

THE WHEATBELT AND CENTRAL COAST



A NUMBER OF DIFFERENT FACTORS led to the early European settlement of what has come to be known as the Western Australian wheatbelt. Reports of excellent country following the establishment of a military post at **Kojonup** sparked a speculative rush for land grants, but enthusiasm waned when the existence of native plants poisonous to sheep was discovered. Despite this, those who pierced the interior seeking sandalwood, an important export from about 1845 to 1900, were almost invariably impressed by the grazing potential. In 1848–49, for example, John Hassell's flocks moved into the **Jerramungup** country to establish the wool industry there. Settlement was assisted by the journal of the surveyor-general John Roe, who began his last major overland exploration in 1848 to examine the south coast's hinterland and to inspect reported coal deposits.

In the same period, A.C. Gregory was exploring to the north: he inspected coal deposits on the Irwin River and discovered lead ore deposits on the banks of the Murchison River in 1848. His party reported favourably on the pastoral potential of the district around Champion Bay, the future site of **Geraldton**, and groups of settlers were quick to move their flocks there as overstocking and closer settlement in the Avon valley had made expansion vital. **Toodyay** residents already had runs on the fertile Victoria Plains, and a Spanish Benedictine mission had been founded at **New Norcia** in 1847.

A type of nomadic life was evolving with flock owners turning a blind eye to shepherds depasturing sheep on unleased land. Squatting rights only were assumed until rivals encroached on the squatter's precious watering hole and forced purchase of a few surrounding hectares. In this way a scattering of settlement grew, unofficially, north of **Toodyay**, in the Champion Bay area, south from **Beverley** to **Katanning**, and inland from the south coast. Despite this, the 1840s was a period of stagnation in the colony only relieved when transportation from England commenced in 1850. Convict labour was used to improve the Albany Road, the increased traffic benefiting **Kojonup** and Williams. In addition, **Kojonup** had a group settlement of Pensioner Guards, ex-military men who had overseen the convicts en route to the colony. A similar settlement was established in the north at Port Gregory but later transferred to **Greenough**.

With the cessation of transportation in 1868 and the related withdrawal of imperial money, the colony once again languished. For almost twenty years, life in rural areas amounted to little more than subsistence farming until development picked up in the late 1870s and the 1880s. In the 1870s, the colony's first railway line was constructed from the lead and copper mines of **Northampton** to the growing port of **Geraldton**, which became the region's only municipality in the mid-1870s. In 1886 the government signed a contract with an English company to construct the railway between Albany and **Beverley**, granting large areas of crown land in return. The opening of the line in 1889 brought rapid development of railway towns, while the old towns along the Albany Road diminished in importance. However, the company's control of so much of the best land tended to prevent the spread of cultivation. The government also arranged for the Midland Railway Co to construct a line, under a similar land grant scheme, from Midland Junction to Walkaway to connect with a government line to Geraldton.

In the early 1890s the spectacular gold finds at **Coolgardie** and **Kalgoorlie** attracted thousands of gold seekers to the colony. Many disembarked at **Albany**, took the train to

Broomehill and trudged Hollands Track from there to the fields. Others disembarked at **Fremantle** and moved eastward from **Northam**, glad of sustenance at isolated outposts on the way. Settlers followed the same routes with their wagons loaded with farm produce, especially hay and chaff, to sell in the lucrative goldfields markets.

Flushed with goldfields money, the government determined to improve the colony's agricultural output and overcome the need to import wheat and flour. In 1893 it announced the Homestead Act, which enabled anyone to obtain a free homestead block of 65 ha, provided they lived on it for seven years and made certain improvements. Generous financial assistance was provided through the government's Agricultural Bank.

From that time, agriculture boomed in the colony. Land was sold on easy terms, the aim being cultivation rather than profit. As arable land close to railways or established centres grew scarcer, hopeful farmers pushed further out. Established areas such as **Greenough** and **Dongara** still led the way, but more distant places such as **Ravensthorpe** and **Bencubbin** also produced profitable crops, the latter giving its name to a respected new strain of wheat.

