

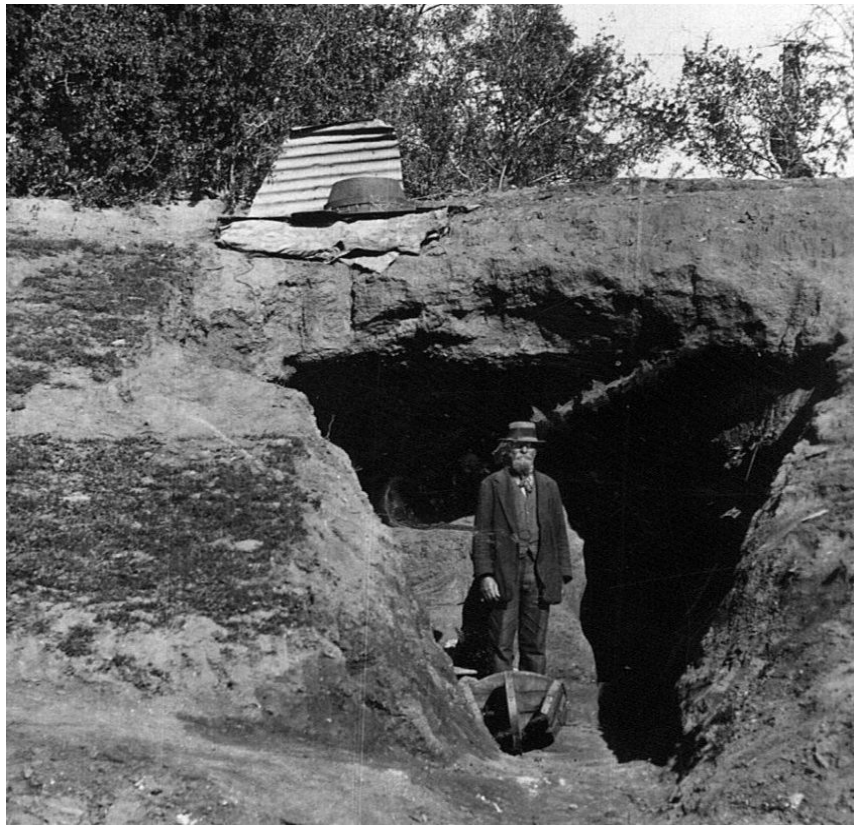
Former Miners' Dugouts
Blyth Street
Kooringa, Burra SA

Contact the Burra Visitor Centre for entrance with a
"Burra Passport Key"

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The Burra History Group Inc.
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MINERS' DUGOUTS BURRA

SOUTH AUSTRALIA



Charlie Grow in front of ruins of a dugout in the 1920s

Miners' Dugouts

The Early Years in Kooringa

In the early years, the rapid influx of miners who emigrated from Cornwall and Wales to the Burra Burra Mine led to a shortage of housing. This was overcome in a rather inventive way by the miners who dug their homes into the soft alluvial banks of the Burra Creek and its tributaries. The first dugout was thought to have been dug by brothers John and Robert Collins in the summer of 1845-46 and when others followed soon after, they proved perfect for the conditions, being close to a source of water and providing shelter from the cold in winter and the heat in the hot summers. Being rent-free and easily constructed, they became a popular way of providing for the burgeoning population. In 1851 about 1800 people out of a total population of 4000 lived in almost 600 of these dugouts that extended along the creek for about 2 miles.

Creek Street

"The Register", the Adelaide newspaper, reported in 1851 *"this creek with its habitation in the banks on both sides forms one of the most singular spectacles ever beheld. The miners have excavated dwellings like rabbit holes, in lines as thickly under the banks of the creek as they could be placed, a foot or two intervening between them, sometimes merely a mud bank as a division wall."*

The so called rabbit burrows being variously constructed, some with mere holes for doors and windows: some with substantial doors and even glazed windows: a few had shingled verandahs and many are whitewashed inside and out, with some papered or carpeted within.

These dwellings were often single roomed with chimneys, formed on the bank top with beer barrels cemented in mud that looked like tree trunks alongside a roadway running along the banks and over the housetops. Many of these creek dwellings which were described as comparatively large, being 10 foot by 10 foot with ceilings up to 8 feet high, were home to as many as three or four families. Some of the dugouts comprised as many as three rooms connected by passageways with walls that had ledges dug into them for storing supplies and crockery. It was also customary to have a secret hiding hole dug into the wall to keep their owner's valuables.

Many of the inhabitants had animals like fowls, pigs and goats housed in pens at their front door.

