

# VICTORIA'S HERITAGE

## POINT NEPEAN NATIONAL PARK

by Daniel Catrice, 1998.

*As readers of this column are aware, this year has marked the centenary of two of Victoria's oldest national parks, Wilson's Promontory and Mount Buffalo. The celebrations have focused on the 'centenary' parks, with seminars, exhibitions and 'Centenary Walks' coordinated by the VNPA Bushwalking Program. This year several other parks are also celebrating anniversaries, but to less fanfare. Brisbane Ranges National Park was proclaimed 25 years ago. (The park's history was the subject of a History Notes article in Parkwatch, no. 190, September 1997). Other parks are celebrating ten years, including Point Nepean National Park, Coopracambra National Park, Lerderderg State Park and Errinundra National Park.*



Sorrento Back Beach circa 1900. Courtesy of DSE

Point Nepean was proclaimed in 1988 during another anniversary year, the bicentenary of European settlement in Australia. The creation of the park was negotiated between the Commonwealth and State governments. For generations, Point Nepean had been virtually inaccessible to the public: first as a Quarantine Station, and later as a army base. The park has a wealth of historic relics, offering a very different experience from other Victorian national parks.

### **BEFORE 'THE FLOOD'**

Aboriginal people knew Point Nepean not as a peninsula jutting into the sea, but as a low sandy ridge overlooking a vast, grassy plain. The Yarra, Maribyrnong and Werribee Rivers joined on the plain, cutting through a deep gorge where the Rip is today.

When the Ice Age ended about 10,000 years ago the sea level rose, drowning the plain and forming the shallow bay we know as Port Phillip. Aboriginal people adapted to the changing landscape. Point Nepean became an important place for the hunting and gathering of food, particularly shellfish and fish. Middens are evidence today of their seasonal feasting. Water birds were also hunted during summer and spring, and native animals provided abundant game. Aboriginal people altered the landscape to improve food supply, subjecting the peninsula to regular burning which created an open landscape dominated by she-oaks.

### **THE FIRST SHIPS**

Aboriginal people probably watched the first ships come and go within a few hundred metres of Point Nepean. The swirling tidal flows at the Rip ensured that most explorers kept their distance, and failed to discover the vast bay beyond the Heads. In 1802 Lieutenant John Murray took possession of Port Phillip. He named the peninsula after Sir Evan Nepean, Secretary of the Admiralty. The Aboriginal people had called it Boonatallung,

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meaning kangaroo hide, because its shape resembled a stretched hide.

Murray's enthusiastic assessment of the land he found ('the southern shore of this noble Harbour is bold, high land....and in some places falls nothing short in beauty and appearance to Greenwich Park...') influenced the British government to establish a settlement. As it was feared that the French may attempt to annex the southern shores of Australia, an expedition under the leadership of Col. David Collins with convicts, soldiers, a surgeon and a clergymen were dispatched from England in April 1803. The party arrived at Port Phillip in October 1803. The site of the landing was Sullivans Bay near Sorrento

## SETTLEMENT

Unlike the Aboriginal people, whose nomadic existence and intimate knowledge of the land provided subsistence, the first European settlers were unable to adapt to their new surroundings. With no permanent supply of water, the settlement was abandoned in May 1804.

Once a permanent settlement was established at Melbourne, it was not long before Point Nepean was occupied by land-hungry squatters. The first grazing licence over the area was taken up by Edward Hobson. In 1843 John Sandle Ford settled at Portsea as a squatter and lime burner. Later, Ford was to play an integral role in developing the area as a tourist resort, financing the construction of the Portsea pier so that the first bay steamer, the "Golden Crown", could bring visitors from Melbourne and goods for the local residents.

The discovery of limestone at Point Nepean gave the area its first industry. Limeburners built kilns (some built into the cliff faces) to produce lime mortar and whitewash for buildings in Melbourne. Large quantities of local timber were cut to supply the kilns. Banksia and she-oak soon became scarce, and in 1853 the government declared that no timber or firewood was to be removed between

Arthur's Seat and Point Nepean unless required for lime burning.

## QUARANTINE

In 1852 Point Nepean was chosen as the site for a Quarantine Station. Accessible only by boat and inhabited only by a few lime burners and fishermen, Point Nepean was an ideal location for quarantine purposes. Holders of lime burning licences were given one months notice to quit. When, in November 1852, the ship "Ticonderoga" arrived at the Heads with 300 passengers ill with fever, the homes of the lime burners were quickly adapted for quarantine purposes.



