

VICTORIA'S HERITAGE

FRENCH ISLAND NATIONAL PARK

by Daniel Catrice, circa 2000.

Situated just 75 kilometres south west of Melbourne, French Island National Park is close to the metropolitan area but a world away in other respects. Access to the island is by ferry or barge. Cars are not permitted on the ferry, so the only vehicles on the island belong to farmers or park rangers. The island has a permanent population of about fifty. There is no reticulated electricity or water supply, and the only supplies are available from a general store at

Tankerton on the island's west coast. Despite its proximity to Melbourne, French Island is remote and relatively undisturbed. French Island National Park comprises two-thirds of the island. It is the only national park in Victoria wholly contained on an island. It has 6000 visitors a year, making it one of Victoria's least visited national parks. Yet it is protected wetland of international significance. It has Victoria's largest and healthiest populations of koalas and long-nosed potoroos. It has over 200 species of birds and 400 species of native plants, including 82 orchids.

Its history is no less remarkable. Aboriginal people were attracted by the island's abundant wildlife, probably gaining access by canoe. The coastal wetlands were especially bountiful, yielding large quantities of oysters, mussels and other shellfish, as well as water fowl and eggs. There is little available archaeological information and no recorded evidence of permanent occupation, but it is known that the island was regularly visited by



Remains of Old Dormitory , French Island prison. Courtesy of DSE

the Bunurong and was considered to be an important food source.

The first European to lay eyes on French Island was George Bass, who sailed into Western Port in an open whale boat on January 5, 1798. He watered and repaired his boat and made a chart, but did not land on French Island (he actually thought it part of the mainland). Unaware of the larger (and yet to be named) Port Phillip Bay, he named the bay Western Port "from its relative situation to every other known harbour on the coast".

In 1801 the "Lady Nelson" under the command of Lieutenant James Grant entered Western Port to carry out a further investigation. During Grant's visit the bay was surveyed by Francis Barillier who guessed that French Island was not part of the mainland as Bass had assumed. Barillier did not circumnavigate the island. Limited for time by Grant's desire to clear the bay while good weather held, he was not able to examine the island's northern shoreline. Nevertheless, when the charts from

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this voyage were published in 1803 the island was named Western Island. In 1802, two boats from the French ship "Le Naturaliste" spent eight days in Western Port correcting Bass' charts. The French crew named Western Island *Isle des Francais*, or Island of the French people. (They also named Phillip Island, *Isle des Anglais*, but this name did not survive). As the French had been the first Europeans to establish that *Isle des Francais* was in fact an island (Barillier had only guessed that it was) the name has remained, albeit in anglicised form.

Despite frequent visits to French Island and Western Port Bay by scientists and explorers, no one considered it a desirable place to stay. At the end of 1804 Lieutenant Robbins accompanied by the surveyor John Oxley sailed the cutter "Integrity" into Western Port. Asked to investigate if permanent habitation of the area was possible, Robbins reported that the land possessed "no great advantages to render it an eligible place for a settlement".

Another person to record his impressions of French Island was G.H. Haydon, who had been fishing in Western Port in 1842 and had found himself stranded on French Island's mud flats by a receding tide. His opinion may have been coloured by an enforced overnight stay, without food, fresh water or shelter. He described it as "a useless mass of scrub, with scarcity of water and barren soil". He did note that the island had timber "good for the purpose of settlers who occasionally send men from the main-land to procure it".

According to local historian, Jean Edgecombe, John and William Gairdner, the first legal settlers, squatted on the island in about 1847 before taking up a pastoral licence for 320 acres (130 ha.) on the south coast. When the Gairdners applied for their licence they gave the area of the island as 30,720 acres (12,300 ha.) – it is actually 16,900 hectares – and estimated its grazing capacity as 8,000 sheep.

The first land subdivision was made in 1867. Surveyors pegged 14 allotments of just over

4,700 acres on the south coast, most of which were taken up under selection licences. The first land sales took place in 1873.

Settlers depended on ketches and coastal schooners for transport and supplies. Cattle were sometimes swum across from Stockyard Point on the south east coast or taken by sailing vessel to Corinella on the mainland. A regular ferry service between Hastings and Phillip Island was introduced in 1868. This



The chicory kiln at Blue Gum Farm.

would occasionally stop at French Island. A regular ferry service to French Island was established after the completion of a railway to Stony Point in 1889. A jetty was built at Tankerton on French Island's east coast in 1890.

In the 1893 unemployed workers and their families were encouraged by the government to settle on the island. Six settlements were established: Energy Settlement, Band of Hope, Industrial, Perseverance, Callaran's and Kiernan's. Each family was allocated 20 acres and an allowance of 10 shillings a week. Many turned to growing chicory; one of the settlers from the Star of Hope Settlement is credited with building the island's first chicory kiln. Nevertheless, the settlement scheme was a short-sighted reaction to the economic depression of the 1890s and reflected the government's misplaced confidence in its ability to create a class of yeoman farmer to subsist on the land. French Island's isolation, together with settler's inexperience on the land

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and poor equipment brought the ill-fated project to an end and all but one family returned to the mainland.

