

STRATHALBYN THEATRICAL-HISTORICAL TOUR 'DOWN BY THE RIVERSIDE' A 'SOUTH AUSTRALIAN HISTORY FESTIVAL MAY 2017' EVENT

Strathalbyn is Peramangk and Ngarrindgeri country. We acknowledge their earlier settlement in this land, that their lives and culture were interrupted and dislocated and many lives were lost. We are deeply sorry for this and thank them for their courtesy and friendship towards us in spite of this past. We pledge ourselves to work with you for a better future for this country.

Note: Most text and many images in this booklet are from the book "Strathalbyn 1839 - 2006" by Brian Simpson, a copy of which can be found in the local library.

EARLY STRATHALBYN

Strathalbyn is one of the few Australian towns (and the first in South Australia) to be settled by Scots. Its first settlers arrived in Adelaide on the "Fairfield" in 1839 and crossed the hills to select land in the Strathalbyn district. Their families began to settle here in 1840.

The book "Memoirs of Dr John Rankine", written in 1866 by Alexander Andrew, states that the town area was named Strath Albyn by Dr John Rankine and his fellow pioneers, this name being chosen because Dr Rankine was a chief shareholder in the Albyn Iron Works in Glasgow (not the Albion Iron Mills later suggested by Matthew Rankine). "Strath" is the Scottish word for "valley".

Edward Stirling, a businessman from Glasgow, arrived in Adelaide in 1839 and took up a special survey of 800 acres at Strathalbyn. He settled on his property 'Hampden' and later at 'The Lodge' near Strathalbyn. His pastoral interests included 'Nalpa' station near Lake Alexandrina, and an estate at Highland Valley near Strathalbyn.

He was a partner in Elder, Stirling & Co., a director of the South Australian Banking Co. and the Wallaroo and Moonta Mining, Member of the Legislative Council, and active in the affairs of the local St. Andrew's Church. His sons were Sir J Lancelot Stirling, MP, MLC and President of the Legislative Council for 31 years, and Sir Edward Stirling, a Professor at the University of Adelaide and a scientist. After making additions to 'The Lodge' Lancelot Stirling made his home there and continued with his father's pastoral interests and contributions to the town.



Initially, the easiest place for the early pioneers to run stock was on a narrow band, about 10-20 kilometres wide, of open woodland on the fertile plains in the vicinity of the Angas and Bremer rivers. They had a good supply of water, both from the rivers and shallow wells, and this corridor of land was relatively easy to clear. Even after several years hardly anyone lived in the town itself - there were only six cottages in the town area by 1855.

Until St. Andrews Bridge was built in 1857, residents or travellers were often isolated on one side of the Angas for days at a time during periods of high river flow. At that time nearly all of the town's development was on the eastern side of the river, with High Street being the focus of business activity, but the bridge facilitated gradual expansion to the west. Most of Strathalbyn's grand buildings were erected in the 1860s.

STRATHALBYN GROWS

For the next 10-15 years, the Strathalbyn township developed rapidly and by 1869 it was one of the largest agricultural towns in the colony. Its population was said to have trebled in just six years between 1861 and 1867, reaching about 900. It was no uncommon sight in the 1860s and 1870s to see 20 or 30 loaded wagons lined up at the flour mill store.

The town's position on both of the main intercolonial routes between Adelaide and Victoria was a major factor in its early dramatic growth. Carpenters and boot makers offered their services, drapers and grocers sold a variety of merchandise, and a daily mail-coach connected the residents with Adelaide (8 hours from Adelaide to Victor Harbor). Agriculture was the mainstay of this area. With little fencing, livestock roamed the streets of Strathalbyn.

By 1870, Strathalbyn had two or three resident doctors, three chemists, a solicitor, several general stores, the thriving Wheal Ellen silver-lead mine nine kilometers to the north, a busy foundry and machinery factory, one or two coach building businesses, its own newspaper *The Southern Argus*, five churches, two banks, several private schools, a post-and-telegraph station, a police station and courthouse, its own gasworks (to generate gas for lighting many buildings around the town), a tram station, and a coach terminal.

There were of course no cars, and no bicycles either. For transport, people usually went by horse, or on foot. Otherwise there were the very limited coach or horse tram services. About half of the local population lived in the countryside outside of any main towns, and half of these were children. A normal family in those days had about six children.

The men usually worked six days a week, almost half of them on farms, and most of the women did housework, either as a mother of a large family or as a domestic servant for someone else. A few women had positions as teachers (untrained) in private schools, but there was virtually no call for nurses because there were hardly any hospitals.

However, by the mid-1870s, Strath's golden age petered out and disaster was looming. Strathalbyn was no longer on the main road to Melbourne or the gold fields. After 20 or 30 years of cropping, the land was "overworked" and there was a dramatic decline in soil fertility. Artificial fertilizers were not yet in use and wheat yields plummeted. Droughts, the red rust fungus, and low overseas wheat prices combined to bring ruin to many local producers. The population dropped as people moved away. The Angas Mill in Strathalbyn was closed for several years between 1870 and 1880, and the Bank of South Australia closed

its local branch in 1871. Other Strathalbyn businesses and organisations such as the churches also suffered badly as the population fell away. The countryside around Strathalbyn, and other hills regions also, became dotted with small deserted homesteads which lie in ruins in all directions today. Strathalbyn found itself in the doldrums from about 1875 to 1902.