After World War I land settlement continued apace, with returned men and British immigrants being liberally assisted. Wheat production increased at a phenomenal rate so that, even with the greater population, the state was self-sufficient in wheat and flour by the mid-1920s and had a flourishing new export industry, the production being almost entirely from this region, popularly referred to as the wheatbelt. Meanwhile, wool production had always been carried on in the older districts, especially in the Champion Bay (**Geraldton**) area, but from 1910 some **Katanning** farmers concentrated on improving sheep and wool, leading to a permanent stud merino industry in the area and a statewide interest in flock and wool improvement.

The depression of the 1930s brought severe hardships to inexperienced farmers: about 3000 farms were abandoned and sold off through the Agricultural Bank. Stabilisation had begun when war broke out in 1939, preventing further headway. After the war reconstruction was rapid due to high wool prices, improved farm machinery and technology, stable wheat marketing and soldier settlement. Increased superphosphate applications, extensive sowing of subterranean clover and the use of trace elements enabled previously marginal lands to be brought into full production, making Western Australia famous for 'light-land' farming. Diversification into cattle and grain varieties broadened the region's economy. Incomes rose and with the gradual introduction of government water and electricity schemes the standard of living became more comparable with that of the cities than ever before. However, droughts, increasing costs, lower commodity prices and land degradation problems caused increasing concern in the 1980s.

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SUGGESTED READING

- M.A. Bain, *Ancient landmarks: a social and economic history of the Victoria District of WA 1839-1894*, Nedlands 1975.
 M. Bignell, *First the spring: a history of the Shire of Kojonup, Western Australia*, Nedlands 1971.
 G.C. Bolton, *A fine country to starve in*, Nedlands 1972.
 S. Glynn, *Government policy and agricultural development: a study of the role of government in the development of the Western Australian wheatbelt 1900-1930*, Nedlands 1975.

**DONGARA**

[29°14'S 114°56'E]

Popn: 264 (1911), 324 (1933), 269 (1944), 1155 (1981). Name: Aborig *thungarra*, = 'mouth of river'. Known as Port Irwin for many yrs. Area settled by Europeans c1859. First policeman stationed here in 1868. Jetty built in 1868 and gazetted as Port Denison. Royal Steam Roller flour mill (RNE) operated 1894–1935. WA Petroleum discov oil and gas 1964–70: in 1970 announced they could supply natural gas for 15 yrs and built pipeline to Perth and Kwinana in 1971.

GERALDTON

[28°46'S 114°36'E]

Popn: 911 (1881), 2476 (1901), 10 894 (1961), 20 895 (1981). Named Gerald's Town after Gov Charles Fitzgerald.

Early history Champion Bay named after first British ship to anchor there in 1840. In 1846 Gregory brothers led settler-sponsored expedition to open up vast areas in district and probably led to decade of determined Aborig resistance. Moonyoonooka run east of Geraldton leased in 1850. First Tibbradden homestead of mud and straw built in 1852: John Forrest spent first night of overland trip there in 1874.

Town and services Township surveyed in 1849

after discov of lead at Northampton. Geraldton Hotel built in 1850: departure point for Forrest's west–east expedition of 1874. Convict depot estab in 1853. The Residency was built by convict labour in 1861 for govt resident of town: became a hospital in 1924, then a community centre. Overland mail service to Perth began in 1853: first post office built in 1866, present building in 1892. Town Trust estab in 1871. Rlwy to Northampton opened in 1879: connected to Midland Junction in 1894. Non-denominational church and school building estab in 1861. Public school built in 1877: largest in colony for several yrs. St Francis Xavier Cathedral (RNE) begun in 1914, opened in 1938: one of many churches in region designed by Monsignor J.C.Hawes. First regular air service in 1921 by WA Airways to Derby. Wicherna Dam completed in 1922: it was covered by largest asbestos roof in Southern Hemisphere to reduce evaporation, but this collapsed in 1967. Group of 12 operational bores at Allanooka, 48 km southeast, opened in 1967 to augment supply.