Another failed venture was salt harvesting. In 1869 Richard Cheetham established the French Island Salt Company to harvest salt by evaporating sea water impounded in large shallow pans. This and similar enterprises in the 1880s and 1890s failed mainly because summer rains were too heavy to allow the salt to dry in open pans. Attempts were made to dry the salt in cast iron vats over wood fires, and as a consequence large quantities of timber were cut down as firewood.



Ablution block, French Island prison. Courtesy of DSE.

In 1916 a prison farm was established on the site of a failed pine plantation on the south east coast of the island. In 1921 the Penal and Gaols Department acquired 480 acres of this land for occupation by 'indeterminate sentenced prisoners'. The aim was to rehabilitate the inmates by teaching them rudimentary farm skills. Prisoners were originally accommodated in tents. More permanent buildings were erected in 1946.

The prison closed in 1975. In 1977 the Department of Youth, Sport and Recreation took over about 147 acres (58 ha.) of the original camp and ran the place as a recreation camp. It now operates as the McLeod Eco Farm and Historic Prison.

French Island was also considered an important place for the confinement of koalas

which were introduced from nearby Corinella in the early 1900s. The koalas thrived in their new surroundings which included several kinds of eucalypts including Manna Gum (*Eucalyptus viminalis*) which was then plentiful. Numbers grew so rapidly that in 1930 their numbers were estimated at 5,000, prompting Sir James Barrett to declare French Island "the home of the koala".

Over the next decade the population suffered a grave setback. According to F. Lewis, Chief Inspector of Fisheries and Game, this was due to a complex chain of events:

The settlers burn the scrub, practically every summer. This resulted in a number of koalas being destroyed each year but despite this drawback they were holding their own until rabbits were introduced. These pests increased so rapidly that, in order to cope with them, some one conceived the brilliant idea of liberating cats. As is usual under such circumstances the cats attacked the bird life with the inevitable result that insect pests, having no birds to keep them in check, multiplied amazingly.

The weakening influence of fires, combined with attacks of insects, soon resulted in the death of most of the tress which the residents blamed on the koalas. To protect the koalas the Fisheries and Game Department moved them to a reserve and sanctuary on nearby Quail Island.

Since the 1950s the Fisheries and Wildlife Department has used French Island as a holding area for koalas from which surplus animals are sometimes taken to restock the mainland.

By the mid 1960s French Island and Western Port were becoming the focus of a conservation campaign of a different kind. A succession of proposals to establish major industries prompted some to promote Western Port as the 'Ruhr of Australia'. The bay provided a deep water harbour, surrounded by

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flat land which could be purchased cheaply. In 1963 the Victorian government enacted the Westernport (Oil Refinery) Act to permit the establishment of the BP refinery on the bay's western shore. The Act also authorised the construction at a cost of \$7 million of State-owned port facilities and harbour facilities for use by the company. Also established as a result of this legislation was the Esso/BHP fractionation plant at Crib Point.

In the late 1960s BHP purchased 2,000 acres of land at French Island on which they intended erecting a steel works. This galvanised support for the protection of the island's remaining habitat. In 1971 the Fisheries and Wildlife Department produced recommendations for the creation of a Wildlife Reserve of 13,000 acres. The proposal noted the French Island carried a unique fauna, and that the island could be described as an "ideal natural laboratory for future research".

The Conservation Council of Victoria (CCV) cautiously backed these recommendations, but called for the island to be given national park status. It claimed that the island had several characteristics that made it extremely valuable if maintained for nature conservation. It drew attention to the island's isolation which "can create genetic differences which are important in taxonomic and evolutionary studies"; its accessibility (or lack thereof) which enabled the mode and volume of traffic to be controlled and regulated; and its location, which was ideally situated as "an area of recreational escape and scientific study" because of its proximity to Melbourne.

The CCV claimed that the island contained the largest area of natural vegetation remaining in Western Port region. It conceded that the botany of the island had not been extensively investigated but that it was "most likely" that it has many associations which are now rare, absent or severely damaged. This is especially likely, it argued, as the island lay between the warm and cool temperate zones.

The CCV called for a 'massive campaign' to have French Island and its surrounds set aside as a national park. Interestingly, it argued that the national park should also include Phillip Island and all the eastern shoreline areas of Western Port. Rejecting the lesser status implied by the term 'wildlife reserve', the CCV expressed the concerns of a growing number of national parks campaigners:

Reserving an area as 'National Park' gives it more prestige than a 'Wildlife Reserve' and with the anticipated development of the National Parks concept it is likely that 'National Park' areas will be much better managed in the future than other forms of reserves.

French Island was classified by the National Trust in 1976. It cited industrial development and land subdivisions as the key threats to the island's landscape values.

The Land Conservation Council (LCC) considered these arguments before submitting its final recommendations for the Melbourne Study Area in 1977. It recommended that an area of 7,700 hectares be reserved as the French Island State Park. The park was permanently reserved under the Crown Land (Reserves) Act in June 1982. The park was subsequently included under the schedules of the National Parks Act in 1988, and in 1994, following a review by the LCC, it was finally recommended as a national park.

The enlarged French Island National Park was proclaimed on 4 June 1997. SEC-owned land at Red Bluff (261 ha.) was included in the park in 1997, and land at Heifer Swamp (175 ha.) was added to the park in 1999.

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