The Quarantine station. Courtesy of DSE.

Later, five dormitory buildings were erected to house the passengers of quarantined ships: one for the sick and four for the healthy passengers, divided according to saloon, second class, third class and steerage. These buildings formed the basic units of the quarantine station until its closure in 1978 (although they also housed the Officer Cadet School from 1952 to 1985). Until recently the site was occupied by the School of Army Health.

## VICTORIA'S GIBRALTAR

Victoria's defence was the topic of much concern in the mid nineteenth century. The fabulously rich gold discoveries of the 1850s aroused fears of attack from foreign raiders. 'In the event of war' the Argus warned its readers 'we are in a very defenceless state and that the fact of it being known all over the

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world that we have a few millions worth of solid gold within cannon shot of the Bay is a circumstance which renders us peculiarly liable to attack'.

Fears of a war between Britain and Russia prompted the Victorian government to appoint a team of advisers from the Royal Engineers to report on Victoria's coastal defences. Their report, submitted in 1877, recommended that Port Phillip be defended by a battery at Queenscliff, a fort at Point Nepean and batteries at Swan Island and South Channel Island, with mines in the South and West Channels.

Construction of the defences at Point Nepean commenced in 1882. The first permanent gun emplacement at Fort Nepean was completed in June 1884. Another emplacement, for 80-pounder guns, was built at the fort in 1886.

The next phase of development at Point Nepean commenced in 1887 to adjust to new developments in artillery. Two gun pits at Fort Nepean were converted to receive 5 inch 'disappearing' gun and a new battery was constructed for a 9.2 inch disappearing gun. These guns were mounted on a hydro-pneumatic carriage. After firing, the gun recoiled beneath the parapet to enable re-loading in the relative safety of the gun pit.

At Eagles Nest, one of the highest points along the Peninsula, an emplacement was built with a 9.2 inch disappearing gun in 1888-89. The Eagles Nest emplacement was completed during a period of intense activity to keep Victoria's defences up-to-date with the latest developments in artillery. The period was characterised by a series of war scares, culminating in a general mobilisation in June 1888 as a result of the accidental cutting of the cable linking Melbourne and London. Point Nepean, known in the 1880s as 'Victoria's Gibraltar', was an essential part of Victoria's defence network.

## MANNING THE FORTS

Until Federation, the fortifications were manned by a permanent force of the Victorian Artillery. Forces were stationed at Fort Nepean continuously until the end of the Second World War, with a civilian militia providing additional numbers during major conflicts.



Soldiers on duty. Courtesy of DSE.

The guns of Fort Nepean were not used in anger until the first Allied shot of the First World War was sent across the bow of the German freighter "Pfaltz" as she steamed out through the Heads. The freighter was seized and returned to Port Melbourne. The first Allied shot of the Second World War was also fired from Fort Nepean; a warning to an unidentified ship which hastily identified itself as the Tasmanian freighter "Woniara".

At the end of the Second World War, the garrison at the Heads was removed and the buildings at Point Nepean were declared redundant.

## A NEW NATIONAL PARK

The proposal to establish a national park at Point Nepean arose in the 1980s when the Officer Cadet School, which had occupied the site since 1952, was relocated to Canberra. At the same time the Commonwealth government commenced a review of the future use of the holdings at Portsea. Arising from this review, it was decided to transfer the School of Army Health to Portsea (to the former Quarantine Station site). The future of the remaining

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Commonwealth land was announced jointly in November 1985 by the Commonwealth Minister for Local Government and Administrative Services, Tom Uren, and the Victorian Minister for Conservation, Forests and Lands, Joan Kirner.

The Ministers had agreed in principle to transfer two large portions of the land at Point Nepean to the State. Joan Kirner announced that the State government proposed to manage the land as a national park. Development of the park would be funded by a \$2 million grant from the Bicentennial program.

The new Point Nepean National Park, comprising 215 hectares, was opened in 1988. It became part of the Mornington Peninsula National Park in 1995.

## SOURCES

O'Neill, F. 'Point Nepean: A History' Prepared for the Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands, December 1988.

'Point Nepean National Park', Files F/C:2/4, Historic Places Section Resource Collection, DNRE.