Industries and port Copper discov nearby at White Peak and mined from 1852. First jetty built in 1874, connected to rlwy in 1877. New jetty built in 1893; new land-backed harbour with first reinforced concrete berth in WA in 1931. Fishing boat haven built in 1963: crayfish industry very important, large exports to USA. Fourth berth and conveyor system for huge grain terminal built in 1964. Geraldton Port Authority estab in 1969. Point Moore lighthouse built in 1878: all steel structure imported from UK after many wrecks in vicinity. Filter grade diatomite plant planned nearby in the early 1980s.

Miscellaneous Edith Cowan born here in 1861, elected to WA Legislative Assembly as Aust's first woman member of parliament in 1921. Rev C.G. Nicolay arrived as Anglican chaplain in 1870: tried to estab coffee plantation, but failed; became editor of *Western Australian Times* in Perth; was commissioned to write a *Handbook of Western Australia* in 1876; was responsible for creation of Aborig reserve of 20 235 ha in Upper Murchison district in 1878; and founded WA's first public museum. Geraldton famous for its radical politics in the 1890–1910 period. Novelist Randolph Stow born here in 1935 and his novel *Merry-go-round in the sea* set in the town. Maritime museum with artefacts from Dutch shipwrecks (see Houtman Abrolhos).

GNOWANGERUP

[33°55'S 118°00'E]

Popn: 319 (1911), 472 (1933), 346 (1947), 981 (1966), 872 (1981). Name: Aborig *gnowneerup* = 'place of mallee hen eggs'. The surveyor-general John Roe, travelled through district and reported on it in 1835. Quaalup homestead (Nat T) built in the late 1850s. In late 1870s Thomas Quinn acquired Gnowangerup Spring area as pasture for horses used in sandalwood trade, main industry in district in the late 19th cent. In early 1900s, land taken up for farming; most of new settlers from SA and Vic. Town gazetted and named in 1905: town lots for sale and township officially declared in 1908. Rlwy opened in 1912: became terminal when line further east closed in 1963. Butter factory



Fishing from the jetty at Geraldton. The jetty was built in 1874 and connected to the railway three years later. Geraldton is now the second-largest port in Western Australia, serving rural, fishing and mineral industries. Photograph, c1910.

operated 1918–25. Pallinup Estate soldier settlement scheme begun in 1918, expanded after World War II. In 1922, call for Aborig reserve. In 1926, Aborigs given 3 ha beside rubbish tip and sanitary depot, moved to new mission site in 1935. Poor conditions for Aborigs in town widely publicised: led to improvements in 1960s, a royal commission in 1974.

GREENOUGH [28°57'S 114°44'E]

Popn: 524 (1901), 103 (1947). Named after George Greenough, president of Royal Geographical Soc. River explored and named by George Grey in 1839. Greenough Front Flats settled for grazing in 1852, later a rich wheatgrowing area when smaller allotments opened from 1857. Rust, a cyclone in 1872 and bad floods in 1888 led to change back to grazing. Relics of old flour mills in district, eg Clinch's Mill (RNE) built in 1857. Many RNE and Nat T buildings from 1860s (when area had about 1000 farmers) including school (1860), Gray's Store (1861) and Hampton Arms Hotel (1863). Convict depot and police station complex (RNE) built by convicts 1863–68. Old buildings had become a major tourist attraction by the 1980s.

HOPETOUN [33°56'S 120°06'E]

Popn: 131 (1911), 31 (1933), 72 (1947). Named after Lord Hopetoun, first gov-gen in 1900–02 when town declared. Once known as Mary Anne Harbour. Port for region, particularly for copper from Ravensthorpe

mines, before World War I: rlwy joining the two towns opened in 1901. Later a grain port for some yrs. Bad period when mines closed in 1918 and many farms abandoned. Rlwy closed in 1925, port in 1936. Large areas of land in district opened for settlement in the early 1960s.

