

VISITING HISTORIC POUND BEND

Previous Names for 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 1850s.

This pinch-neck area is where the entrance to the picnic park is situated, down from the junction of Everard Drive and Pound Road.

In pre-colonial times, Pound Bend was an important Aboriginal living and gathering area, with the surrounding river rapids and deep-water 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 would have been 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'.

Pound Bend was an Aboriginal Reserve

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 to establish 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. Fortunately, 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 weatherboard and when it burned down in the 1920s, the Mechanics Institute was built on the site.

Interpretive Signage at Pound Bend

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 person behind this and his connection with William Barak should be the subject of its own interpretive signage.

David Mitchell and William Barak

The company, that put the tunnel through in 1770, was headed by a famous Melbourne builder, David Mitchell. He was responsible for constructing iconic Melbourne buildings such as Scots Church, St Patrick's Cathedral, the Melbourne Town Hall and the Royal Exhibition Building. Mitchell also built a number of grand houses in and around Manningham, one of which still stands today. 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 were visiting, and often this included European aristocrats. Mitchell always introduced Barak as their local nobility.

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

It is a pity that the interpretive signage at Pound Bend doesn't adequately reflect this historic context.