

VISITING HISTORIC POUND BEND

In pioneer times this historic Warrandyte area was known as 'Horseshoe Bend'. It is a very apt description, due to the wide circling shape of the river course, with a narrow pinch-neck at the southern end. The area only became known as Pound Bend after a stray animal pound was established at this southern end after the 1850's.

The entrance to the picnic park is adjacent to the junction of Pound Road and Everard Drive. Pound Road was in fact a traditional Aboriginal Songline route that continued along Tindals Road to the Doncaster Road Songline.

In pre-colonial times Pound Bend was an important Aboriginal living and gathering area, with the surrounding river rapids and deepwater areas being ideal locations for eel traps and fish nurseries. The shady and slow-flowing areas along the riverbanks would also have been where freshwater mussel and yabby farms were located.

The Aboriginal name for the area is not certain, but seems to have been referred to as 'Beal' which means 'Red River Gums'. Certainly, the original name of nearby Anderson's Creek was 'Beal Yallock'.

In 1840, the Kulin leader Billibelleri identified Pound Bend as a preferred location for an Aboriginal Reserve, but it took ten years before any government action was taken. In 1852 an Aboriginal Reserve of 1,908 acres on both the north and south sides of the Yarra was formally established. By then, Simon Wonga had assumed Kulin leadership and he had a vision of establishing a secure economic base for his people by grazing stock and cultivating commercial crops on land to which they had legal title.

To mark the occasion, Wonga organised the last ever Kulin Nation Corroboree at Pound Bend, which took place over fourteen days and nights in March 1852. All their traditional games were played, including the tribal football game of Marngrook, which was a precursor to the modern game of Australian Rules football. The site of the corroboree was down deeper in the bend area, rather than where the picnic park now is.

However, due to gold having been discovered at Anderson's Creek in 1851, the Aboriginal Reserve became unviable, but the immediate discovery of far richer gold deposits at Ballarat and Bendigo resulted in an unexpected benefit for Wonga and his people. The desertion of farm workers, to take up gold fossicking, had the effect of driving up Aboriginal work opportunities and their wages.

Over the next few years, Wonga's people were therefore able to gain experience in farm work and building construction that paid off handsomely when Coranderrk Station was established, near Healesville in 1863.

With the Pound Bend Reserve becoming unviable, Wonga based himself at Wonga Park, which was named after him, because of the respect held for him as a leader and a horse

whisperer. In 1854 Wonga won the tender to build the first hotel in Warrandyte, the Union Hotel. This bark structure was later replaced by weatherboards and when it burned down in the 1920's, the Mechanics Institute was built on the site.

The contribution of leaders such as Simon Wonga and William Barak who succeeded him, is recorded in some interpretive signage at the picnic area. There are also some other half-dozen information signs there, about aspects of Kulin tribal culture. Unfortunately, the birthdates and ages given for both Wonga and Barak are inconsistent and self-contradictory, but apart from that, all the signs are informative, interesting, and well worth a look.

However, one of the most interesting areas of the park barely has any interpretive signage at all. This is the Pound Bend Tunnel, which connects the east and west sides of the river, underground through the pinch-neck area. Virtually the only information provided was that the tunnel was put through in 1870 to divert the river and allow for gold prospecting.

The name of the person behind this was David Mitchell, but he was not the famed Melbourne builder of the same name. That David Mitchell constructed several iconic Melbourne buildings such as Scots Church, St Patrick's Cathedral, the Melbourne Town Hall and the Royal Exhibition Buildings. He also built a number of grand houses in and around Manningham, one of which still stands. This is the mansion 'Clarendon Eyre' which was built in 1865 and still stands at 6 Robb Close in Bulleen. It is well worth a look.

Mitchell and his family later lived in the Lilydale area, where he formed a close relationship with William Barak. Mitchell often invited Barak to lunch when overseas guests, often aristocrats, were visiting. Mitchell therefore always introduced Barak as their local nobility.

That David Mitchell deservedly enjoyed considerable fame in his own lifetime, but he was ultimately far exceeded by his daughter. Helen Mitchell was only aged nine when the Pound Bend tunnel was put through in 1870, but she later became internationally famed as the opera singer, Dame Nellie Melba.

It is a pity that it was a different David Mitchell who built the Pound Bend tunnel and he had no notable links with famed Aboriginal leaders or opera singers.