HOUTMAN ABROLHOS

[28°39'S 113°47'E]

Name possibly from Portuguese *abre olhos* meaning 'look out!' because of dangerous reef; and after F. de Houtman who, in *Dordrecht*, reached and named islands in 1619. Pelsart Is in group named for Francois Pelsaert, captain of *Batavia* wrecked there in 1629. He went to Batavia (Jakarta) in an open boat for help, but a mutiny led to 125 deaths before his return later that year. Geelvinck Bay and Channel named by Willem de Vlamingh in the *Geelvinck* in 1697. The *Zeewyck* wrecked on islands in 1727. Divers from the Fremantle Maritime Museum have been searching for and exploring wrecks since the 1970s. Islands are now a major source of rock lobsters with 350 boats in fishing fleet.

JERRAMUNGUP

[33°57'S 118°53'E]

Popn: 294 (1981). Name: Aborig *yerra-mo-up* refers to native trees. John Roe explored area on 1848 trip to Esperance. John Hassell settled in district in 1849: he applied for 3238 ha to run sheep, land granted in 1848. Aborig sheep stealing near Hassell's camp in 1851 and a murder in 1861 led to permanent police post being estab. Run traversed by John Forrest's 1870 expedition. Chinese employed from 1875. Horsebreeding for sandalwood traders on leased portion of property from 1877. Battle between two Aborig tribes in 1878. Daisy Bates visited area in the 1900s. First school opened in shearing shed in 1956: town site declared 1957. Jerramungup station very successfully subdivided for Gairdner River War Service Land Settlement Scheme. Controversy in 1969 over shire levying rates to build interdenominational church — protests to Queen and United Nations.



The Houtman Abrolhos Islands, situated on the reefs off the Western Australian coast, have been the site of major shipwrecks, the most famous of which was the wreck of the *Batavia*. Photograph by Reg Morrison, c1979.

WELDON TRANNIES

KALBARRI [27°40'S 114°12'E]

Popn: 113 (1966), 820 (1981). Francois Pelsaert marooned two mutineers involved in massacre of *Batavia* survivors (see Houtman Abrolhos) in Wit-tecarra Gully in 1629: believed to be first 'permanent' landing by Europeans in Aust. Willem de Vlamingh landed here in 1697 seeking fresh water. First European settler in Murchison region, C. von Bibra, estab Murchison House at mouth of river in 1858. Town site proclaimed in 1951 and has since developed as fishing and tourist centre. Kalbarri Nat Pk proclaimed in 1963.

KATANNING [33°41'S 117°33'E]

Popn: 123 (1891), 2456 (1947), 4413 (1981). Name: Aborig *kartanup* = 'sweet water'; or *kartannin* = 'meeting place'. District explored by John Roe in 1835. Grew as a result of rlwy from Perth to Albany opening in 1889. Piesse brothers important in investing in site and erecting stores from 1889. Selection in area after rlwy opened. Flour mill estab in 1891. Daisy Bates visited district in about 1903 and reported on condition of Aborigs. Separate Aborig school opened 1912, attracted Aborigs and part-Aborigs to town. Trouble with European popn led to Aborigs setting out laws for their group in 1914, but removed to Carrolup reserve, later to Moore River reserve. Aborigs' aims fulfilled in 1975 when govt appointed 10 Aborigs as honorary probation and patrol officers. Katanning Progress League called for rlwy linking 2 main north-south lines in 1903: completed in 1907. Boom from 1945 with soldier settlement schemes in district and opening of govt offices in town. First reliable water supply in 1950. In the 1950s agricultural research, especially into trace elements, and high wool prices led to increased local prosperity. Christmas Islanders settled here in 1974.