ABORIGINAL HISTORY

Strathalbyn was on the border between two distinct tribes of Aborigines - the Ngarrindjeri to the south (Milang, Encounter Bay, etc) and the Peramangk to the north.

Unfortunately, little is known about the Aborigines who once lived in the Strathalbyn district - they are rarely mentioned in the old newspapers. The "*Observer*" on 20 April, 1850 reported that 2305 acres had been "reapt" by natives in the Strathalbyn district in the past season. In the very early days, when there were few white men in the area, the Aborigines were an important source of labour on some farms.

Reminiscences of the 1840s and 1850s by Mr Paul Martin:

"There were far more blacks than whites in the (Strathalbyn) neighbourhood in those days, three regular camping places being used, the principal one on the peninsula, another just where the old (Pioneer) cemetery remains, and the third on what was called "The Island", just in front of the present Victoria Hotel, for the Angas ran right around the elevation then as a regular thing.

There was also an occasional camp at the rear of the Terminus Hotel site, but the other three were always used, and were generally the camping place of about a hundred or two of men, women and children, who lived very much in their native state.

"Many of the natives have been making good wages at harvest work [at Strathalbyn] this season, and have proved themselves useful men". (*"Observer"* 25 Jan, 1862)

"The natives are quite strong in the township [Strathalbyn] now, and have lately favoured the colonials with several corroborees - many professed musicians might learn a lesson from them in keeping time." (*"Observer"* 12 July, 1862)

"A considerable number of natives are now camping by the side of the River Angas, having lately returned from Adelaide. (*"Observer"* 21 June, 1862)

"The country [around Hartley in the 1850s] was well populated with natives. Some helped Gottlob Jaensch with his work, shearing the sheep and helping to reap his wheat harvest, using a sickle to cut the stalks. During the Victorian goldrush the shepherds took off for the goldfields and the natives stepped into the breach and did excellent work as shepherds". (*"Venture"* 30 Oct 1974)

"There were hundreds of natives about when I first went to Ashbourne, and they were stark naked always. We never had trouble with the blacks. They were reliable and by no means savage." (Mr J.S. Allingame's recollections of the 1850s, "*Argus*" 19 Feb, 1914)



Strathalbyn 1865: Aboriginal shelters in foreground, *Watervilla* at left, Flour Mill middle right, Grain Store far right. Look up the tree. (Photo: Strathalbyn Museum)

When the new school foundations were being dug [in Colman Terrace in 1879] a large number of skulls and other bones were unearthed, a large bagful being sent down to the Adelaide Museum. They were in fossilised condition and evidently have been buried for a great many years. The shape of the skulls proved they represented Aborigines, and the extensive cracks in many of them showed that the original owners had not met with a peaceful death. *Old Eliza* said that a great tribal battle had been fought in this neighbourhood in her childhood days before the arrival of the white man, and that the bones referred to above were the harvest of the conflict." ("Argus", 1 Feb 1917)

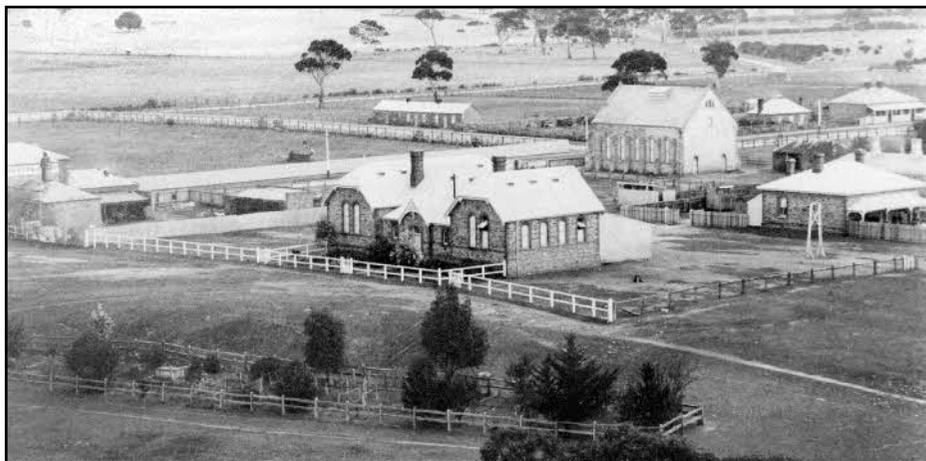
"When I was a youngster [in the 1870s], Mr David Uniapon, South Australia's best known Aborigine, was a regular visitor from Pt McLeay to the Strathalbyn area, and he used to sing and play the organ in the local Methodist Church. He was very popular here and accepted by all." ("Argus" 9 February, 1967). [Born in 1872, he was very well-read and used to write his own religious books and pamphlets. In 1952 he attended the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth to receive a Coronation Medal. He made 10 applications for patents for his inventions, including a new design for a shearing hand-piece. His face has been featured on Australia's \$50 note since 1995. He died in 1967.]

Although having little time to participate in the town's affairs, Lowitja (Lois) O'Donoghue was already famous when she came to live in Strathalbyn in 1983. During her four years here as a resident she was named the 1984 *Australian of the Year*. She has long been one of the nation's most recognisable faces in Aboriginal affairs.

