Curdies' Tales:

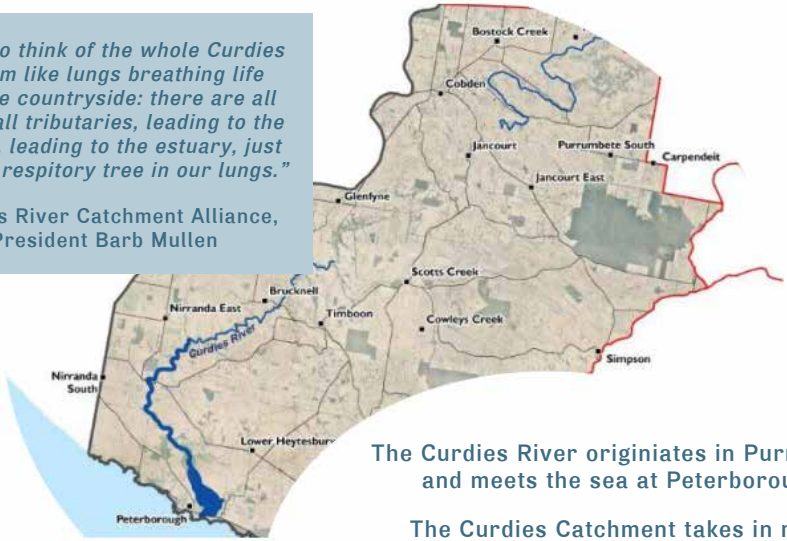
STORIES OF THE RIVER BY ITS PEOPLE

Where is the Curdies catchment?

where water is collected by the natural landscape...

"I like to think of the whole Curdies system like lungs breathing life into the countryside: there are all the small tributaries, leading to the creeks, leading to the estuary, just like the respitory tree in our lungs."

Curdies River Catchment Alliance, President Barb Mullen



The Curdies River originiates in Purrumbete and meets the sea at Peterborough.

The Curdies Catchment takes in many tributaries, including Scotts Creek (Simpson and Cooriemungle) & Power Creek (Timboon).

Put together by Heytesbury District Landcare Network

Base Map: Corangamite Catchment Management Authority, Regional Catchment Strategy, 2022.

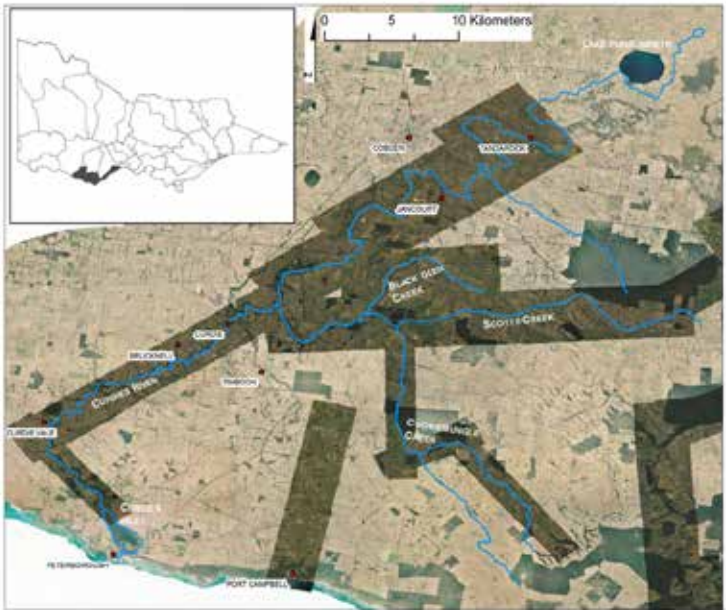


Figure 1. The Curdies River catchment within the Otway Coast Basin (insert: shaded grey), Victoria

Front cover - Map of County of Heytesbury 1854, From the Public Record Office Victoria, Historic Plan Collection. Produced by the Surveyor Generals Department C. 1854.

Looking across the Curdies estuary 1950s

Contents

These stories were told and collected on the lands of the Kirrae Whurrong People of the Maar Nation. Timboon P-12 School and the Timboon Agriculture Project (TAP) acknowledge them as the Traditional Owners and pay our respect to their elders past, present and emerging.

Forward

Children are our promise for the future and we want to bequeath to them a better world. We want them to enjoy the good things in which we have found pleasure, we want their lives to be healthy, happy and peaceful. We all draw strength from the country we live in, our heads in the sky and our feet on the earth, breathing clean air: the health of our children depends upon the health of our country.

Summer in Peterborough is a chance to enjoy the warmth of summer magic, playing in the waters at the main beach where the Curdies' estuary joins the sea. Those who are lucky to live here appreciate this contrast to the wild woolly weather of winter. Further into the Curdies River system farms border the tributaries, streams and creeks to the very edge of the river, and the waterways are a part of the everyday life of the people who live there, kilometres from the drama of the sea. Alongside the Curdies are communities, businesses, homes: the waterways carry the promise of life, they are the lifeblood for this country. As the seasons pass, the pleasures of the place where we live and play change. By autumn many of the migratory birds prepare to head for warmer climes. In winter the inlet floods as the waters from the higher levels race down, the water birds are plentiful when the waters rise. Spring brings more birds; in the wetlands the swans are plentiful and their cygnets are balls of feathers. In the Curdies, the fish and aquatic animals are hidden and hiding, avoiding being caught by the many who like to put a fresh fish on their plate.

As I write, the magic of our Curdies is under threat from the pollution and neglect since white settlement. Nutrients make their way into the waterway feeding blue green algae and when the conditions are right, our river becomes a poisonous place. This is happening with increasing frequency and severity as both current and historic practices take their toll.

The history recorded in this book is mainly history from living memories, spanning not quite a hundred years, but it would be a shame to ignore the history of settlement of the district in the previous hundred years. By 1872, Fanny Curdie, writing from her home at Tandarook (near Curdies) wrote: 'The natives here have almost disappeared from this district & there are none at the sea coast, where we go for change in summer & where they must have at one time been numerous in summer—so much have [sic.] civilisation done for them.' (Fanny (Frances) Curdie to her nephew, Rev. James Russell, Tandarook, 5 October 1872, [Curdie Papers] MS 8664, Box 942/b(2) SLV.)

So, by 1872, the frontier war here had been fought. "The physical sites of the Aborigines' age-old occupation of this land—mia mias, stone fish traps, earthen mounds, stone arrangements, campsites, stone wells, axe-grinding stones, scarred trees, and middens—were clearly visible to and recorded by the early settlers. Much of this physical evidence has since been lost, however, due to land clearing, building methods, and changing land-use patterns, but also due to the destructive ways of some of the settlers, who had intentionally destroyed or removed Aboriginal heritage. Aboriginal mounds, found near lake banks in western Victoria, have been levelled. (Jan Critchett, Untold Stories: Memories and lives of Victorian Kooris, Melbourne University Press, Carlton South, 1998, p. 118.) Settlers frequently burnt mia mias to the ground to demonstrate their greater physical force and in an attempt to deter further huts from being built. (An example of burning down of Aboriginal huts is given in Niel Black's Journal (held SLV)." Corangamite Heritage Study Stage One Volume 2: Thematic Environmental History October 2009, Corangamite Shire.

In those days, just as in today, parents of the children of First Nations people wanted their children to be healthy, happy and live in peace. Of course, all Australians want the same for all children.

This future is in the hands of the people of today and when we work together, we can achieve powerful results. A newly created Curdies River Coordinating Committee (CRCC) is responsible for co-ordinating the work of all the many agencies and organisations that have a responsibility for the Curdies and informed by the evidence, work towards its restoration. The people of the communities that now live within the area of the Curdies have hope that the health of this river system will be returned.

I commend you to this book as a record of our time and place in the living memory of those who settled here. There are written submissions and in particular there are the stories recorded by Timboon P-12 School Year 9 students as part of the Timboon Agriculture Project (TAP). These students recorded the histories of locals asking them what their memories were and what was important to them about the Curdies. As we read, we can reflect on these stories: what are we leaving our children and how could we make it better?

Barbara Mullen
Peterborough

Curdies River Coordinating Committee

INTRODUCTION
What a cracker of an idea!

Do you remember what the Curdies was like in the old days? Can we capture oral histories of our region before it's too late?

This was the challenge issued to Timboon P-12 Year 9 Humanities students through the Timboon Agriculture Project (TAP) by Kate Leslie from Heytesbury and District Landcare Network (HDLN) and Curdies River Catchment Alliance (CRCA).

To set the scene, we conducted a field trip in early May, 2023 to the Curdies' estuary at Peterborough to help our students get a sense of time and place as they prepared to record and publish the oral histories of people who live, work and relax in the Curdies River catchment area. At the river mouth, Kate Leslie welcomed students while Barb Mullen and Dean Drayton from CRCA and Gene Gardiner from Corangamite Catchment Management Authority (CCMA) provided their perspectives of this vital waterway.

Our wonderful community responded when invitations were issued, requesting that people with connections to the Curdies catchment area come forward to be interviewed by students. In May / June 2023, great conversations were held between students and community members, with guests sharing personal accounts, photos, books, memories, models and resources. Students discovered more about their world; hearing stories of floods, tin kettlings, fishing, the lime works, swimming lessons, fish hotels, wildlife, the pranks played by children as well as the excitement of watching poachers at night with some wonderful narratives shared and enjoyed.

After recording our guests' stories, students were left with the realisation that the Curdies River catchment area is like the lungs of this sensitive ecosystem, breathing life into the land around it. A better understanding of the science and the social histories of the Curdies catchment will help inspire improved stewardship and greater protection of this fragile bionetwork for future generations.

Thank you to those who inspired this task, our students, our interviewees and to everyone who has supported this project in anyway.

We trust you will enjoy these recollections.

Carolyne Wakefield (Year 9 Humanities teacher)
Andrea Vallance (TAP Coordinator)

Interviews
BY YEAR 9 STUDENTS

INTERVIEW OF AIDEN DENNY

by Cooper, Howard, Tom and Rohan

Aiden has been living and working in this area for 13 years at the Kurdeez Lime quarry.