KOJONUP [33°48'S 117°09'E]

Popn: 94 (1881), 800 (1911), 388 (1947), 1102 (1981). Name: Aborig *kogynup* = 'place of edible bulbs' or 'place of axe stone'. In 1837 Alfred Hillman found a permanent spring here while surveying road from Albany to Perth via York. Kojonup Spring became a small military outstation in 1837, but the troops were transferred to Vasse in 1838. Area opened for selection in 1838, though not surveyed and sold until 1840. Edward Eyre drove sheep through district in 1840 and lost many due to poisonous plants - a problem for almost a century. Small military outpost again estab in the 1840s: stone barracks (RNE) built in 1845. By 1846 a district of large grants with absentee owners. First cereal crop in district in 1850. In the 1850s one of the main activities was the export of kangaroo skins via Albany. Large group of retired British soldiers settled in district in the 1850s. Major horse change station on Perth to Albany mail route in 1850s. First school in 1863, first hotel in 1868. John Forrest rested here 4 days on trek to Adelaide in 1870. Last mail coach ran in 1888. Rlwy bypassed town in 1889 and relative decline in importance followed. New settlers on conditional land leases 1900-10. Rlwy to Katan-

ning opened in 1907. Superphosphate and subterranean clover used from 1920s to improve productivity. CSIRO agricultural experimental station estab on Glen Lossie 1948-66.

MERREDIN [31°28'S 118°17'E]

Popn: 274 (1911), 1855 (1947), 3520 (1981). Name: Aborig *merrit-in* = 'tree used for making spears'. Surveyor-general John Roe in district in 1839. Surveys in 1866 and c1890 opened area for settlement, though the Clarkson brothers had estab Doodlakine station in 1864. Town proclaimed in 1891, but moved towards rlwy when that opened in 1893. Estab of locomotive depot in 1904 brought employment. Nangeenan Experimental Farm, estab in 1904 and later the Merredin Agricultural Research Station, developed new Bencubbin wheat variety. Promising agricultural district by 1910. Became important rlwy junction as more lines built 1910-25. First municipality in Aust to treat sewerage effluent and use on recreation grounds. Severe earthquake in 1967.

MOORA [30°38'S 116°01'E]

Popn: 974 (1911), 652 (1947), 1677 (1981). Name: Aborig = 'camp' or 'hand'. District settled by Europeans about 1846. Berkshire Valley homestead (RNE) built in valley to northeast by James Clinch in 1842, restored in 1952; mill, now a museum, built in 1847. Much of pastoral land resumed by Midland Rlwy Co for line from Perth opened in 1894. Land to north sold to settlers in 1905; some to Benedictine monks of New Norcia who operated it with Aborig labour until 1913. Town gazetted in 1908. Army camps in area in World War II. Western end of Moora-Brisbane line, south of which commonwealth govt decided was to be defended against Japanese: more a publicity statement than a defence plan.

MOORE RIVER [31°02'S 115°35'E]

Popn: 84 (1911), 247 (1947). Named after George Moore who explored district in the 1830s. Crossed by George Grey on overland expedition from Shark Bay in 1839. Aborig reserve set up in 1918: children from Perth area sent here after 1921. Compulsory reception centre for southwest Aborigs allegedly needing care and protection; but also receiving centre for Aborigs from whole state, often because of alleged bad behaviour. Much of northern Aborig popn brought here between 1918 and 1950 with forced march of Aborigs in 1933. Aborigs had little in common, people were disoriented, little training was provided, there was much ill treatment and diet was poor. Some improvements since 1944.