Although there are no significant rivers or lakes close to Strathalbyn, there are nevertheless quite a number of Aboriginal canoe trees in the district. The preferred tree was the red gum, South Australia's biggest in terms of girth. Most canoes would have been floated down to

the lake in times of high water, but on rare occasions they may have been carried (on foot) for considerable distances. The Aboriginal canoe, more like a raft than an American Indian canoe, was generally used on smooth water, and was usually not paddled but poled along. There are two shield trees in the Soldiers' Memorial Gardens in the centre of Strathalbyn, another having been lost in a flood in 1933.

Few, if any, records seem to exist which document the fate of Strathalbyn's Aborigines. It is hard to know when they disappeared or where they went. Certainly by the early 1860's there were few permanent Aboriginal residents in the area.



Above: Pioneer Cemetery in the foreground, Primary School centre, Blackwell House left, Methodist Church top right, taken about 1885.

EDUCATION- PRIMARY SCHOOL

Strathalbyn's first day school was conducted in the original Presbyterian Church, since removed, from 1844. Mr Smith, a shepherd of Dr John Rankine, was the teacher. Paul Martin as an old man in 1922 reminisced - "We had our lessons in a hut-like building with an earth floor in the centre of which, on cold days, we used to make a fire although there was no chimney."

After erection in 1844, St. Andrews Church was used as a day school, though from 1851 there was no state aid to religious "churches, schools or anything else". Corporation or District "vested" schools received Government grants and financial or material support from the Council. Private schools outnumbered licensed schools at least two to one, in Strathalbyn and across the state. Licensed teachers were paid a limited stipend. The education provided in the private schools was often of a high standard, but they received no support from the Government.

In these early times such communities "were in the minority. In many localities nobody provided a school at all, and the children simply went uneducated", and "Large numbers of

untaught children roaming the streets scandalized respectable citizens who saw the whole sorry scene as a breeding ground for larrikins and criminals". Education was not yet compulsory, and some pupils lived too far away from the school to make the journey. Most travelled on foot and if they lived three or four miles away, they had to set out at daylight, and arrived home at dusk. Even for those who were enrolled at a school, attendance was often very erratic. The education provided was of a very elementary nature - reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar, and geography.

The first District School in the town was a wattle-and-daub structure which was built in about 1851 on the southern corner of Colman Terrace and Commercial Road. It began as a community school but was donated to the District Council in about 1857 so that it could become eligible for Government grants.

In 1862 the Central Board of Education provided funds, to be supplemented locally, for the erection of a school building in Strathalbyn. With several schools the Board found it could not support them all so decided to support only one district school in Colman Terrace. Private schools, with government funding, continued until the passing of the Education Act in 1875, which "made it compulsory for a child to attend school 35 days a quarter until he passed a fourth class examination when, no matter how young, he was at liberty to leave, sometimes at the early age of nine." Then funding went to selected schools, so many small private schools disappeared.

(From the 1940s to the 1960s, caravans and camping were permitted beneath the Aleppo Pines opposite the old Primary School in Colman Terrace, near the present Lions Park.)

COUNCIL AND CORPORATION

The local council has a long history of splits and amalgamations. When the District Council of Strathalbyn formed in May 1854 it was one of the early ones in South Australia. Other nearby Councils were: Bremer formed in 1855 as a breakaway from Strathalbyn DC, Alexandrina in 1856, Onaunga in 1861, and Brinkley in 1894.

Shortly before 1868 some of the Strathalbyn townspeople decided that the out-of-towners had too much influence, and that the town itself was being neglected. There were in fact more people living on properties outside the town (about 580) than inside the town (about 300). The Corporation of Strathalbyn was subsequently formed as a separate entity in 1868, to exclusively serve the interests of the townspeople. Thereafter, the Corporation and Council had separate Mayors, but the same Clerk acted as Town Clerk and District Clerk until the positions were divided in 1915. The Clerks were part-time, and continued with their other occupations. In 1939 when the old Power House in Dawson Street ceased to generate electricity, it was donated to the Corporation, and taken over as its first "permanent" office.

From 1935, in accordance with the new policy of rationalising small Councils into larger regional Councils, many of these recombined and, on 22 April, 1976, the Strathalbyn Corporation and District Council recombined, 108 years after they had separated. They met in the District Council office in South Terrace, and the old Corporation office was no

longer required. All 16 Councillors from the two bodies served for the first few months until elections were held to fill the nine new wards.

After the old Strathalbyn Primary School in Colman Terrace was vacated in December, 1976, the Education Department donated it to the District Council, which extensively modernised and refurbished it as their new Council Chambers, opening in February, 1981.

As a result of State Government initiatives to further consolidate small District Councils, a survey was held in January/February, 1997. Consequently, 1 July, 1997, was the commencement date for the new Alexandrina Council, which had seven wards. The Strathalbyn Ward was allocated two councillors out of a total of 10.

Population figures were: 1866: local 200, district 1572, then 1876: local 886, adult males 153, houses 193, then 1909: local 1000, district 1950, houses 250.