These Lime Works have been here for well over 100 years but not always owned by the same company. Aiden used to work in a gold mine in Orange, New South Wales, and when his boss bought Kurdeez, they sent Aiden down to Timboon to work on it and now lives here.

The lime works creates lime for animal feed. The name for this lime is bulldog lime. It's all dried lime, not like the lime that you spread on fields. It is stock lime that is high in calcium which is why it is put into feed, especially for cows. Lots of companies buy lime for feed.

The Kurdeez lime works is a quarry of lime and seashells that is 10-12 million years old. They strip the overburden and the grass and put it to the side. The team excavates the lime and brings it out to the drying factory then it is distributed and bagged up. You can spread it on a garden, but it is a bit expensive for that.

Aiden used to quarry in Ireland driving machinery before he came to Australia to work. He was sent here from the gold mine in Orange to get things going. That was thirteen years ago and he said he wouldn't move back. He said with a smile,

> *"I like it down here. It's much nicer but a bit worse weather than Ireland though.''*

He told me that the quarries in Ireland are smaller than Aussie quarries.

Above left: Calcite crystal stalagmites. Middle: Conch shell in lime.
Right: Cave with stalagmites, stalactites and crystals

Working in the winter time isn't nice. The lime sticks and gets everywhere, unlike stone. Last year they found pure calcite. The calcite was sharp and colourless which is rare because it is usually a browny-grey colour. Some professors took the crystals and so did the Port Campbell museum. In the past they would blow the lime with dynamite and they would even find fossils like shark teeth. They find big cone shells too and they give them away sometimes.

Nowadays this work done with a ripper, which is kind of like a spike. It gets mucky and one time a bulldozer got bogged and it was a pain to get it out. Aiden said:

> *"The man that owns the gold mine and the lime works bought some of my machinery back in Ireland and asked me if I would teach people how to use it, so I did. I was only meant to come for 3 months''.*

They were paid to put the lime in the Curdies River because there is lots of nitrogen, due to the fertilizer. They put the lime into the river to balance the nitrogen. They used it to control the algae. The first lime was found in 1910 and they used kilns to burn the lime, which was dangerous work. There were more mining companies here in the old days and they mined high up in the hills at the start.

Kurdeez Lime mine

Earl's Store

Above: Station yard 1920's. Bottom Left: George Morgan's timber mill, Cowley's Creek. Right: Lime train bound for Curdies

INTERVIEW OF ALAN KERR

by Cains, Oscar and Patrick

Alan Kerr, the former owner of Berry World Strawberry Farm is a Timboon resident who has lived in the area for his whole life.

Alan says that the Curdies River runs along an old lava flow and that it begins in an area between Camperdown and Colac. There is a part of the river where volcanic soil and limestone soil are side by side. Dr Daniel Curdie is who the river was named after, he was the first doctor in the region.

Back then, Camperdown was originally called Timboon then the settlement moved to higher ground and was named after the Scottish Earl of Camperdown. There were apple orchards everywhere around Timboon, and even they sold apples to Germany.

Alan talked about a town at Curdies where there was a general store and a church and the platypuses that are no longer found in the river.

The government ran out of money when they were building that train track it was mainly supposed to go to Port Campbell, but they just finished it at Timboon. The train track was a big part of the lime works when transporting limestone. Alan spoke about how badly the Curdies floods around the trestle bridge area and around the lime works.

He said that Timboon had so much vegetation that it needed eleven sawmills.

He told us that one time around the 1950's, a flood came that ended up rising all the way up to the water and nutrients testing facility near the trestle bridge and some of the machines suffered water damage.

Alan described when a truck came down to the Curdies lime factory as the river was beginning to flood. The truck managed to make it to the lime works side of the river to get its load but when it was time to get back over the river the water had risen too far to the point where it was over the bridge and now it would be very risky to try to get back over the river. The boss at the lime works ended up getting in the truck and trying to drive it through but it got stuck halfway over the bridge. After a couple of minutes, the truck eventually got flipped on its side and most of the lime fell into the river, then they had to wait until the floods stopped for a rescue team to come and salvage the truck.

INTERVIEW OF ANN WILKINSON
by Kaylee, Kayla and Molly

Memories:

Some of Ann Wilkinson's Curdies River memories include her Grandma fishing and crayfishing. Her favourite things about going to the Curdies River were the warm sunny days and the clear water with clean white sand. Her most recent memories are seeing the kids swimming and playing along the river and on the beach. Ann used to visit the river and Wild Dog Cove with her 5 siblings and mother. Ann's grandparents were pioneers in the district in 1873

The trestle bridge and floods:

Memories that Ann had about the trestle bridge was walking along it with family and friends and how it used to flood from bank to bank. Ann told us a story about a friend who lived on a farm around the trestle bridge and when it flooded he would have to ride his horse across the bridge because the rest of his farm was under water. The bridge still had the train tracks on it and no railing on the sides. One of the most recent big floods at the Curdies in 2010.

Above Left: Curdies in flood 2010. Right: Bridge builders' living quarters 1927

Animals in the Curdies:

There are many animals that live down by the river. There are lots of snakes in the Curdies and estuary, in particular the black snakes. Mice and frogs are other animals that are highly populated down there. Ann also said that every time it flooded there would be heaps of different types of birds down by the estuary. Ann has lately seen pelicans, albatrosses, even a sea eagle and many more. There has also been a platypus sighted

in the clear water near the Irvine's. Ann has also seen a black silver body and fin of a shark popping out of the water beyond the reef on an overcast day.

Peterborough Bridge:

The Peterborough Bridge began being built in May 1927 and was completed in December 1927. The first bridge that was built was a wooden bridge. When the wooden bridge was being built the builders had tents set up along the river which they called their "living quarters." 60 years after the wooden bridge was built a stronger more reliable concrete bridge was built in 1987.

Above: Peterborough timber bridge construction 1927. Below: New concrete bridge at Peterborough 1987

INTERVIEW OF ANNIE FRASER *by Olivia, Paige and Thea*


Opening Curdies River 1933

Annie Fraser is from Wallaby Creek which is at the bottom end of the river. She worked with wildlife, which she really adored.

Her family came from Wales in 1853 and when they arrived, they started a fishery which they set up in Port Fairy. They had to move to Melbourne when it got fished out and then the Great Depression started so her uncle got a settlement down here near the Curdies. They started to farm with 15 cows, with her grandma doing most of the milking. Her uncle Bill took over the farm but then he got recruited into the air force, so the farm work was left to her grandparents to do.

When Annie's parents were having kids, she and her siblings got carted off to her relatives where they stayed at Curdievale near the river. Going fishing with Uncle Bill was her best memory because she would get in the back of the lorry with the other kids. They would all fall asleep in the back while driving home after having fun and fishing all day.

Annie enjoyed gutting the fish she caught even though it "Wasn't something young girls should do." They caught a lot of black fish and might've overfished them for the amount the caught. There were also trout and eels which were apparently tasty, though with a slight hint of mud. They mainly ate rabbits and eels though the Great Depression of the 30s.

We asked her how the river and fishing has changed since she was a kid and she said it floods way more and farms are getting flooded. A lot of birds have left the river and been replaced with snakes. Fishing now uses big boats and equipment to capture the fish which she says stirs up the water and are really noisy.


Curdies Flood 1920

Hop Garden Timboon

INTERVIEW OF CLYDE BASSETT

by Annalyce and Charlotte

My name is Clyde Bassett. I live on Digneys Bridge Road, so north of Curdies, we back onto the river. Well, the farm I'm on backs onto the Curdies. It's where the Scotts Creek joins the Curdies at the junction.

Clyde spoke a lot about his experience in the Curdies, here is what he said:

> *Where we are now has been cleared for a long time, but over the far side it was cleared back in 1960 – 1970, it was really big heavy timber. They cleared everything. Now there's a lot of slips on that far side of the river, so some of the slips go into the river and sort of partially block it, and then you get a flood that washes it away a bit.*
>
> *Years, years ago, the junction of the Scotts Creek and the Curdies used to be a really big open hole and kids used to ride their bikes down there in the summer for a swimming hole but because that all got cleared, it's nearly filled in now, and it's nothing like it used to be.*

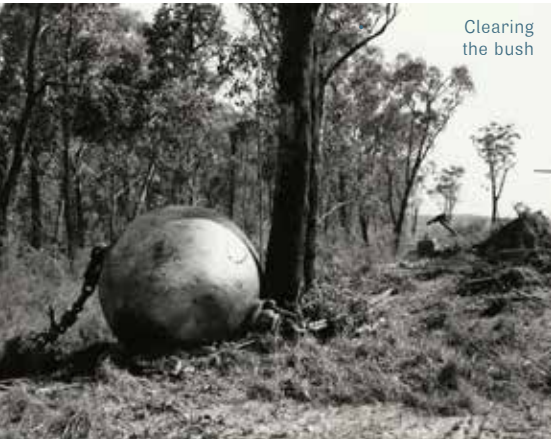
The Scotts Creek really is always muddy and dirty. And Curdies is a lot clearer. Because upstream from there, through that steep country where Maddens Bridge and Morries Bridge is, there are a lot of springs come out of the hills there and they keep it fairly clean, the Curdies. You know, Scott's Creek sort of ends up more like a drain than a nice clean river.

Clyde said he used to fish, mainly the eels or blackfish, but he doesn't think they are there now.

The Curdies was an isolated area back in the day and people who didn't understand the bush could have a hard time. Clyde told the story of the great koala attack on some visiting workers.

In 1920s, I suppose before my time, there was a sawmill, and there used to be a couple of men would stay there overnight to start heating up the steam engine before the workers come. So yeah, so they'd camp there. Well, my father always told the story about how these two fellas, just on dusk they go down to the river fishing, which should be about, two and a half to three kilometres, well through fairly heavy bush. They just got down there and it was their first time, I think, and they'd never heard koalas and you know the noise they make, but they had no idea what it was. Well it frightened the daylights out of them, they left everything behind and headed back up the hill to the sawmill. They didn't go fishing again, the story was that was the last time.

