad store. Rlwy from Melbourne opened in 1894: terminus was temporarily railhead for Wimmera wheat shipments. Co-operative freezing works opened in 1909 exported lamb to London, but closed by 1939. Wheat storage capacity doubled in the 1960s–70s.

NHILL [36°20'S 141°40'E]

Popn: 1102 (1891), 2251 (1966), 2067 (1981). Aborig name with numerous possible meanings. Most likely that two squatters built homestead in 1844 on site of Aborig camp by large swamp they called *Nyell*. During gold rush period of the 1850s, known in SA as Melbourne Swamps as on main route between the two capitals. First agric land selected in 1877. Village founded in 1880. Drilling to tap Murray Artesian Basin began in 1886, provided town supply for decades. Rlwy opened in 1887. Post office (Nat T) built 1888. First Vic country town to have electric light.

NYAH WEST [36°11'S 143°21'E]

Popn: 130 (Nyah, 1911), 843 (1933), 535 (1981). Name: Aborig *nia* = 'here' or 'at this place'. Formerly called Tyntynder, but changed to Nyah in 1894. Settlement scheme for unemployed begun in 1893 when first fruit grown with water pumped from Murray River: Nyah village estab to become local centre. New settlement of Nyah West, 2.4 km to west, grew when rlwy opened and has become more important. Long Lake Water Supply scheme begun in 1903. Nyah Irrigation District estab by 1913. Significant Aborig cooking and burial mounds found in Nyah Forest.

RAINBOW [36°53'S 142°01'E]

Popn: 1301 (1911), 693 (1981). Named after site on crescent-shaped ridge, originally known as Rainbow Rise. Albacutya station taken up in 1846. Village founded on part of run in 1890, township named Rainbow when railhead estab in 1900. Area opened for agric settlement in the early 1900s when large areas of scrub were cleared. Dairy factory closed in the 1930s, flour mill worked sporadically 1934–54. Yurunga homestead (RNE, Nat T) built 1909–10.

ROBINVALE [34°36'S 142°48'E]

Popn: 225 (1933), 194 (1947), 1751 (1981). Named after Capt Robin Cuttle VC, killed in World War I, son of owners of Bumbang station. Pastoral licence to Bumbang Pen from 1847. Large-scale wheat growing on station in the early 1900s; part of the peninsula became an agric college reserve. First citrus orchard in area planted on station in 1913. Bridge built over Murray River and township named and surveyed on section of station in 1924. Lock construction began in 1925, but not completed until 1937. Rlwy link through town to NSW built in 1925. In 1938 many blocks changed hands and vines, citrus and stone fruits planted. World War II halted progress, but major soldier settlement area after war. Pumping station for irrigated blocks opened in 1947 and 246 blocks allotted by 1956. Large McWilliams winery opened in 1961. Aust's main olive grove and factory here.

SEA LAKE [35°29'S 142°52'E]

Popn: 854 (1911), 707 (1947), 1026 (1966), 943 (1981). Name probably from large size of Lake Tyrell: first used locally in 1893, officially from 1895 when rlwy opened. First pastoral leases in district in 1847. Mallee Pastoral Leases Act of 1883 and new technology, as well as exhaustion of some SA wheatlands, led to

closer settlement in area. First wheat harvest from newly cleared areas around Lake Tyrell in 1891–92. First businesses estab in Sea Lake in 1894, sale of town allotments in 1897 when township gazetted. Wheat silos built in 1943, new storages in 1969. Diversification in the 1970s with more cattle and pigs on farms. Co-operative bacon factory estab at Beriwillock to southeast in 1970. Lake Tyrell reached by Edward Eyre in 1838. First attempts to harvest salt from lake in 1896; not successful until after World War I, then demand from chemical industry increased from c1940.

WARRACKNABEAL [36°14'S 142°25'E]

Popn: 1313 (1891), 3151 (1966), 2735 (1981). Name: Aborig = 'red gums around hollow'. Edward Eyre was first European in area when following Wimmera R on 1844 expedition. First European settlers were Scott brothers who took up Werracknebeal run in 1845. District opened for selection under Land Amendment Act of 1869. Village founded, first building erected and Commercial Hotel (RNE) opened in 1870. Log lock-up (RNE) built in 1873, used until the 1950s. Rlwy opened in 1885. Flour mill estab in 1894–95. Wimmera–Mallee water supply system developed from the late 1880s improved supplies throughout district for stock and domestic uses. Power alcohol distillery operated during World War II.



The wide main street of Wycheproof. Photograph by Bruce Rigby, 1985.

WYCHEPROOF [36°04'S 143°14'E]

Popn: 90 (1891), 1011 (1933), 756 (1947), 1005 (1966), 938 (1981). Name: Aborig *witchi-poorp* = 'rushes on hilltop'. First squatter in district in 1846. Rlwy opened in 1883, extended to Sea Lake in 1894. Mallee first surveyed and subdivided from camps here and at Birchip. At start of 1874 only one settler at Wychepraff, by June over 130 selectors. Township surveyed in 1875. Courthouse (RNE) built 1889.