MULLEWA [28°32'S 115°31'E]

Popn: 299 (1911), 818 (1933), 627 (1947), 918 (1981). Name: Aborig = 'swan'. An 1887 Act opened up land in district, though still being taken up as late as 1929. Township declared in the 1890s. Starting point for Calvert expedition of 1896. Rlwy to Perth opened in 1915. Private rlwy built 1961-62 by Western Mining Corp to bring iron ore, pyrites and concentrates from Talling Peak (40 km northwest) for export through



Benedictine monks outside Holy Trinity Abbey, New Norcia, founded by the Spanish monk Rosendo Salvado in 1846 as a mission for Aborigines. The abbey remained for a time the northernmost outpost of European settlement. Boys' and girls' boarding schools were added in the early 1900s. The monastery, which still houses a community of 30 Benedictine monks, and its surrounding buildings and art gallery have become a major stopping-off point for tourists from Perth.

Photograph, c1900.

ARCHIVES OF BUSINESS AND LABOUR

Geraldton. Racial unrest between Europeans and Aborigines in 1985.

NARROGIN [32°56'S 117°11'E]

Popn: 1651 (1911), 2558 (1947), 4969 (1981). Name: Aborig *gnargajin* = 'place of water'. Pastoral leases from early 1860s. Vineyard planted in 1876. Rlwy from **Perth** and **Albany** opened in 1889, first hotel followed. Town founded in 1895, became a municipality in 1906. Govt farm opened in 1901–02; Narrogin Farm School in 1914.

NEW NORCIA [30°58'S 116°13'E]

Popn: 190 (1933), 393 (1966). Named by Benedictine monks after Italian birthplace of St Benedict. First Roman Catholic bishop of Perth (Brady) brought missionaries out in 1845: 3 missions set up but only New Norcia survived. First mission estab by Dom Salvado and Dom Serra 8 km from present site in 1846, relocated in 1847. Initial yrs hard but more missionaries arrived in 1848 and 1853. Status of monastery raised to equivalent of diocese in 1869. Monks worked with Aborigs. St Gertrude's College opened in 1908, also schools for Aborigs and orphanages.

NORTHAMPTON [28°21'S 114°38'E]

Popn: 136 (1881), 888 (1911), 626 (1947), 750 (1981). Named after county town of Northamptonshire, England, and to honour J.S. Hampton, gov of WA 1861–68. First settled in 1848 after discov of lead (Geraldine mine) and copper (Gwalla mine) in district. Town declared and surveyed in 1864. Church opened in 1864; Chiverton House built by convict

labour 1868–75 for manager of Geraldine mine, now a museum. Rlwy completed in 1879. An 1887 act of WA parl opened up land in district, but not very fertile. Still some lead mining in early 1980s.

RAVENSTHORPE [33°34'S 120°03'E]

Popn: 967 (1911), 116 (1947), 327 (1981). Named after village in Northamptonshire, England. District explored by Edward Eyre and Wylie in 1841. Surveyed and named by John Roe in 1848. John Dunns was first settler at Phillips R in 1872: Cocanarup homestead (RNE) built for him in 1868, still extant. Phillips River Goldfield discov in 1892; first mining mine in 1899; field proclaimed in 1900: yielded 826 669 g of fine gold. Copper lodes found in 1899. Mining began and town gazetted in 1901; popn of about 3000 in district in 1909. Smelter and mines closed in 1918 and popn decreased. Rlwy from **Hopetoun** opened in 1901, closed in 1925. Copper mines reopened in the 1960s, closed in 1971.

YALGOO [28°20'S 116°40'E]

Popn: 213 (1911), 104 (1966). Name: Aborig *yalgru* = 'bloodwood' (*Eucalyptus terminalis*). Estab of Emerald mine in the mid-1890s led to flourishing alluvial goldfields: declared separate goldfield in 1895. In 1896 it had 7 hotels, 2 inns, 2 hop beer joints, 5 houses and a huge number of tents. Bicycle Mail carried mail and news around goldfields. Rothesay another ghost town in district: gold discov there in 1894; brief unsuccessful attempt at reopening mine in the 1930s. At nearby Golden Grove, copper, zinc, silver and gold deposit discov and feasibility studies are being carried out.