That would have been the original koalas because I don't know whether you realized there weren't any around then they released them at the Golf Club. That was the 70s or 80s, I think and they've done really well since then haven't they?



Clearing the bush

Pop and George Morgan 1920-1930s

Clyde described his experience of the Curdies:

> *I often used to just go for a walk along there. It's peaceful and quiet, the view and the birds and the wildlife. Yeah, it's nice. There's a big, long stretch with no access down the back of my place. You've got the bridge, some more houses, and another bridge - the next one on Browns Rd, so, the big patch in there it's nice and quiet. With the clearing of the land it's sort of changed it a bit, but it's a nice spot, quiet spot for a walk.*

Clyde described the previous land uses along the Curdies.

> *The farming's changed a lot along the Curdies but in the old days it used to be just little tiny dairy farms, or there were a lot of apple orchards around. This is back 1890s to 1920s. That's in the old days. Apple orchards -don't know about potatoes don't think there were many- but a lot of timber in there.*
>
> *The biggest impact probably happened when the train line came through. It sort of changed the whole nature of the district. Up until then, it was not much happening, and it was really hard work. There's no way in, no way out. To go to Cobden, it was probably a day up in the horse and cart and then another day back. Once the train line came in, it opened up from the lime works. That's when the lime works started, and it is still going today. A lot of timber went out and sawmills everywhere along the river and all that timber went out by train.*

Clyde's farm and life today has changed:

> *Well, my back paddock joins on to the trainline, so I'm checking cows down there fairly regularly. I used to be a dairy farmer, but now I've got just got beef cows, so I've got cows down there. A lot of kangaroos down there - kangaroos everywhere now.*
>
> *I've been there my whole life. I haven't moved far because I was brought up at Cobden. So yeah, that's 76 years I've been there.*

Clyde reminisces about the past

Clyde Bassett was generous in his reminiscing. In describing the changes over time he said:

> *Seventy-six years is a long time. Yeah, my parents moved on to the farm in 1936, it was about 40 acres cleared then, and the initial bit they bought was 120 acres. So, they cleared that, and it was either done by hand or do you know what a traction engine is, or a steam engine? A man in Timboon used to have one of those, and he'd go out onto farms. He could pull a big tree over with that and clear it. Then they bought another engine early 1950, that was just after the Second World War when there were bulldozers around, they made it a lot easier.*
>
> *That sort of changed the whole nature of the district then. And then they cleared that Heytesbury Settlement and that's what has probably had a bigger impact. See when that was all bush out there, if you got a really wet winter, if a flood came up around the Digney's Bridge, it'd be up for 3-4 days because the water sort of ran off slower out through the bush. If you did get a flood it was there for a while. Now if you're getting a lot of rain because it runs off grassland, it goes up and down in a day and a half -and that's had an impact on the river.*
>
> *There's been a lot of research done on fertilizers and stuff. So, since the 50s there's been a lot of phosphorus, nitrogen and potash used and as a consequence, the load of these nutrients in the rivers increased to the river's detriment. This is why you get these algae blooms and stuff nowadays. That's a consequence of farming practice mainly. That's probably the biggest change I've seen along that and the impact of it, which is going to be forever, I think, yeah.*

Clyde shared more thoughts, comparing the past to today:

> *You can get some good photos along the river, the foggy mornings. I took one not long ago It's a good place to take photos, you know? You can even see wedgetail eagles here.*
>
> *Probably the train line coming in had a big impact on bringing change, like the Curdies settlement was a bigger town than Timboon once, with the small little lime works along the eastern third line. In those days, all the timber in that area was used to burn at the lime works. There used to be a school at Curdies.*
>
> *Well, the Rail Trail's a nice walk now too, isn't it? It's especially interesting from Curdies to Glenfyne along Limestone Creek, isn't it? How they built those bridges for the train in those days I'll never work out. They were fairly clever. There used to be people work on that like the ones that looked after the rail, they called them gangers I think, the people that maintain the line. There was a house beside the siding.*
>
> *There's another siding at Glenfyne. Timboon had a station master and the ganger's house there but the top end of the Curdies is up towards Lake Purrumbete. That's sort of been cleared for a long, long time so.*

Something probably of interest…. ah, where does it start? The Devil's Gully Bridge on the northwest side is all volcanic stones, whereas on the south sides there's no stones, so the river actually runs along the edge of the lava flow and it runs out on Roberts's farm, in Merretts Road, before it gets down over the hill.

So, Curdies was bigger than Timboon but it's interesting over the years how the population changes - and the school thing? Initially there were little schools all around the district and then they built the big brick building here in Timboon, and then everyone came here, and I think they got up to 1300 kids, about 24 buses, standing room only, you wouldn't get away with it these days. That's when there was just a lot of little dairy farms, or all small farms. The school numbers have cut back enormously, haven't they? The farms have got bigger. It's just changed the nature of the district. There are hardly any sporting clubs, Footy Club, Cricket Club, they've sort of disappeared. We've only got one or two now, whereas before they were everywhere and that was when people were at the end of the horse and cart era and the beginning of the car era, and cars becoming available. Well, all those little clubs, that was the only social get- together the people on the farms had mainly. The roads have changed, cars and vehicles have changed, and people are zooming everywhere and anywhere now.

Above Left: Curdies town from Bulldog Hill 1950s. Right: Train carrying lime.

Limeworks steam engine

INTERVIEW OF DEAN DRAYTON

by Airiz, Xyndryx, Leah and Blake

Dean Drayton, who grew up around the Curdies River, talked about his experiences and memories around the river. He shared with us stories, including exploring a cave on his family's farm, the kilns and limeworks. He told us about taking photos and witnessing beautiful scenery and observing animals, he told us how the river used to look.

The cave:

Dean explained to us how caves were created by the water movement, which was also how the river was formed at the start. One side of the river has bluestone rock, because the water couldn't cut through it, and the other has limestone. His family had a cave on their farm, which was along the river, and it was about 300m from their house. Many people came to explore the caves, including people from Melbourne that wanted to study it. Lots of people wanted to go into the cave, and they'd often see cars parked near it, so they blocked off the entrance using a block of concrete, which would be moved with a tractor when people came and asked for permission to enter it.

Dean and his friend, Ian McConnell, went into the cave together. Ian disappeared headfirst into the cave with no hesitation, and Dean mentioned that he'd never seen anyone go down that fast. One of the scientists that wanted to explore the cave was a large German guy, and when they saw he wanted to go down they laughed because the entrance was too small.

When Dean and his friend entered the cave, the entrance was a small and narrow hole that goes down a slope and into a cavern that was tall enough to stand up in. The cavern had cave crickets, and bones from animals that had fallen into the hole, gotten stuck and then die in the cave. Dean described the soil as "light and fluffy", but there were lots of rocks on the floor of the cave. After the cavern, there is a tunnel, which leads into another cavern. Geologists that have explored the cave have told Dean and his family that it's ancient.

When he was younger, Dean and his brother would explore the cave, and their Mum would make them take a candle and a ball of string down with them so that they would know if the oxygen was bad, so they'd know when they needed to leave. Then they wouldn't get lost because they could use the string to leave a trail.

Limeworks:

Dean talked about how he found old kilns by the river, covered by blackberries, and spent his weekends as a child digging them out, as well as playing in the lime works. There were old trees that were cut down to power the kilns, but were regrown, increasing the vegetation around the river. The Curdies River used to be very well vegetated, with tall and dense forest, blackwood trees and tree ferns. In more recent times there used to be lots of ragwort weeds, but they're now controlled, though they have been replaced by blackberries.

The Depression in the 1920s caused the limeworks to shut down, leaving many unemployed people, who found limestone in another area, and decided to sell it in blocks, some of which were sent to Melbourne for the construction of a house, and possibly other things.

Animal life:

The river was once surrounded by wildlife, such as gang-gang cockatoos, wedge-tail eagles, peregrine falcons – which live around the limeworks near the cliff faces, long nosed bandicoots, antechinuses, as well the two endangered animals: powerful owls and yellow belly gliders.

Dean told the story of how a peregrine falcon flew past him, but he didn't notice until after; he only heard a "WHOOSH!". He was fascinated by how fast it flew by him, saying how it was like "a miniature jet flying past" and only saw it once it flew by him and was already at a distance.

Peregrine Falcon

Cave on Drayton property

He described the long-nosed bandicoots as “very shy animals” and informed us how it’s easy to recognise where they’ve been, as their noses leave marks on the ground from pulling out grubs, and mentioned how there was a time where there were some living around his home.

Childhood pleasures:

As a child, Dean used to swim in the river, and he mentioned that there was a rope on a tree branch that kids used to swing from and land in the river. The rope disappeared, but a while ago, another rope was found, replacing the previous one.

He also mentioned how rail workers always had to check the train track, looking for fallen branches or trees that could be covering it. They left small caps on the tracks that would cause little explosions when hit, so you would know when a train was coming and could move off the track. One memory that Dean shared with us was that he, along with his friends, would attempt to steal the caps and set them off. Their attempts failed though, the caps were locked away.

Out of his whole childhood, and life, spent around the river, Dean highlighted the pleasure of watching the light change across a natural cliff face as the sun set. He remembers the old trestle bridge, and the stories of the lives of men at the Curdies Limeworks. The Curdies providing a backdrop to natural beauty and the lives of ordinary people.


Trestle Bridge Flood 1971

INTERVIEW OF HELEN LANGLEY
by Shelby

Helen grew up on a farm just outside of Timboon and has spent a lot of time down at the river.

Helen's school bus was Bus 11 and had a twisty route ending up at the Curdies River where the big bridge is, along the rail trail. Her bus turned there, so in a rainy year on the way to school she got to see the floods along the river. She always found that a bit exciting, but she didn't like it when everyone else got sent home early but she got sent home later because her bus didn't have to go over a bridge or anything. The other kids got to go home early at 1 o'clock but she had till wait till 5 o'clock.