PIONEER CEMETERY

The Pioneers' Cemetery in Colman Terrace was not the first burial place in the district. In a reminiscence of the 1840s and 1850s by Mr Paul Martin, this area was a regular Aboriginal camping place. J.W. Elliott (*"Argus"*, 1st June 1933) reported that "several bodies found their last resting place near the original homestead, and one or two out in the lonely bush which then surrounded Strathalbyn." He also wrote that Hampden Ford on the River Angas, a little to the north of the town, was another early burial place (*"Argus"* 15th August, 1918).

The "*Back to Strathalbyn 1933*" booklet stated: "The remains of many are still under the present road near the bridge (St Andrew's). Others were removed and placed in the Pioneers' Cemetery." This of course refers to the early custom of putting graves in churchyards, St Andrew's Presbyterian Church being the only church in town for several years.

When a road was put through the church cemetery, the Presbyterian Church in February 1854 purchased a one-acre block of land on the opposite side of the river in Colman Terrace as a replacement, at a cost of £5. This became the Pioneers' Cemetery and many were buried here, and are of course still there today.

Although a new cemetery (a public one belonging to the District Council) was opened in October 1856 in Parker Ave, occasional burials continued in the old cemetery for family members of those already interred there. By all accounts the old gravestones remained in the Colman Terrace cemetery for many, many years, but in almost every case they eventually became badly weathered and gradually crumbled away.

Any remaining headstones were transferred to the new cemetery in February 1939, but only two have legible inscriptions - those of Elizabeth Noye (died January 1852) and the wife and two children of William Colman (died between 1852 and 1855). Although the latter gravestone was the first imposing one to be erected in the Pioneers' Cemetery (and later transferred to the new cemetery), William Colman himself has a separate very insignificant grave marker in a different part of the cemetery, although he was one of the town's best-known pioneers (the former owner of the Flour Mill).

Unfortunately the burial records for the Pioneers' Cemetery were lost a long time ago, and no-one knows how many are buried there, or the names of most of them.

The Corporation took out a 100-year lease on the old cemetery in 1895 and it became part of the town's parklands, and in 1995 they purchased it outright from the Uniting Church.

In 1995 the Uniting Church sold the old Pioneers' Cemetery (a one-acre block next to the swimming pool) to the District Council, which had leased it for the previous 100 years for £1 per year.

BUILDINGS NEAR THE PARK

There are a number of old buildings that people can see from the Lions Park: St Andrews Church, Westpac Bank, Bells Stores, Power House, Grain Store, and the Old Mill.

One that is missing is the old Post and Telegraph Office, built in 1860. The imposing bluestone two-storey structure is shown in the image below, also taken looking west in 1865 from about the same position as the previous image. In 1913 a new post office, the present one, was built in Dawson Street, right next to the old one. For the next 52 years the old building served as the Postmaster's residence before being converted into two flats in 1951, one for the postmaster. It was still in quite sound condition when it was demolished in February 1965. It is now the Post Office car park, with Argus House to its north.

Post and Telegraph Office, built 1860, demolished 1965



Blackwell House, corner Commercial Road and Colman Tce

Several large general stores were erected in Strathalbyn in the boom years between 1857 and 1869, when the town's population virtually tripled. Six of them ("Blackwell House", "London House", "Victoria House", and "Manchester and Glasgow House" and Woolfitt's) are listed on the Register of the National Estate, although they have long since ceased to be general stores. What is now called "Blackwell House" was the town's first big store. When built in 1857 by Messrs R. Lander and R & S Stephens it was claimed in the "Adelaide Observer" to "eclipse anything of the kind now existing this side of Adelaide". It was a drapery, grocery and ironmongery until 1885 when it became a butcher's shop, and remained so for many years.



Above: Blackwell House and the Power House / Corporation Offices / Art and Craft now in 2017

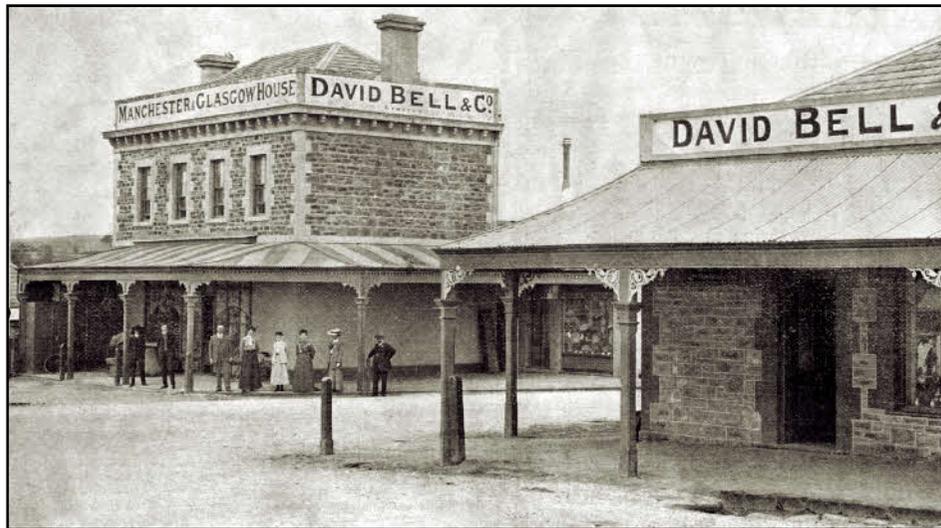
Commercial Bank, Westpac Bank, Glyn Morris & Co

The Commercial Bank of Australia was first established in the town in 1906, on the eastern corner of Albyn Terrace and Catherine Street, before moving to High Street (next to Gilbert's) in 1909. They built a new bank in Alfred Place in 1924, became Westpac in 1982, and in 2000 became an in-store operation in the offices of Glyn Morris & Co..