Practical Jokers

It was reported that practical jokers sometimes removed the chimney barrels leading to unsuspecting passers-by making an unorthodox entry

References

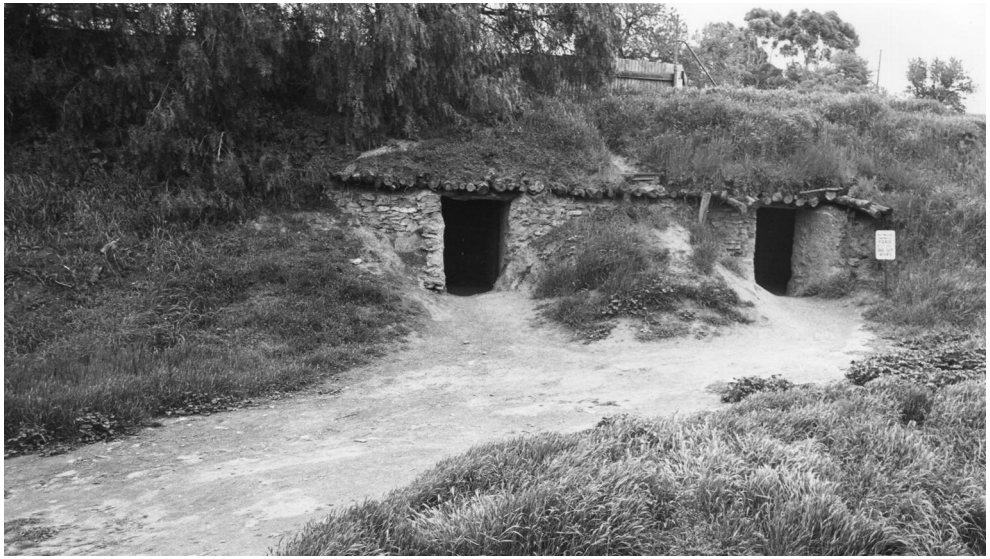
"The Monster Mine" – Ian Auhl
"Burra Creek Dwellers' Dugout Conservation Study"
Austral Archaeology Pty Ltd.
"Whitewash and Red Clay" - Peter Birt, Flinders University



The miners' dugouts sometime after their major renovation in the 1970s.



Burra's Miners' Cottages 1970s
This shows the restoration of the remaining miners' dugouts on a tributary of the Burra Creek alongside Blyth Street that was carried out between 1970 and 1974.



The same dugouts after the restoration and renovations of the 1970s.

into the homes below. Another story described larrikins fishing for a meal by dropping a hooked line down the chimney of one such home.

Fever

As can be imagined the sanitary conditions along the creek rapidly deteriorated with many cases of "fever" (typhus, smallpox and typhoid fever) being reported. As a result the infant mortality rate was unacceptably high, with 153 deaths and 300 births in 1851.

The Flood Hazard

A summer flash flood in February 1850, described the destruction of *'upwards of eighty huts….the furniture floating about in al directions. The water accumulated so quickly that in many instances large sums of money were forgotten to be removed. In one instance a am dived in after his money said to be upwards of £100 and succeeded in recovering it. It was a sad sight to see women and children endeavouring to save their furniture from the flood.'*

In 1851 three major floods devastated "Creek Street" driving the miners from these dugouts to leave them virtually deserted, for a while. In fact, floods were a constant hazard for "the dugout people."

Creek Dwellers

The 1851 census indicates that most of the dugouts were occupied by the families of miners who were Cornish, Welsh or Irish. Other residents included carpenters, masons, shoemakers, saddlers, sawyers, mechanics, builders, clerks and even a doctor. The South Australian Mining Association was reluctant to build sufficient housing for their miners but seemed determined to have miners move out of these creek dwellings. Following the 1851 floods, Sammie issued a directive that in future "Creek Dwellers" would not be employed in the mine. Henry Ayers the Secretary of the Mining Company, also had an agreement with The English and Australian Smelting Company that they would observe the same policy. From this time on, workers would pay the rents set by the mining company or build timber dwellings above ground. Eventually a major flood in 1859 forced the last remaining dugout dwellers from the creek.

Recording this extraordinary sight

On the two occasions, 1847 and 1850, when the artist S.T. Gill was sent to document the Burra Burra Mine, rather remarkably, he left out the details of the dugouts from his paintings of Kooringa.

Rather fortunately, however, in 1850, William Cawthorne did make a drawing of the dugouts, which now hangs in the Mitchell Library, Sydney. This is perhaps the only existing record of the extraordinary sight of so many of the inhabitants of the mining township of Kooringa living in dugouts along the banks of the creek from which the mine and its surrounding townships would ultimately take their name.



W A Cawthorne's sketch of the Burra Creek in 1850.
It shows what was known as 'Creek Street' with its many miners' dwellings dug into the clay banks of the creek. Dotted along the creek banks you can see the dugouts' chimneys made from beer barrels or palings. In the foreground there is also the activity of miners

Preserving the Past

During the Back to Burra celebration in 1925, three remaining dugouts adjacent to Blyth Street were renovated and displayed to the public. The dugout here had survived the flooding that had destroyed most of the other dugouts because they are situated on a tributary of the Burra Creek rather than along the main water course. Since then they have become a regular feature for visitors interested in Burra's history to see.

Eventually after fund raising for the project, these dugouts were completely rebuilt between 1970 and 1974 by the Burra Council and The National Trust as a present day tourist attraction.



This photograph taken during the Back to Burra celebrations in 1925 shows dignitaries Edwin Harris a local businessman on the left with the property owner and local cabby Charles Grow behind and Adolph Lott the local carpenter and businessman on the right, inspecting the renovated dugout adjacent to Blyth Street, Kooringa. And rather significantly, the miner's wheelbarrow that was so much a part of this town's history is seen on the right, having been used in the renovating.