She remembers that she went eel fishing with her dad and her uncle fifty-five or sixty years ago. She was about the same age as me then, maybe a bit younger. She remembers that the eels were tricky to catch and along the edge of the river there were reeds, tee tree, and a plant with a strange sort of minty smell, so, it could have been native mint growing along the river, the river always had an odd smell to it. They would go down to the river just after the cows had been milked just a bit after dark, they always fished in the dark for the eels. Helen loves the taste of eel, it's the best fish, she says.

Helen told us: I can't remember if it was that night when my grandpa was visiting. (He had been a farmer up at Dunolly, very dry country.) Dad had been eel fishing and had caught some eels. Mum in the mornings said to Grandpa would you like some eel for breakfast - they were peeled and skinned already in the fridge. Grandpa said too much like eating snake, no thanks. So, Mum is cooking eels for Dad and eggs for Grandpa. After a little while Grampa had a little taste. Well, it ended up that Dad had the eggs and Grandpa had eel for breakfast!

Helen hasn't been fishing in the river recently and doesn't know how much it has changed for eels. She fears there are less because the farms go right to the river bank and the water won't be as good for the eels. When there was bush and vegetation along the river edge it would filter anything nasty. The river has changed a lot, there is not nearly as much vegetation down there, all of the protective growth along the river has gone. The vegetation that served to filter out all the fertilizer and cow poo and things like that is now gone. The filtering system is gone.

Helen's interest in nature:

Helen remembers going to a talk in Warrnambool and the researcher had been doing research on different sorts of yabbies and how in different rivers they would have their own species. That means there is a lot of local research to do, but our river has never had very much research.

Helen is a field naturalist, we have a field naturalist club in Timboon. Field naturalists are interested in natural history from what in beneath your feet to what is above your head, from geology to astronomy and everything in between so that means birds, plants, fish, yabbies, spiders, insects and fungi.

Helen involves herself in learning about the Curdies and the flora and fauna.

Looking for platypus:

The first time the river had been surveyed for platypus they put in nets at the Trestle Bridge, Devil's Gully Bridge and a bit further on the bridge the other side of Cobden and Digney's Bridge Road. There were around five nets put in. They had to put the nets out and use stones to weigh everything down and in a couple of hours they went out again and checked all of the nets. Then they could go home about midnight or so. They caught a small fish and a duck. A native water rat put a hole in one of the nets - they have extremely sharp teeth - so they knew they caught a water rat because of the hole in the net.

Then they would go out at about four in the morning. They would check them every couple of hours so that nothing got stuck in there and they didn't want to get badly tangled because they don't want to kill anything. When you are looking for things, you put the nets in shallow water so if something gets stuck in it, they can get their noses out to breathe. If it is deep water, animals will drown. So, this is why you end up spending the evening jumping rocks in big heavy waders, they are very awkward and hard to walk in.

Finding Pygmy Perch:

Helen knew Rosemary who used to live on the river and was a field naturalist. Rosemary had a little creek on her farm that had dried up in the summer. In this little pool were these little fish. She put them in her freezer, they were Pygmy Perch and they had been in this little creek which was only 100- 150 meters from the river. The people who identified them were excited to learn where they came from because they are on the endangered list.

Helen said that people don't really fully understand the negative impacts that the damage to the environment causes because they don't know what you're losing.

> She said: *We know that there are eels in there. There are Pygmy Perch around and there will be some research on other things but there has never been much research on the river so we don't really know what is there. Also, the catchment has different ecosystems for the different geography, for example, if you look at a topographical map there is high ground and low ground so if you're a yabby or something like that you don't go mountain climbing to higher ground. This means that over millennia you get slightly different species in different areas.*

Above left: Swamp Orchid. Right: Australian crake

Endangered Orchids:

Helen has been down along the river looking for orchids that grow in the swamp. These orchids have green stems and green flowers and they are threatened.

Birds:

> *She said: We were down at Peterborough a couple of years ago. One of the field naturalists asked if anyone wanted to see the crakes. Imagine the pompoms you can get on your hats, the crakes were like two of them stuck together with legs under them. They were babies.*
>
> *So, they were there, in the water, in a flooded reed bed just behind the caravan park, on the edge of the road. They were easy to see but a lot of people wouldn't have because they were very small. The minute movement around them stopped, they would all just come out and run around.*
>
> *We had a lovely afternoon down there. We saw the crakes. We saw an emu wren. A tiny wren with a long tail very rarely sees those. And while we're standing there, a snipe came flying by in the late afternoon – the reed bed was where they roosted.*
>
> *The reed bed is very important. There were dozens of snipe flying in. They were out feeding on the farmland and wetlands, and they came into the reed bed because it's a safe place to sleep. They come all the way from Japan so having good reed bed is important for them to rest and feed for the summer, so they can then fly back to Japan to nest and breed.*
>
> *The surprise was when all of a sudden there was a thing like a brown sack coming out of the reed beds. It was a bittern and*

Above: Bittern

it flew like a sack flying. I knew what it was because there is research now happening on the bittern and we are actually a bittern hot spot.

I live near Lake Cobrico. It's a little lake and the night of the eclipse of the moon my husband and I were standing out the front of the house. The frogs at Lake Cobrico were just about deafening, they sounded so loud I reckon you could feel it. And then all of a sudden, we heard "BM BM BM" and that's the bittern calling. You know when you blow across a bottle- that's what they sound like.

They have been recording them all around the lake here and along the river and the river mouth, where there are areas of reed beds and swamp, because they are soggy but no-one wants to be walking around in a reed bed because you could be up to your eyeballs in mud, getting attacked by leeches! They are not very popular and this means they are nice and quiet so all these birds like them, also they are full of creepy crawly things that birds love to eat.

Helen said that our river needs a lot of love. She said there is talk to improve the quality of the river so that we can get platypus back, so that means improving the water quality all of the way down. That would be good for everything along the river. We also need to stop the blue green algae.

Pylons of the Trestle Bridge Timboon

INTERVIEW OF IAN AND PAM McCONNELL

by Thea, Paige and Olivia

Ian came to take up a farm in Glenfyne in 1990, before that they farmed near Mount Noorat. Their farm is on a basalt outcrop on stony country, and the Curdies River runs around the edge of their property.

Before they moved here and since childhood, they would camp and hike in the area. They would go on raft races and canoeing, which was great fun.

Today, Ian can't get down to the Curdies and he used to be very involved with it. He would take samples of the water to find out the quality, he knew this was important to monitor. He said that the water that comes out of the stony country is fresh, clear and you can drink it and when you get down here to around Glenfyne - because lots of the bush has been cleared away - there's a lot of runoff and effluent from dairies.

Creating the Rail Trail

For decades now, there was a group who wanted to turn the old railway track into a walking/riding trail that Ian was involved in.

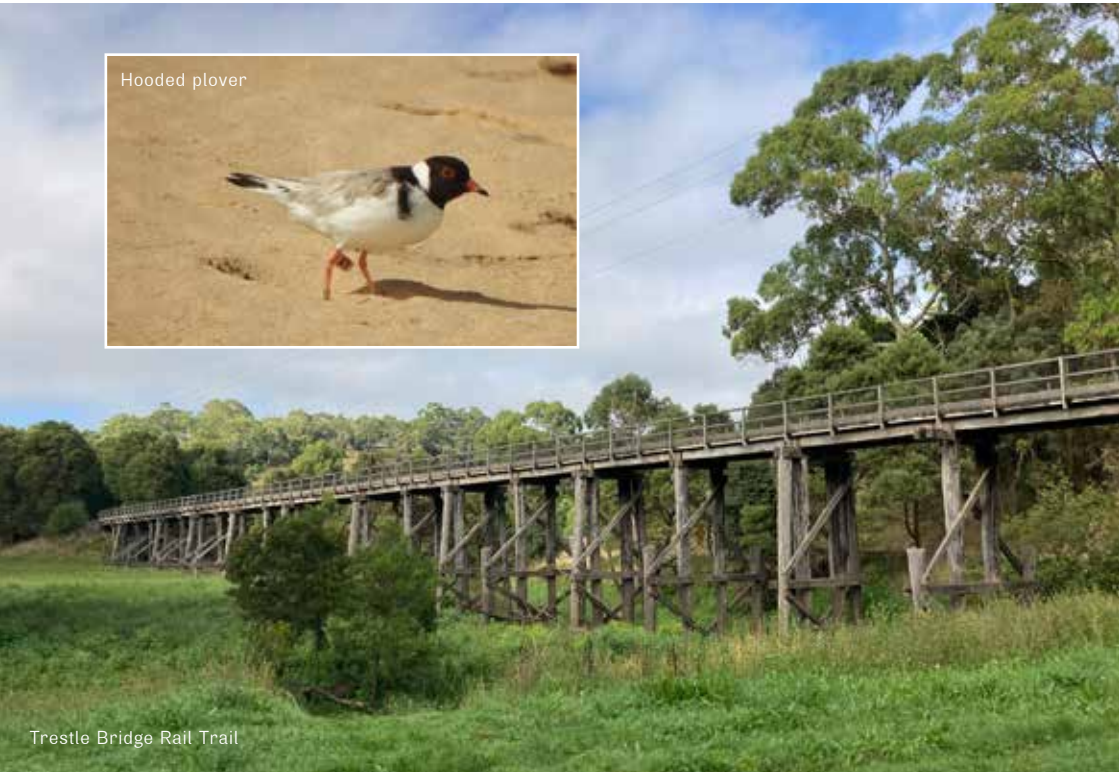
There first efforts were with the Shire, but they couldn't get much assistance at first because the Shire didn't think it would work. But they kept trying and eventually they got $5,000 to start it off. That then meant they would need a lot of volunteers to clear the vegetation and tracks. It took quite a while and eventually they got there.

Then they found out all the bridges were unstable, so they needed to build new ones. The last big effort was the trestle bridge over the Curdies. The group managed to get some $150,000 from one of the gas companies.