Bell's Store, c1865 - closed 1971

The grandest of them all was Edward Sunter's two-storey "Manchester and Glasgow House", built on the corner of Swale and Sunter Streets in 1865. It was acquired by David Bell in 1869 and grew to become the biggest business in town and, indeed, one of the largest country businesses in the state. Branch stores of Bell's were opened up in Victor Harbor (1893), Mt Barker (1902), and Murray Bridge (1906). In Strathalbyn, the tailoring department alone employed 20 people in 1940. Bell's was a genuine department store, with divisions for drapery, millinery, Manchester, footwear, men's and boys' clothing, furnishings,

books, hardware, garden requirements, and groceries, and must have had 30 to 40 on the payroll in its heyday. All three corners of the Sunter Street-Swale Street intersection were once occupied by the business. The business had a big reputation for fair dealing, integrity and courtesy to customers.



Above: Edward Sunter's two-storey "Manchester and Glasgow House", built on the corner of Swale and Sunter Streets in 1865. Acquired by David Bell in 1869.

Bell's became Ryan's in 1958, Paynes bon marche in 1962, and lastly Myer's (who restored the original name Bell's in 1963). The store was closed with no warning in January, 1971, never to reopen. It was a sorry ending for the store which had dominated the business life of the town for over 100 years. No doubt its proximity to Adelaide contributed to its demise.

Until the 1960s, Strathalbyn was a relatively self-contained town in which residents were able to buy nearly all of their requirements without venturing to the city. The collapse of one of the town's icons, Bell's Store, in 1971, heralded a new order – an era of greatly increased mobility. From a population of about 900 in 1871, the town's growth was quite unspectacular over the next hundred years, reaching only 1570 by 1972 (with very few in Willyaroo or Burnside Estate).

Power House, 1917

Until 1917, the only lighting in the town was supplied by gas lamps, kerosene lamps or candles. There was no electricity. The iron gas pipes were rusting badly and the gas company (which had been bought out by the SA Gas Co, based in Adelaide) decided not to renew the mains, which had been underground for 47 years, and were now unable to cope with demand from the increased population. Prompted by the imminent closure of the Gasworks, the Corporation decided to switch to electricity, and in 1917 began generating its own electricity from the newly-built Power House on Commercial Road.

A new age for the people of Strathalbyn, but of no benefit to those outside the town - they had no gas (apart from a few private acetylene gas generators) and no electricity until 1939 or later. This was a 200 volt Direct Current (DC) system which supplied only 80 consumers initially. For many years the service was only from 8 am to midnight. By 1927 there were 230 consumers and 50 street lights, and the supply was now continuous (i.e. 24 hours a day).

A disadvantage of the DC system was that the voltage dropped off considerably on the outskirts of the town, and anyone over a mile from the Power House received an inferior supply. The service could not be extended to the surrounding district and to more distant townships, including Milang and Langhorne Creek. Wireless interference was a significant problem, and some appliances, e.g. electric clocks and electric jugs, would only operate on AC. The Power House was a big consumer of wood. When heated, the wood released a flammable gas to fuel the engine which drove the generator.

In September, 1937, the Adelaide Electric Supply Co. made an approach to purchase the existing supply for £5,000, and replace it with an Alternating Current (AC) 3-phase 240 volt service. The offer included a thorough overhaul of the whole town's distribution system and the replacement of old wooden light poles with steel-concrete ones.

Ratepayers called a public meeting to force the Corporation to take the issue to the ballot box. No doubt the Corporation was reluctant to close down its generating plant because it had only just purchased a new diesel engine to boost the local supply. However, the poll of ratepayers on 3 June, 1938, instructed the Corporation to sell the operation for £5,000, and on 1 February, 1939, the old generator was closed down. Thereafter Strathalbyn received its power direct from Osborne, via its nearest existing point at Macclesfield.

The Corporation and Council did not have their own offices for many years. In 1939 when the old Power House in Dawson Street ceased to generate electricity, it was donated to the Corporation, and taken over as its first "permanent" office.

Flour Mill and Grain Store (see the background of later Swimming Pool image)

The Angas Mill on the corner of Mill Street and Commercial Road was the town's first flour mill, built in 1849 by Donald Gollan and sold to William Colman in 1851. The mill did a roaring trade in supplying flour to the procession of optimistic prospectors on their way to the Victorian goldfields in the early 1850s, Strathalbyn being the last sizeable town on the route for hundreds of miles. The town was at the hub of a busy agricultural district; in fact one of the busiest in the colony, and wheat was its main product.

