

Point Ormond

Point Ormond on the Elwood foreshore is a local landmark in the City of Port Phillip. It has a varied and fascinating history. Prior to colonisation the local indigenous population, the Bunurong, used Point Ormond as a site for social gatherings. In 1840 Point Ormond became the unlikely site of St. Kilda's first graveyard and Victoria's first quarantine station. In the early 1860s an abbatoir was built in the vicinity and in the 1890s the point was mined for coal by two remarkable women under the direction of a spirit called 'Pat'. In more recent years Point Ormond has played host to a bicentennial log-fire beacon and its beauty has graced our screens in a number of films.

Point Ormond has a varied and interesting history. A marked geographic feature of Elwood, Point Ormond hill lies just south of the Elwood Canal at Point Ormond Reserve where it rises prominently from the sea to form a lookout over Hobson's Bay. At one time this mound formed a steep and curving headland of red sandstone known as the 'Little Red Bluff'. Over time the crashing waves below eroded away the base and nose of the cliff, forcing it to retreat from the coast. This natural phenomenon was accelerated in the 1890s, by the removal of stone and earth from the base of the cliff. This was used as landfill in the reclamation of the swamplands which once covered much of present day Elwood. In the late nineteenth century the name of the site was changed from the 'Red Bluff' to 'Point Ormond' in honour of Captain Ormond (the father of prominent Melbourne philanthropist Francis Ormond), who visited the Port Phillip district in 1839. The Captain saw great agricultural potential in the land and vowed to return to settle in the area.

Prior to colonisation a large part of Victoria, centering on what is now the city of Melbourne, was owned by the Kulin Nation. The Kulin Nation was a large 'confederacy of peoples'¹ which included the traditional owners of the area we know today as the City of Port Phillip, the Bunurong or Boonerwung group. Archeological evidence suggests that Point Ormond was once a site of communal, social activity for the Bunurong. In 1974 a shell

midden² was uncovered, indicating that it was a campsite of the Bunurong. The reef below the site would have provided ample shellfish and other food, and the hill itself would have made an excellent lookout for the Bunurong, who would have been able to spot game, as well as approaching clans, from its vantage point. In fact, indigenous Australians had an oral tradition which accurately recalled the flooding of what is now the Port Phillip area approximately 9000 years ago at the end of the last Ice Age, when the sea broke in at the Heads of the Bay.

In 1840, only five years after the establishment of Melbourne, Point Ormond became the unlikely site of St. Kilda's first graveyard and Victoria's first quarantine station. When the barque, the *Glen Huntly*³ docked in Hobson's Bay flying the yellow flag indicating there was 'fever' or typhoid on board, the inhabitants of Melbourne feared for their lives. Typhus had recently ravaged Hobart and a number of 'fever' cases had also been reported in Sydney. Superintendent Charles La Trobe, ordered the *Glen Huntly's* Captain Buchanan to cross the Bay and dock his barque off the 'Little Red Bluff' at St. Kilda. Soldiers were immediately sent down to Point Ormond to ensure that no one escaped the quarantine station. Two camps were set up, one 'healthy' and the other 'sick', to prevent further outbreaks among those previously unaffected.

Conditions at the campsites were harsh. In charge of the 'Healthy camp' was Dr. Barry Cotter, who reported that the weather was bitterly cold with occasional showers, and that the camp itself was exposed to the elements.⁴ Even in the 'healthy' camp many immigrants were emaciated and weak as a result of the overcrowded conditions aboard the *Glen Huntly* and the lack of decent provisions and comforts on the ship. It was approximately two months after the *Glen Huntly's* arrival that the last of the immigrants was permitted to leave the quarantine station.

¹ Meyer Eidelson, *Walks in Port Phillip: A Guide to the Cultural Landscapes of a City* (Melbourne: City of Port Phillip, 2001). 28.

² Remains or debris of shellfish and other edibles indicating that campfires had been lit there.

³ There is some confusion regarding the spelling of *Glen Huntly*, as it has also been spelt *Glen Huntley*.

⁴ John Butler Cooper, *The History of St. Kilda: From Its Settlement to a City and after, 1840 to 1930*, vol. I (Melbourne: Printers Proprietary Limited, 1931). 31.