They found thirty-four rotten pylons that needed to be replaced and the decking had rotted away. The sleepers had to come out and so did the balusters. They ended up using treated pine to build the bridge back up. They had to dig down into the Curdies to connect the new poles to the bottom of the old ones that hadn't rotted away and connected them with rotor blades.

Ian also talked to us about wildlife, the lands which the river flows through and native birds who live around the area and along the river.

He explained how the hooded plovers are endangered because they are so exposed on the beach. They only ever nest on the sand under bits of seaweed or sticks and sand. The young ones are in great risk because crows, seagulls, foxes and cats, horses, and dogs. The nests can easily be stomped on, crushing the chicks or eggs. People now put up fences around the nests to keep people away.



Trestle Bridge Rail Trail

INTERVIEW OF IAN & PAM McCONNELL

by Jarrod, Hugh, Lachie, and Evie

Ian moved to Glenormiston Glenfyne in 1990. He has one younger sister and one younger brother. He was born in 1939 and they lived in Glenormiston. His sister was born in 1945 and brother was born in 1946. There is quite an age gap because his parents had him before World War 2. His father then went off to war, came back and then had two more kids.

In Ian's childhood he joined Scouts and camped along the Curdies River, back when the river was more vegetated and had more wildlife. There were deer and often hunters were desperate to get antlers because antlers would sell for a lot. When Ian was younger, he would climb and explore Mount Noorat.

Ian shared his experiences on the Curdies River and growing up along the river. He often camped there with the scouts. When camping. Ian would come across lots of wildlife including possums and yellow belly gliders. Ian told us how possum skin is valuable. Possum skin is valuable because skin items play an important role in connecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders with their culture and are used for spiritual meaning. Possum skin feels silky, which gives a lovely luxurious texture. It doesn't freeze, so it is great for Timboon's chilly weather and it is lightweight. Yellow Belly Gliders have an important ecological function due to their role supporting a "sap-free guide" and possibly a pollinator.

Curdies Valley 1940

The Curdies has changed a lot over the years. Ian mentioned about the history of the rail trail and told us that the railway was first built for easier access through the bush when transporting goods. To gain a perspective of what the Curdies used to look like, you can go to the rail trail to see a sample of what it was like. As you go further down, the valleys get steeper, the bush gets denser and is a lot wetter.

Ian told us about Doctor Curdies who was a squatter.

> *He said: "Squatters moved in the 1840s when a lot of Aboriginals were decimated, so it became safer for other people to move into the area".* They moved into the open country plains where they could drive the cattle, and then went south, which was mainly bush.

Ian brought in some artifacts related to life along the Curdies. The beautiful statues of wildlife were created by Ian.

INTERVIEW OF JASON BURLEIGH

by Ben, Tayne, Joyce and Lachie

Jason is President of the Curdievale Angling Club.

The Curdievale Angling Club is an active group of almost fifty members. They hold about fifteen competitions in a year and have up to twenty people joining in. The main catch is bream: junior members can weigh bream over 25cm but adults are limited to 30cm.

Anglers are keen to care for the Curdies. The Club is interested in helping to keep the Curdies River healthy. They have helped the Corangamite Catchment Management Authority with the installation of fish hotels in the rivers and they were involved in saving beached fish in an incident when the river was opened a few years ago.

Fishing on the Curdies

> *Jason said: Back when I was younger, I used to go fishing with Jim Giblin who taught me how to fish. Nowadays I enjoy taking my daughter Chloe and showing her all of the fishing spots in the Curdies River. I find fishing relaxing and just enjoy spending time together.*

'Fishing with Dad, Chloe Burleigh' age 10

Fish hotels

One of the human activities that has not helped the river has been the clearly of debris that would make natural habitat for fish. To compensate for this, fish hotels are being placed around the Curdies River. They are made of tree limbs and replace hollow logs and other objects that were removed. They are placed especially to shelter vulnerable fish, hopefully creating a habitat to encourage an abundance in fish like there used to be.

Fish hotels in the Curdies River

Curdievale Angling Club competition 2000

Dr Curdie*

Flooded Curdies

INTERVIEW OF JIM AND MARIE GIBLIN

by Holly, Noah and Josh

Dr. Daniel Curdie was a medical doctor and scientist from Scotland. He moved to Australia and settled near Camperdown at Tandarook. Dr. Curdie would walk the river with the local aboriginals and was considered to be the protector of Aborigines. Dr. Curdie was the first president of the Shire of Hampden which is now known as the Corangamite Shire.

The Curdies River used to be surrounded by trees and plants such as the tea tree. As farming in the area increased, the farmers needed more land so they let their cattle into the bush along the river. The cattle destroyed all the bush due to them eating the vegetation, rubbing on the trees and ruining plants. Lots of vegetation disappeared because of this destruction; both the clearing of land for farming and the use chemicals on fields.

In 1976 Jim got invited to join the Curdies' Anglers Club and then became the president in 1978-1979. The Anglers Club was started to help improve farms that were connected to the river. They built fences on the river edge to help the vegetation start growing again and help the river bank survive and not fall in. They helped build the Boggy Creek jetty. Their goal is to help the river survive.

About 20 years ago, the Curdies river flooded. Water was all over the road and you couldn't even get to the pub! The floods were right up to the barbeque area.

*Photo held by state Library of Victoria. Accession no. H2011.1

INTERVIEW OF ROBERT MARR

by Lachlan and Jarrod

Robert Marr was a sheep farmer in Fenton's Creek, where it connects with the Curdies, near Brucknell. He went to school at Timboon and dropped out in Year Nine and pursued his dream of being a sheep farmer, while working also as a part-time shearer.

He has lived on Fenton's Creek all his life. As a kid he loved to fish and this love of fishing he has passed on to his kids and his grandkids. He has fished all along his part of Fenton's Creek and all along the Curdies, from the mouth down at Peterborough, all the way up to Brucknell.

Robert has been a farmer for 72 years, that's a long time, and he has seen some changes in the river. He witnessed the clearing of the Heytesbury Settlement. The clearing of the Heytesbury forest was one of the worst things humans have done to the Curdies River. It caused mass erosion. The rain pushed downhill and into the river, making water run faster, hitting river corners and chewing them away.

Heytesbury settlement circa 1965

Robert is now retired and he leases his farm to bigger dairy farmers. Robert says he believes that: the main cause of the blue, green algae is the fertilizer that is being spread on paddocks to make good, green, luxury pastures for big, hungry dairy cows. The superphosphate and urea that is being spread on paddocks is washing into the river and it's not good for the water.

Curdies in flood

The nutrients in the fertiliser sink to the bottom and build up over time. When we get a big a big flood and a bit of warmth, the algae just blooms and then it takes all the oxygen out of the water, killing thousands of fish -and the river stinks in a blue green algae bloom.

When we get a heap of rain, lots of dirt washes into the river and fills in waterholes, making the river like a smooth funnel. The dirt washing in also covers the fish eggs. Rob believes that without trees to slow down the water flow and create a healthy, fresh water habitat for fish and other birds and predators, the river will continue to degrade and deteriorate.

Over Rob's lifetime he has seen many changes in the river and surprisingly some good change. Robert said that when he was younger and was fishing along the rivers and creeks in his area, he found that it was quite murky and it was hard for him to catch fish. Nowadays when he goes fishing with his grandkids, the water is clearer and there are more fish: bream and mullet are the most common. Rob wonders if the river may be getting better at his part of the river system.

Left: Blackfish. Right: Rainbow trout

INTERVIEW OF STEPHEN MUELLER *by Georgia*

Among the fish that inhabit the Curdies and that have been affected by the decline in the river, is the blackfish.

Stephen Mueller has dedicated his efforts to bringing the blackfish back, he has established his fish farm in the Cobden district. He told us:

> *They've been trying to breed these blackfish for probably 150 years, and everyone's failed - doctors, professors, aquacultures - the whole world. Every single one of them has failed to breed them except me. This is what I do in my life.*
>
> *To explain his success he added: So, I think what happened is I started with a very young fish, and she bred. Eventually we got more and more. That's the pond where I keep the fish before breeding. It worked out to be the perfect size. I would put about 20 or 30 fish in there - and hope.*

He pointed out that they don't have enough information about them to know what age they breed. He said that he can't tell the difference between the females and males either and said that the trouble is no one knows about them. However, Stephen has succeeded in developing his venture and says about it: *It's incredible, let me tell you.*

The fish can grow to five and half kilos, which is quite a big animal. There are people who fly all over the world trying to catch a trout that big. You'd never see one 5 1/2 kilos again. You won't find fish that big in the river now, but they used to be there.

> *He explained: There should have been a lot more work done on those fish. There was a paper by Peter Minnard back in the 9o's about a breeding attempt in the 1950s. I think it was somewhere in Gippsland and they tried. They tried for three damn months, and they gave it up. They couldn't. They couldn't do it, so, they give up.*

We asked him: Why do you think everyone but you have been unsuccessful at breeding the fish?

> *He replied: The reason I think that I have been successful and everyone else has failed is because they give up too easily.*

INTERVIEW OF ZAC TAYLOR

by Josh, Noah and Rory

Zac is an eel fisherman and owns his own company, the Paaratte Eel Company. He is a second-generation eel fisherman, taking over the business from his Dad. He mainly fishes in the Curdies River at Peterborough and in the Gellibrand River.

When Zac was young he went out fishing with his Dad and wanted to continue the family tradition. His Dad was aware that there can be tough times in the industry due to things such as the millennial drought and so insisted Zac get a trade first. Zac trained as a plumber ensuring he had a back-up if eel farming was not possible. He worked in the plumbing industry for a few years, but his love of fishing bought him back to the eels.

Zac catches the majority, around 70%, of his eels during autumn when the eels are migrating from the river out to sea to breed. They generally wait until darkness and when there is a big storm before crossing from fresh to salt water.

The eel is incredible in that it will swim very long distances to breed in the warmer tropical waters of places such as New Caledonia. Once there, they don't return as they are exhausted and instead their spawn find their back to the Curdies and Gellibrand rivers, through the ocean currents.