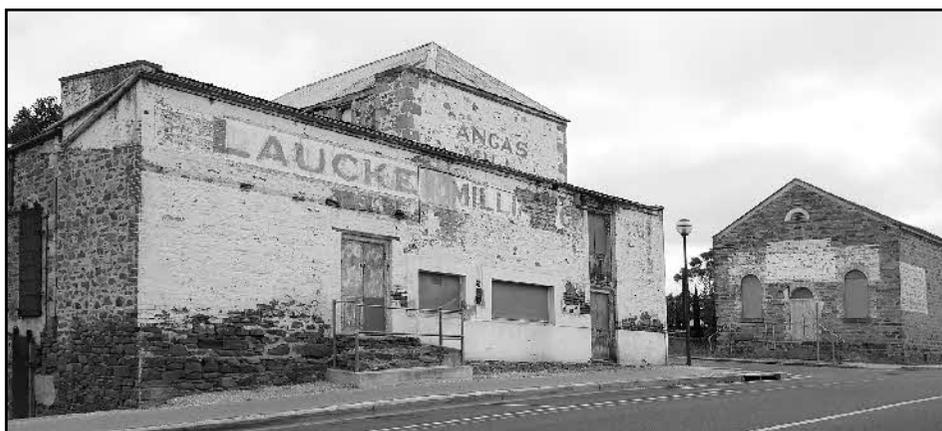
In 1864 the outlook was so promising that a big new bluestone wheat store was built directly opposite, on the northern corner of Mill Street and Commercial Road, the Grain Store. When erected, the mill store was claimed to be one of the most impressive structures in the colony and was also used for concerts, public meetings and balls (when not filled with grain) until the Town Hall was built in 1874.

However by the early 1870s crop yields had fallen alarmingly. No fertilizers were in use and the land was becoming exhausted of nutrients. Many farmers left the district, and the mill was idle for a number of years. The mill store was used as a school from 1875 to 1879. For

a time the mill was run by a local board until it was sold to Robert Johnston in 1881, and to Friedrich Laucke in 1927 (who had bought his first mill in Greenock in 1899).

When fertilisers became available in the 1890s, and new land was opened up by scrub-clearing, yields increased dramatically and the mill was busy again. With Strathalbyn's reliable rainfall, good crop yields have been maintained ever since, and the mill has never looked back. The Angas Mill was originally steam-powered and fuelled by wood, later by producer-gas generated from charcoal. William Colman installed a new engine, "the finest in the states - with a fly-wheel which for very many years was the largest in Australia".

The mill's big chimney dominated the skyline until at least 1940 when the mill was connected to the new electricity supply from the Adelaide Electric Supply Co. After 112 years the old mill was closed. The new mill on Callington Road was opened in 1961 by the Premier of South Australia (Sir Thomas Playford) in front of a crowd of 800-1,000.

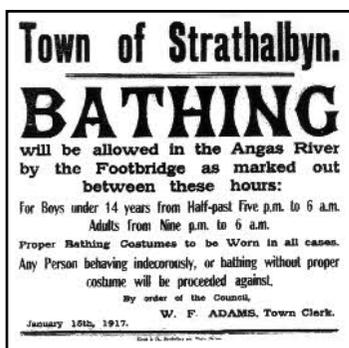


Above: The Angas Mill and Grain Store in 2017.

SWIMMING - WATERHOLES AND POOLS

From the early days of settlement, locals had cooled off in various waterholes of the River Angas, but only a minority could actually swim.

The Corporation permitted swimming in the popular Jeff's Waterhole in the Angas (opposite Jeff Street) in 1872 between the hours of 8pm and 8 am, but in 1874 it became 9pm to 6am (i.e. the hours of darkness only!). The Corporation modified the permitted hours for use of the Waterhole in 1917, allowing boys under 14 to start at 5.30pm, but girls were not mentioned. Adults' hours remained at 9pm to 6am.



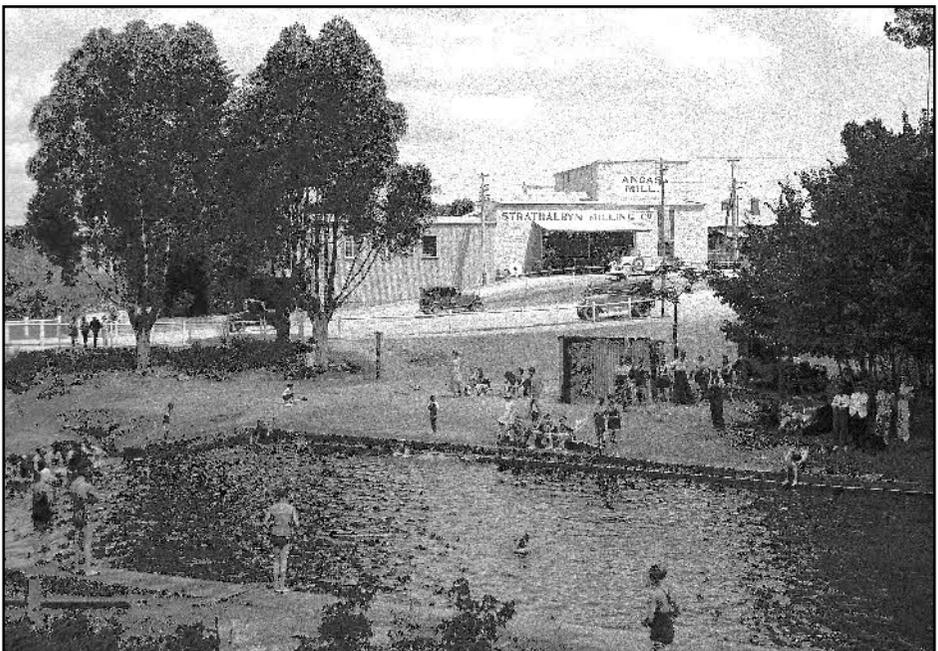
King's Waterhole, adjacent to the northern end of St Andrew's Bridge, where the Angas curves sharply to the right, was a deep waterhole, somewhat discouraged as being dangerous. It was out of favour by 1935.