Ten immigrants died during the voyage out from Scotland, and a further three – George Armstrong, James Mathers and John Craig – at the quarantine station on Point Ormond. Their bodies were buried on the cliff at Point Ormond overlooking Hobson's Bay. For years the graves lay untouched, bordered by a picket fence. Unfortunately, the waves below gradually eroded the stone and earth of the cliff face away, threatening to claim the men's remains for the sea. On August 27, 1898 the graves were re-opened and the remains were transported, placed in new coffins and re-interred at St Kilda Cemetery in front of around one hundred onlookers. Present at the ceremony was the Mayor of St. Kilda and descendants of those aboard the *Glen Huntly*, including one Mrs Bowman, the daughter of 'fever' victim John Craig.

Enough money was raised to erect a memorial over the graves of the three fever victims who died in the quarantine camp. In 1990, one hundred and fifty years after the *Glen Huntly's* arrival, descendants of the immigrants met at Point Ormond. A bluestone cairn lies at the bottom of the hill on the reserve to commemorate this event. Glen Huntly road, and the suburb of the same name, commemorate the barque's fatal voyage to Port Phillip.

Following the dramatic events of 1840, Point Ormond figures in local history in various ways. In the early 1860s an abbatoir was built in the vicinity, causing some discomfort for local residents. At the time there was no water service in the area and so the blood from the slaughterhouse drained directly into the Elster Creek and surrounding swamplands. Such a practice polluted the area, creating both a health hazard and a terrible stench for nearby residents.

In the early 1890s two unconventional women, Geraldine Minet and Agnes Simmons, established, under the direction of a spirit entity called 'Pat', 'The Victorian Coal Mining Company' to search for black coal around the shores of Hobson's Bay. Geraldine Minet was the financial and spiritual backbone of the company, claiming to be a clairvoyant in communication with 'Pat' who directed exactly where to drill for the coal. The other, Agnes Simmons, was a local personality who taught swimming at Hegarty's Baths and shared Miss Minet's unwavering faith in 'Pat'. A site opposite the abbatoir at Point Ormond was chosen as the starting point. Drilling commenced on the cliff top, but nothing other than brown

coal and blue clay was discovered. As it turned out ‘Pat’ had deceived them. Both women maintained an all-female farm (no male creatures of any kind were permitted) at Clayton which was left to the Society for the Protection of Animals upon Miss Simmons’ death.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s the Point Ormond reserve was beautified by six hundred and seventy unemployed men through a relief scheme funded by the St. Kilda City Council in conjunction with the State Government.⁵ In the early 1970s local residents fought successfully to keep Point Ormond from what was, in their opinion, inappropriate development – a split level restaurant on the knoll.⁶

It would seem that Point Ormond has always been a popular spot for public gatherings and celebrations. In addition to its long history as a social gathering site for indigenous Australians, it has been the location of numerous settler celebrations. In 1851 celebrations marking the Port Phillip District’s separation from New South Wales and the creation of the Colony of Victoria, were held on the Point. A later commemoration of this event took place there on July 1, 1862. This consisted of a martial display of Victorian troops at the Point in front of approximately 20,000 spectators. The display was a mock battle between an invading Austrian contingent and the Victorian Volunteer Corps, (including a local St Kilda regiment) which was established in 1854 in response to fears of a Russian invasion during the Crimean War.⁷ Point Ormond was once again a site of public festivities in 1988 when numerous log-fire beacons were lit there as part of Australia’s bicentennial celebrations. The spectacular sunsets that grace the Point have attracted the eye of film makers and featured in scenes from *On the Beach* and *A Man of Flowers*.

Further Reading

Cooper, John Butler. *The History of St. Kilda: From Its Settlement to a City and after, 1840 to 1930*. Vol. I. Melbourne: Printers Proprietary Limited, 1931.

Eidelson, Meyer. *Walks in Port Phillip: A Guide to the Cultural Landscapes of a City*. Melbourne: City of Port Phillip, 2001.

⁵ Anne Longmire, *St. Kilda, the Show Goes On: The History of St. Kilda Vol. Iii, 1930 to July 1983* (Hawthorn: Hudson Publishing, 1989).

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

⁷ Cooper., vol. II, p. 12.

Longmire, Anne. *St. Kilda, the Show Goes On: The History of St. Kilda Vol. III, 1930 to July 1983*. Hawthorn: Hudson Publishing, 1989.

Moore, Olive. *Flying the Yellow Flag* Melbourne: The Author, 1990.