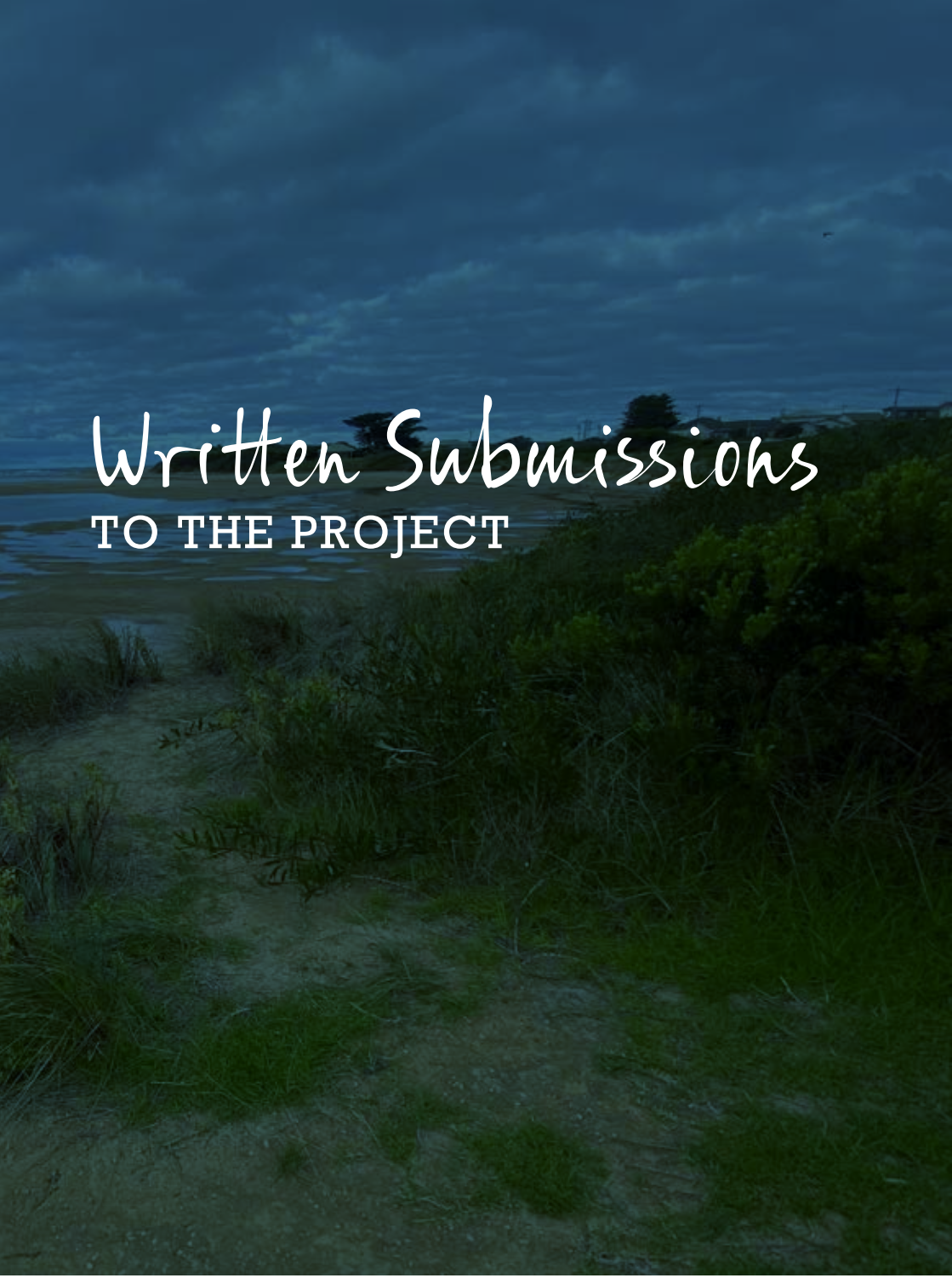
When fishing, Zac generally catches more eels in the Gellibrand River but they are smaller than the ones in the Curdies. The smaller eels will be put into dams and lakes to grow and the bigger ones be sold for food consumption. Some are smoked locally, while others are sold live to restaurants. There was a strong export market but in recent times it has been declining. Zac used to smoke his own eels but with increasing costs and licencing requirements it was easier to outsource the process.

During the off-season, Zac does a lot of preparation and monitoring of the stocks he has put into lakes and dams. He makes his own nets which are quite complex, to ensure the eels are captured safely, and that other fish and wildlife do not get caught in them. There are lots of regulations that control eel fishing and how they can be caught. There are limits on where Zac can fish, how many eels he can catch and how he transports the eels. These include that he has to have a GPS tracker when he is fishing and must tell Fisheries the times he is at his nets.

During the blue-green algae outbreak over the summer of 2021-22 Zac was interviewed by a number of organisations about the fish deaths and the general health of the Curdies. He continued to catch eels but could not sell them straight from the contaminated water. He had to take them home and put them in tanks of clean water and allow them to detoxify. Zac was horrified by the numbers of dead bream as they were the breeding stock that had lived for 25-30 years. Positively though he has seen many reasonable size bream and other fish back in the inlet and river since the algae cleared. The eels survived the outbreak as they were able to come to the surface to breath.

Wild eels have a much better taste than any farmed, and so eel farming is pretty much non-existent in Australia. There is no comparison, according to Zac, as farmed eel is very bland. Customers want the wild flavour, which will keep the industry going.

Zac is now taking his son out fishing for eels and this gives him great enjoyment. He would be very proud if a third generation could continue the business but would insist his son gain a backup trade, just as his Dad advised him.



Written Submissions
TO THE PROJECT

Curdies township from railway yards

NEIL TROTTER

Neil grew up in what was a small Curdies township before heading downriver to Peterborough and he has fond memories of an idyllic childhood, playing in and alongside the river, getting up to mischief too. Today he looks at the river with wiser eyes, and calls us all to action to repair the damage done to the river during his lifetime. This is what he says:

Childhood memories of learning to swim:

My earliest recollections of growing up at Curdies River commence with being taught to swim by my mother at the swimming hole, where Limestone Creek joined the Curdies below the Trestle Bridge.

I grew up the youngest of eight children and our farm boarded on one side by the river. During summer all the children from around the district would swim at that swimming hole. There was no pool in Timboon. My parents ensured that we were competent swimmers as soon as we could walk.

As summer approached, one of the local Dads would take their tractor and slasher and cut the grass on both sides of the river to make an area that was snake-free and to create an area to sunbake. We learnt to swim by swimming from submerged log to submerged log. Lime Stone Creek was shaded by bush for its entire length and was cut into the limestone, where it joined the river there were some waterfalls and deeper holes.

The water in the creek was much colder than the water in the river and we would store our soft drinks in it to keep cool. We would purchase

lollies and soft drink at Darby Earl's General Store before crossing the trestle bridge.

We would check to see that there were no trains coming before crossing the bridge. Sometimes we would put pennies on the line to be flattened by the train. Limestone Creek was crystal clear and it was possible to see brown trout hiding along the banks.

Childhood memories of the Curdies Township:

The Curdies River Store was an ancient building with a pool hall, post office and general store with a hand pumped petrol bowser out the front. It was situated where the current car park for the Rail Trail sits. Across the road from the store was George Bartlet's home. It had previously been a guest house for workers at the lime works. There were a number of houses nearby that are no longer around. Curdies River once had a large population of people employed in the lime kilns around the area.

We used to attend dances, card nights, church services, Sunday School, kitchen teas, 21st birthday parties and community meetings at Curdies River Memorial Hall, which was built to commemorate those soldiers who lost their lives in the First World War. The hall is still there although it is sited a couple of metres up the road and is now a private residence.


Brian & Linda Trotter, circa 1954

We had a wonderful childhood growing up at Curdies. There were many families with children of similar ages and we would wander in and out of family houses. We would build huts in the bush, make billy carts and race them down the steep hills, we created canoes out of corrugated iron and explored the river. We would often fish for eels in the river at night with tilly lamps and camp fires. I can remember making clay dobbies and having pitched battles in the old lime kilns that were on our property. A clay dobbie was a knob of wet clay about the size of a hand grenade that was formed at the end of a stick of tea tree and when hurled, the clay would become a missile. To be hit by a dobbie was very painful but thankfully, they rarely found their targets.

The children we grew up with became lifelong friends. We had a rich and rewarding start to life.

Memories of poaching in the river:

We spent a lot of time in and around the river, walking along the banks we would sometimes find evidence of poaching or illegal netting. Drum nets about the size of a 40 gallon drum were made out of wire mesh and circular iron rings. One end was closed off and the other had an inverted cone and a bait would hang inside. Fish would swim through the cone and would become trapped. Those trapped inside would remain alive and be able to swim around inside the net until the poacher retrieved it. The only clue to its presence would be a rope tied to the base of vegetation next to the river. We would pull the net from the river, liberate the fish and leave the net on the riverbank. The net just usually disappeared.

Much later in the 70's I lived in Peterborough at the Schomberg Inn. Poaching then was done differently on a much grander scale. The poachers, who will remain nameless, would use gill nets strung across the width of the river at the narrows just near the entrance to the lake. Someone would either swim or boat across the river with a rope. The rope would be looped around a post or handy tree. It would be tied to a weighted gill net which would be pulled across the river and left. The

Timboon Cheese and Casein Factory

poachers would spend a couple of hours drinking beer and staying warm because the activity usually took place on a moonless night in inclement weather when the tides were right.

At about the time that I remember, some Fishery Officers were staying at the Schomberg Inn, conducting a survey of fish stocks in the river. They were using 4 inch and 6 inch gill nets in a similar fashion. I remember being astounded by the dingy loads of fish they bought to shore. The fish they caught were primarily bream and bass and they gave the fish they caught to charity outlets.

The degradation of the river:

The river was always an important part of our life and in my childhood it was in a much healthier state than it is at present.

With the river in its present state I doubt it could sustain those levels of fish stocks now. Fish kills due to blue green algae have resulted in a depletion in fish population. Poaching would not have helped but when the river was healthy it was self-sustaining.