The *Southern Argus* (7 December, 1899) refers to the existence of a local Swimming Association whose aim was to teach children to swim (boys and girls in separate classes of course). It had commenced in December 1898.

However, the town did not possess a proper swimming pool until 1935 when a fine pool was laid down using proceeds from the Back to Strathalbyn celebrations. [See image below] This was created simply by constructing a cement weir across the river and cement walls along both sides for 100 feet upstream opposite the Angas Mill. The bottom of the pool was natural rocks and sludge. The *Southern Argus* (28 February, 1935) reported: "The pool itself is large enough to provide swimming space for over 100 yards, with plenty of water beyond for fully three or four times that length, and ample width. The Club is a very popular one, and at present has over 200 paid-up members. The pool was formally opened on Saturday last, with a very large crowd assembled, and the Strathalbyn Municipal Band providing a capital programme of music." The Advertiser Learn to Swim classes were held in the river at least as early as 1935, during the summer holidays.

Pool floodlights were erected in March, 1935, an in-ground children's bathing pool was opened in 1936, and high reinforced concrete walls were erected to prevent flood damage. In 1936, the subject of men bathing topless was still a contentious issue.

Members of the Swimming Club offered to provide swimming instruction to the general population, and the arrival of Alby and Madge Moran in 1942 gave this programme a huge boost. A couple of young children had recently drowned in the Angas in winter, and Alby and Madge decided to conduct swimming classes to teach children and adults how to swim to prevent further tragedies like this. For almost 30 years they voluntarily provided



instruction to hundreds of the local children, and were the backbone of the Swimming Club. In 1943 the pool was given a cement floor.

The Advertiser Learn to Swim classes in January were a major event. The *Southern Argus* (January, 1958) reported that 230 children had taken part, and that almost all of them could now swim at least 10 yards. The highlight was that 23 of them were awarded Bronze Medals. (*Southern Argus*, 30 October, 1952).

The club always held a big competition on the Australia Day long weekend: The entries were excellent and representatives of the Metropolitan Clubs were here in force. As a matter of fact some swimmers from the Henley and Grange Club could not secure accommodation here on Friday night, but Mrs Moran, the indefatigable secretary of the local club, provided tent, blankets and meals for the visiting swimmers. (*Southern Argus*, 29 January, 1953)

On odd occasions since the mid 1940s, Christmas Carols had been held in the Soldiers' Memorial Gardens on the Sunday evening before Christmas. The Strathalbyn Amateur Swimming Club organized the Carols night between 1953 and 1959, as a fundraiser; the occasions were well-supported, with numbers around 500 in attendance.

“Heard several stories since last week about the damage which has been done by the earthquake experience during the early hours of last Monday week. The 'quake did a lot of damage, but on the other side of the picture, others have benefited. Reports have come to hand from various parts of the district advising that bores and wells have been yielding increased supplies. Mrs Moran, the secretary of the Strathalbyn Swimming Club, tells me that between the North Parade Bridge and the Footbridge weir a good spring has opened up, and has provided a much appreciated flow of water through the swimming pool. Let's hope it's permanent. (*Southern Argus*, 11 March, 1954)

In November, 1954, another cement weir was built upstream to enable the pool to comply with Olympic standards; it was now 55 yards long. This brought many famous swimmers to Strathalbyn, including Dawn Fraser in January, 1956, and January, 1957. This second weir greatly reduced the amount of silt and debris which gathered in the pool after heavy river flows. (*Southern Argus*, 13 January, 1955)

Another highlight at the two-day Carnival, conducted by the Strathalbyn Amateur Swimming Club, over the Australia Day week-end, was the exhibition given by Miss Dawn Fraser. Miss Fraser is a triple Australian record holder, and one of Australia's hopes for the Olympic Games. Her demonstration swim was the 220 yards medley of which she is the record holder. She also gave a demonstration of a flying half lap. In this spectators saw Miss Fraser use the new racing dive, which has been developed recently. The carnival was one of the most successful ever conducted by the club. More than 200 entrants competed on each of the two days. Competitors came from Renmark, Port Pirie, and all the city swimming clubs. (*Southern Argus*, 2 February, 1956)

Dawn Fraser won her first two Olympic gold medals later in that same year, and swam again at the Strathalbyn Carnival in January 1957.

From time to time, concerns had been raised about the level of hygiene of the River Angas, particularly as more dairy farms were established upstream. Proposals were put forward early in the 1900s for the construction of a high-quality Olympic size pool which was separate from the river, but the cost was considered prohibitive. For several years, quite a controversy raged.

(Southern Argus, 18 January, 1962) letter:

“After a visit to the pool as it is now, I can assure parents there is not any danger in the water. I, myself, would be prepared to swim in the pool at any time, for after all, you do not have to drink the water while swimming. The present pool, with its two weirs, dressing sheds, toilets, learners and infants' pools enclosed in a cyclone netting fence must have cost about £5,000. Are we going to scrap this? We have had some of the best swimmers in Australia competing in this pool and they all assure that we have a good pool of Olympic size.

