

Mundaring Weir Forestry Settlement (or Portagabra)- Fiona Bush

As many of you may know, the Water Corporation want to build a water treatment plant on the DEC site. The development will mean the demolition of the buildings which currently occupy this site. The place, commonly referred to as Portagabra, has been listed on the Shire of Mundaring's Municipal Inventory and is currently being assessed by the National Trust of Australia (WA) for possible inclusion on their List of Classified Places. In 2005 place was assessed by the Heritage Council of Western Australia and the documentation led to the conclusion that the place did not have sufficient merit to be included on the State's Register of Heritage Places. During the December meeting of the Executive Committee I agreed to write an assessment for the National Trust and found that the information presented in the Heritage Council document did not in fact relate the full story of the site. Written below is a précis of the information presented to the National Trust.

European settlement first occurred around the Mundaring Weir in 1882 when Walter Jecks bought land in the area on which he established an orchard. Land sales came to a halt in 1898 when the state government decided to construct a dam on the Helena River to provide water for the eastern goldfields. During the construction of the dam, fears had been held that the Darkan and Helena Rivers would not be able to supply sufficient water to fill the dam. Orders were therefore given to ringbark 20,360 acres of marri and jarrah forest to increase the rainwater runoff into the dam. However, their fears proved groundless as the dam overflowed during the first winter. The Goldfields Water Scheme (GWS) became operational in 1903 with responsibility for the Helena Catchment area vested with this body. However, timber cutters were still allowed to cut in the area, although camping in the catchment area was not permitted. The felling and ring-barking of such an extensive area led to rising salinity levels. By 1909, Mr Reynoldson (Chief Engineer at Mundaring Weir) had become concerned over the rising level as had the Western Australian Government Railway's Chief Mechanical Engineer based at Midland. The Railway engineer commented that if conditions continued to deteriorate then the Railways would have to look elsewhere for their water. It is interesting to note that at this period, whilst the reason for the rising salinity levels were not clearly understood, both engineers urged the GWS authority to encourage the revegetation of trees in the cleared area as this would help reduce salinity levels. The GWS authority pointed out that they were in fact encouraging the regrowth of the forest, but that bush fires had decimated the regrowth.

The Forests Department was created in 1896 and this Department managed timber licenses in Western Australia's forest areas. Charles Lane-Poole, with a forestry degree from the French National Forestry School at Nancy, was appointed Inspector General of Forests in 1916.¹ Following his appointment he toured the forests in the southern portion of the state and realised that Western Australia's forests were being exploited in an ad hoc manner with little concern for sustainability. By 1918 he had drafted the *Forests Act 1918* for the government. The Act was passed in 1919. The Act enabled Lane-Poole to set up State Forests and he divided the south-west into a number of

¹ Dargavel, John, *The Zealous Conservator, a life of Charles Lane-Poole*, UWA Press, Nedlands 2008, p. 9 & 4 - 41.

divisions which were provided with a working plan to ensure that they were managed properly. This management included controlling saw millers and hewers' licenses, silviculture (the marking and management of trees in the district) and the establishment of fire patrols to try to minimise fire damage. The first working plan was prepared for the Helena Catchment Area (later called the Mundaring Working Circle). Four objectives were outlined in this plan:

1. Manage the forests to maintain water quality.
2. Old timber had to be cut out to make way for new trees which could be developed into marketable wood.
3. Fire breaks had to be developed and fire patrols implemented.
4. Roads constructed to assist with fire prevention.

In 1921 - 23, three experimental nurseries were set up around the Weir and planted with a variety of pine species to determine which would be most suitable. Pine was chosen as it was fast growing and would provide the timber industry with good supplies of softwood timber. The first buildings were erected at Mundaring Weir Forestry Settlement for the forestry workers in 1924. Men were employed to plant the trees, manage the plantations, cut out timber and engage in fire management. As the years passed and the operation at Mundaring was enlarged, additional buildings were added to the site. The residences erected at Mundaring were standard Forestry cottages (designed by the Public Works Department) and at times buildings were re-located from other forestry settlements, a common practice of the Forestry Department. By 1932 the first pines were ready for thinning and a saw mill was erected close to the plantation area. However, by 1939 it was decided that it would be more efficient to place the mill close to the forestry settlement and the train line which ran between Mundaring and Mundaring Weir. In 1937 a siding had been constructed near the forestry settlement and named Portagabra after the nearby orchard. The sawmill operated until c.1965 after which logs were transported to Perth by truck.

In 1985, the Forests Department, National Parks Authority and the Wildlife Section of the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife were combined to form the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM). CALM continued to manage Mundaring Weir Forestry Settlement although in 1989 they passed control of the housing to Government Employees Housing Authority. Prior to this many of the cottages at Mundaring Weir Forestry Settlement had been removed from the site as they were no longer required.

The Department of Environment and CALM were merged together to form the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) in July 2006. During 2006 the Water Corporation began a community consultation process to gauge the community's response to the location of a water treatment plant at Mundaring Weir. By the end of 2007 the initial 21 sites had been reduced to 4 sites and in February 2008 Water Corp announced that they had chosen Mundaring Weir Forestry Settlement as the most suitable location for the Water Treatment plant.

A copy of the full National Trust Assessment can be obtained from the office if required.