I can remember that in the 1960s the Timboon Butter Factory bought a farm opposite ours and began to irrigate whey which was a waste product from the production of butter, cheese and casein. This waste product was very acidic and smelt rancid, particularly in the hot summer months. I can remember one of the levee banks built to contain the whey was breached and allowed the whey to flow into Powers Creek at the base of the farm and then into the Curdies River just upstream from the Trestle Bridge. It polluted both streams and killed fish for miles downstream. I don't believe the river was able to recover. Although the runoff was contained and the Factory closed shortly after, the damage took a heavy toll on the ecosystem. There were platypus in the river that are no longer present.

What can be done today:

High nutrient levels in the river have resulted in blue green algae blooms. The entire river system is under pressure and in danger of becoming little more than an open drain. It takes years for ecosystems to recover and subsequent generations will need to work hard to repair and restore the river systems in our part of the state to good health. Control of high

Sign at Curdies estuary Autumn 2023

nutrient runoff into rivers and water courses will be essential to restore river health. Fencing off access to rivers and streams and revegetation along watercourses will be necessary.

This should not just be the responsibility of adjoining landowners. This is a whole of community responsibility and will require an investment by the community in education and remedial action. There is no magic bullet that will instantaneously fix the problem. We cannot afford to sit on our hands and lament what has happened or dwell in the past, but we do need to commit to repairing the damage and ensuring our rivers and streams are once again healthy and functioning ecosystems.

Curdies River

Crushing limestone at Timboon

PETER YOUNIS

A very brief history of Lime burning in Timboon.

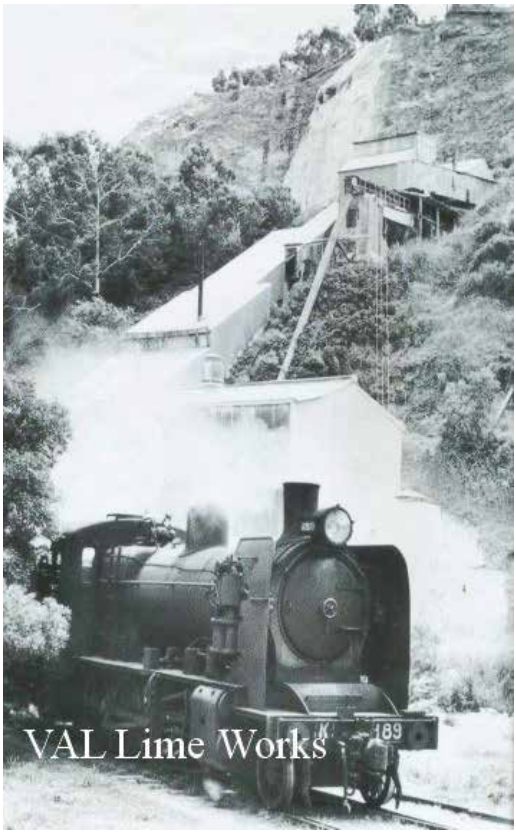
Between 8 and 16 million years ago, a shallow sea extended into what is now NSW and the organisms living there fell to the sea floor producing the extensive layer of limestone that we can all see throughout the Curdies valley and down to the coast.

Early European settlers to Timboon, soon became aware of these deposits and one of the arguments for a railway line, was the opportunity to exploit this resource “giving employment to hundreds and producing a prosperous town in the wilderness.”

By 1910, the lime deposits were shown to be of sufficient quantity and quality to warrant commercial exploitation and in mid-1910 the Bulldog Lime Company began sending product away. They were soon joined by the Tallent Brothers, the White Star, the Southern Cross, as well as other smaller outfits and between 1910 and 1926 there were three full time burnt lime companies operating at Curdies River.

Within a short time of commencing production, Curdies lime was making a name for itself, much to the displeasure of other Victorian lime works who were unhappy with the freight rebate given to the new companies in remote Timboon.

Lime burning is the process whereby limestone or other calcium rich substances such as shell or coral, is broken down from Calcium



Carbonate (CaCO3) to form Calcium Oxide or quicklime (CaO), by burning. Carbon dioxide (CO2) is released, and the result is a lumpy or powdery substance.

This is then used in building. The CaO is mixed with water and sand to make mortar. As the mortar dries it reabsorbs CO2, making CaCO3, thus completing the cycle.

The burning took place in kilns and the remains of some can still be seen along the Curdies River valley, from the trestle bridge to the main Warrnambool Road.

The lime was loosened by blasting and then all the pieces were removed using pick, shovel and hands, it was tough work.

Huge supplies of wood were required. The wood was stockpiled from November to March while the rudimentary tracks were passable. It was cut in the surrounding bush and transported by horse and cart, usually 4 horse teams.

It is estimated that between 10 and 20,000 “tons” of wood were required each year. A ton was measured, 50 cubic feet of closely stacked wood.

The kilns were built into the side of the hill, to accommodate their construction with a smaller opening at the top and a grate at the bottom to create a draft. The rock was broken, or “knapped”, into small 2-inch pieces, too big and it was underburnt and too small led to over burning. It was then shoveled manually into the kiln, with alternating layers of two tons of five-foot firewood and two cubic yards of limestone. After firing, the burnt lime would collect at the bottom and was then shoveled into bags.

Bulldog Kiln 1911

The work was hard and dangerous and many workers and in fact families, lived in tents due to the lack of housing.

As mentioned, this is a very brief history. If you are interested in further reading, Alf Poole, a man who spent a lifetime working and living around Curdies River, wrote “Living with Lime”. It was a labor of love from a man who had left school the day he turned 14.

A few months later he left home with “two blankets and an axe.” His mother gave him a billy, a saucepan and sixpence and after borrowing a tent, he lived under some pine trees up near where Groves currently live.

He was determined to record this life that he knew was finishing and managed to get his final manuscript to the late Jack Fletcher, for editing and preparation for publication, 10 days before he departed this life. He left instructions with his family to proceed with the project and the book was eventually published.

GEOFF ROLLINSON

My recollections and impressions of the Curdies River and catchment area is relatively recent and relates to my prior role as Landcare Coordinator with the Heytesbury District Landcare Network.

In the 12 years working with Landcare in that area, the first impressions were that the Curdies River and its tributaries were some of the most striking and beautiful aspects of the landscape.

Though impacted heavily by the clearance of native vegetation for agricultural purposes along much of the river's length, there are still examples of remnant or restored vegetation that provide important habitat for the flora and fauna species living within.

The steep hillsides afforded wonderful views of the Curdies valley and further downstream the Curdies Estuary at Peterborough is a sight to behold. At times the estuary was teeming with birdlife with an estimated up to 20,000 birds present at the one time.

My favourite experiences were working with Landcare staff and volunteers, Gene Gardiner and his colleagues from the Corangamite CMA and landholders along the upstream and downstream reaches of the river. Over more than a decade we worked with landholders to establish riparian vegetation along the main watercourses and tributaries of the Curdies River.

These experiences were positive and sustained my interest in undertaking activities that protected, enhanced, and restored the natural values described above.

On the other side of the environmental ledger there were many factors that negatively impacted the natural values of that landscape. These included feral animal species such as deer, foxes, cats and rabbits that had a detrimental effect on the native flora and fauna species in the area.

They also included the incursion of weeds such as Blackberry, Ragwort, Arum Lily, Pittosporum and Ox Eye Daisy.

Also intensive farming activities included cattle and sheep accessing water directly from the Curdies, with resulting impacts such as bank erosion and contamination of the watercourse and estuary further downstream.

This reached a flashpoint in April 2022 when Blue Green algal blooms led to major fish kills in the Curdies Estuary. These impacts were attributed to excessive use of synthetic fertilisers and soil erosion that in turn led to runoff into waterways that raised nutrient levels to a harmful level.

My role as a Landcare Coordinator included joining the consultative group formed in the aftermath of these fish (and cow) kills to compile a recovery plan for the river and estuary.

To finish on a positive note, one of the landholders in the upper Curdies River area explained that nowadays it takes him a bit longer to get back to the house or the dairy. That's because he is distracted and entranced by the calls, warbles and whistles from the hundreds (if not thousands) of birds attracted by the revegetation along the river.

Lime works camps at Curdievale

ROY PARFETT

Roy wrote of his memories growing up in the district. He says:

I arrived at Brucknell in 1935, no roads just a bush track. I lived on the top plateau and the Curdies River was on the valley below. The Curdies River starts its journey from lakes, just south of Camperdown.

Curdies was a small settlement with a railway siding and a church general store, garage some houses and dwellings.

Some industries were the lime mining from limestone hills around the river. This lime was burnt for builders' lime and used in housing and to this day lime for agriculture is still mined at Curdies. Lime kilns can still be seen in the hillside around the river. One kiln is on Jamie Mackieson's property at Curdies. My nephew, dug it out to reveal the brick work around the kiln.

Another industry was trapping rabbits, canning them and then selling canned rabbits. It was a way of preserving the meat because there was no refrigeration at the time. This was on the "Gallilier" property.

Trapping water rats was for 'the trappers!' They would sell the very soft pelt of the rats, to make beautiful coats and jackets. The trick to catching them was putting aniseed on a trap and the rats would be caught as they began to eat the aniseed.

The train to Curdies from Camperdown brought goods, and passengers you could buy a ticket and travel on train to and from Timboon five kilometers away.

Those were the days!

Train on trestle bridge

PETER HARKIN

Peter recalls two incidents that left an indelible impression. This is what he says:

In the mid-1980s the fishing wasn't good on the Curdies River. Where had all the fish gone?

Two friends of mine, who were brothers, told me that their farm backed onto the Curdies River and sometimes, late at night, they would see lights down on the river from fishermen in their boats.

We were suspicious, and decided to watch out for those boats at night and see if we could get their vehicle registration numbers to give to Fisheries and Police. The first vehicle registration number sent to the authorities turned out to be two old blokes from Port Campbell who weren't doing anything wrong. That was a bit embarrassing!