I am, Sir, etc.

W.H. Gilbert.”

It is interesting to note that when the new Olympic pool did eventuate, it was officially opened on 2nd February, 1969, by the same Mr W H Gilbert, the author of the above letter to the editor of the Argus. The new pool was built as a special project to mark the centenary of the Strathalbyn Corporation, which had commenced in 1868.

In 1968, the old Pioneers' Tree, under which the Rankine brothers had camped on their first night in the area in 1839, was removed to make way for a new Olympic swimming pool, to be built beside the river to celebrate the Centenary of the formation of the Corporation in 1868. The tree was deemed to be quite decrepit and in a rather unsafe condition. The new pool was opened on 2 February, 1969. Madge and Alby Moran were at the forefront of all developments between 1942 and 1970. In 1970, Ross and Zel Thyer were appointed as coach and secretary, and a new era began.

REFERENCES

“Strathalbyn 1839 - 2006” by Brian Simpson, from which most of this booklet has been derived. Brian, a local historian and author of many books, has painstakingly researched our local history for the last 17 years, scouring the local past newspapers “Southern Argus” and “The Observer”, Government publications, Trove and local oral histories. Many thanks.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

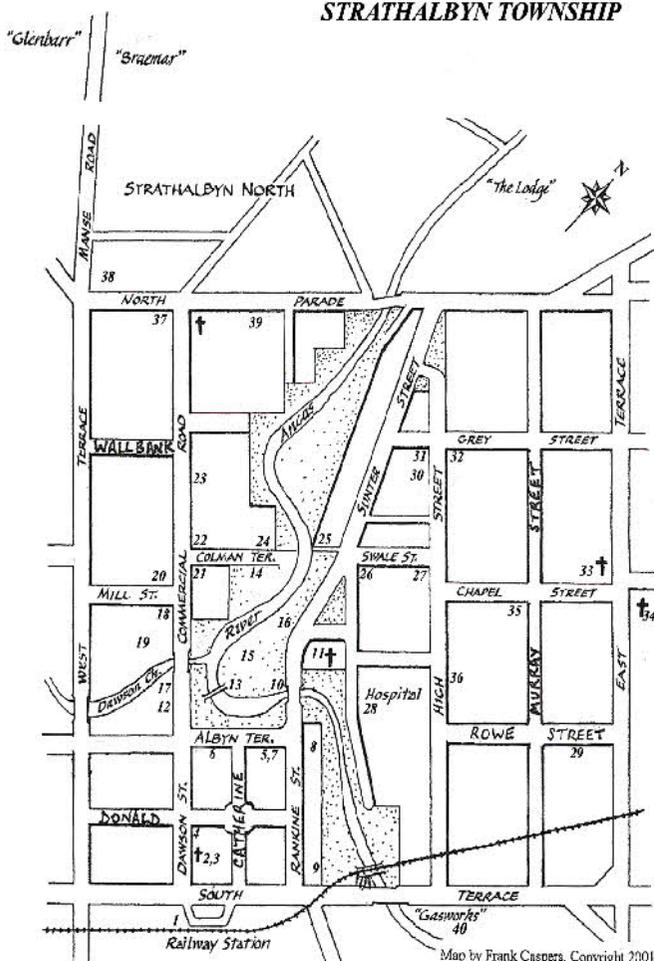
St Andrews Strathalbyn Uniting Church - Helen Stacey Bunton, David Bunton
Freda Jaadawa Mills - Strathalbyn Neighbourhood Centre Aboriginal Reference Group
Strathalbyn Youth Theatre - Melissa Maidment, Tabitha Lewis - and Strathalbyn Players
Alexandrina Singers - Judith Stephens, David Bunton
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Daryl Stevenson - tour booklet and event tickets.

THEATRICAL-HISTORICAL TOUR 'DOWN BY THE RIVERSIDE' MAP: MAY 2017

A 'SOUTH AUSTRALIAN HISTORY FESTIVAL 2017' EVENT

Legend

- 1 Railway Station
- 2 Church of Christ
- 3 Masonic Lodge
- 4 Bank SA
- 5 Albyn House
- 6 Victoria Hotel
- 7 National Bank
- 8 Terminus Hotel
- 9 National Trust Museum
- 10 St Andrew's Bridge
- 11 St Andrew's Church
- 12 Post Office
- 13 Children's Bridge
- 14 Pioneers' Cemetery
- 15 Rotunda
- 16 War Memorial
- 17 Argus House
- 18 Flour Mill
- 19 "Watervilla"
- 20 Colman's Grain Store
- 21 Old Power Station
- 22 Blackwell House
- 23 Wesleyan Methodist Ch.
- 24 Old Primary School (then Council offices)
- 25 Bell's Store (former)
- 26 Old Commercial Bank
- 27 Commercial Hotel
- 28 Hospital
- 29 "Rowe's School"
- 30 Town Hall
- 31 London House
- 32 Robin Hood Hotel
- 33 Roman Catholic Church
- 34 Church of England
- 35 Primitive Methodist Ch.
- 36 RSL Hall
- 37 "The Doctor's House"
- 38 Noye's School
- 39 Rechabite Hall
- 40 Gasworks



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