One rainy night at 1am in the morning, we got the registration numbers of two cars and boat trailers down at the Curdies boat ramp at Curdievale. We sent them to the authorities and the owners were apprehended in Melbourne where they lived. These people were poachers. At night they would launch their boats and put out long gill nets up and down the Curdies River and catch thousands of fish to sell in Melbourne. That is illegal. They were convicted, fined and their cars and boats confiscated.

The saddest part of this story is that it took many years for the fish numbers and species to recover. A few greedy people had made a big impact on reducing the fish stocks in the Curdies River. We all enjoy catching fish. Fish catch limits are very important to keep the Curdies River as a sustainable fishery. Look after the Curdies and it will look after you.

Fishing and lunch on the Curdies with the Prime Minister

A friend of mine named Peter was a builder and he built a holiday house in Peterborough for the Prime Minister, Mr Malcom Fraser. He served from 1975 – 1983 as Prime Minister.

One day Peter and I were fishing in a boat on the Curdies River at a place called "The Lodge" and we caught some lovely bream and mullet on sandworm bait.

Another two boats came along and they stopped to ask if we had caught anything. Prime Minister Fraser was in the first boat and recognised my friend, Peter, who had built his house and we had a great talk there on the Curdies River. We gave them some of our excess sandworms and they fished not far from us and caught many good fish like ours. The second boat had two men in it with dark sunglasses on and they weren't fishing. We think they had guns with them so we presumed they were the Prime Minister's body guards. Eventually Mr Fraser came over in his boat and asked if we'd like to join them for lunch at the Boggy Creek Pub. Of course we said yes! We drove our boats up the Curdies River and along a canal to the back door of the Pub where we moored our boats and had lunch.

You never know who is at the Curdies River!

KRISTEN LEES

Corangamite Catchment Management Authourity

The Corangamite Catchment Management Authority (CCMA) has citizen science projects to monitor the health of the river with a view to engaging the community in the job of restoring health to the Curdies ecosystem. The CCMA has also developed a series of programs and works with organisations and landowners to redress the degradation that has occurred. This is their report on the present state of the Curdies River:

The Curdies River catchment in Southwest Victoria has seen many changes since European settlement with widespread deforestation and the historic and continued effects of farming. Impacts to the river and its estuary include elevated nutrients and increased sedimentation.

WaterWatch and EstuaryWatch volunteers have undertaken long and short-term monitoring of the Curdies River since 2001 for Waterwatch sites and 2013 for EstuaryWatch sites. Students at Timboon P-12 School are also registered as belonging to the River Detective's School program and have conducted many activities about investigating healthy waterways in our region.

Citizen Scientists are represented on the Curdies River Consultative Committee providing important water quality data and observations to the committee. This committee was established in 2022 to provide a transparent and effective platform for knowledge sharing, consultation, and collaboration to improve the health of the Curdies River.

In May 2023 five monitoring sites were tested to provide a Water Quality Snapshot of the Curdies in response to frequent outbreaks of cyanobacteria (commonly referred

to as blue green algae). This data collection coincided with the Curdies River Consultative Committee tour of the catchment which gave members from the local Landcare network, dairy industry, government departments and agencies, and general community an opportunity to see how Citizen Scientists collect water quality and estuary data, and how it is used as an indicator of waterway health.

The Snapshot reported the following results,

- pH and electrical conductivity were in good-excellent condition in the estuary and streams,
- Turbidity was acceptable in the streams but poor in the estuary,
- Dissolved oxygen was acceptable in the estuary and upper Scotts Creek, but was only fair in Cooriemungle Creek and lower Scotts Creek, and
- Reactive phosphorus was acceptable in the estuary but poor in the streams.

While these results were only a snapshot in time, they demonstrate to those with a strong interest in the health of the Curdies River how important water quality monitoring is to track the impact of interventions and education programs. Some of the current programs being delivered in Curdies catchment include the Heytesbury Soil and Dairy Action Program, the Sustainable Dairies Program, the Scotts Creek stability project, and Fisheries Habitat Restoration Project (which has seen the installation of 32 new fish hotels in the Curdies Estuary for species such as Black Bream and Estuary Perch).

Over the last 20 years farm practices have been improved to reduce nutrient run off, and there has been improvements to riparian vegetation and fish passage, however there is still a lot of work to be done to restore the Curdies River to a healthy state.

The Curdies River Consultative Committee members are working together to deliver habitat restoration and nutrient management programs to continue to improve the health of the Curdies River, and WaterWatch and EstuaryWatch Citizen Scientist volunteers will likewise continue to be there to not only record the journey but to also provide critical water quality data to inform priority works and projects.

Epilogue

HISTORICAL REFERENCES FOR FURTHER READING:

- Dr. Curdie: Trove (from The Argus/Hamilton Spectator/Tue 26 Feb 1884, p4) Death of Dr. Curdie
- (Fanny (Frances) Curdie to her nephew, Rev. James Russell, Tandarook, 5 October 1872, [Curdie Papers] MS 8664, Box 942/b(2) SLV.)
- (Jan Critchett, Untold Stories: Memories and lives of Victorian Kooris, Melbourne University Press, Carlton South, 1998, p. 118.)
- Corangamite Heritage Study Stage One Volume 2: Thematic Environmental History October 2009, Corangamite Shire.

Acknowledgments

Many individuals and organizations have helped develop this work.

We give our thanks to the Curdies River Catchment Alliance (CRCA), especially Kate Leslie, Heytesbury and District Landcare Network (HDLN), for asking Timboon P-12 students, through the Timboon Agriculture Project (TAP) to capture oral histories and narratives about the river and to tell the stories of the people in the Curdies River Catchment area to the wider community.

We are grateful to Barb Mullen, Dean Drayton, (CRCA), Gene Gardiner, Corangamite Catchment Management Authority (CCMA), Kate Leslie and Michelle Leech (HDLN) who set the scene for our Year 9 students during a field trip to the Curdies Estuary in May 2023

Our Interviewees: Aidan Denny, Alan Kerr, Ann Wilkinson, Annie Fraser, Clyde Bassett, Dean Drayton, Helen Langley, Ian and Pam McConnell, Jason Burleigh, Jim and Marie Giblin, Robert Marr, Steven Mueller and Zac Taylor.

And all those who have contributed stories or provided photos: Neil Trotter, Peter Younis, Geoff Rollinson, Roy Parfett, Peter Harkin, Kristen Lees (CCMA), Kate Leslie and Kerry Vickers for his stunning bird photos.

We thank Bob Hesketh and the Peterborough Golf Club for their donation of Michael Moore's publication *"Peterborough - Please slow down"* and John Craven's *"The Conquerors"* that features stories on Rebecca Joyce who used the Curdies River for part of her training to win a Rowing World Championship as well as Geelong footballer Paul Couch who learnt to swim in the Curdies River with a rope tied to his waist.

Ann Wilkinson has also generously provided 2 copies of reprints of J.M. McKenzie's book, *"My Grandmother's Story".*

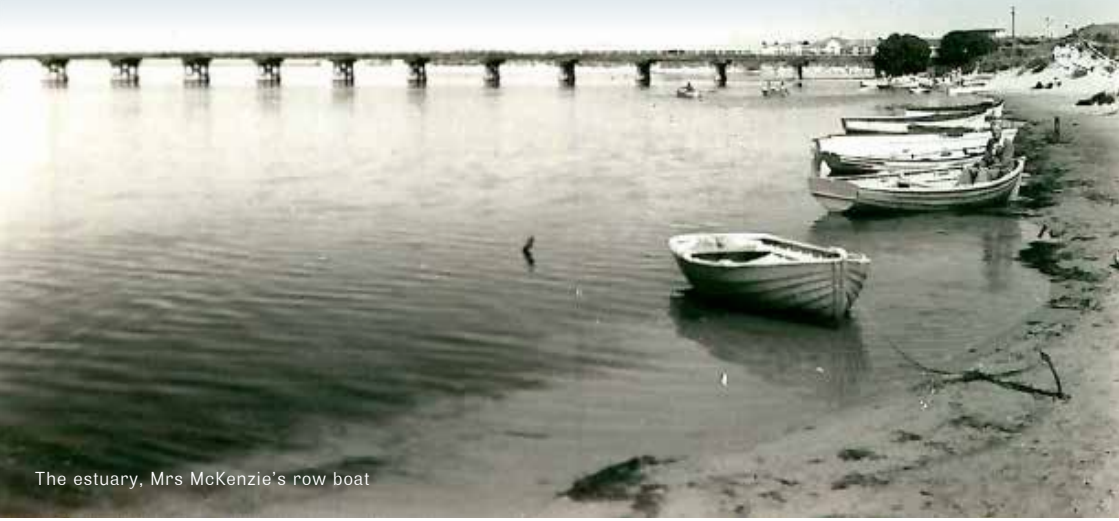
We appreciate Barb Mullen for her considered words in the Forward and for editing the text with Fiona Mackenzie.

Peter Younis, President of the Heytesbury District Historical Society, generously donated his time sourcing photos and maps for this publication.

Timboon Op Shop (TOPS) have funded this project and we are indebted to this community group for their support of our booklet.

Finally, **Carolyne Wakefield and the Year 9 Humanities students** who initiated this study and delved into the history of our region to produce a publication that will help preserve part of our region's history.

– Andrea Vallance
(TAP Coordinator)



The estuary, Mrs McKenzie's row boat

Back Cover - Map of County of Heytesbury 1884, from the NLA. Published by Dept of Lands and Survey Melbourne.

County of
HEYTESBURY

SCALE, EIGHT MILES TO AN INCH

Department of Lands and Survey, Melbourne
1884

Reference.

Pastoral Lands	*Blue*	735 Sq. miles	
Agricultural & Grazing	*Brown*	237 " "	
May be sold by auction	*Pink*	67¼ " "	excluding sundry detached portions considered too limited in area to be shown on this map

RESERVES.

Timber Reserves	*Horizontal shading*		9½ Sq. miles
All other Reserves	*Diagonal*		6¾ " "

ISBN 978-0-6486413-0-8