

PHILLIPS RIVER DISTRICT/SHIRE OF RAVENSTHORPE

By Ravensthorpe Historical Society

Photos courtesy of the Ravensthorpe Historical Society collection.

Enormous changes have taken place from 1918 to 2018 in the remote Phillips River District, which became Shire of Ravensthorpe in 1961.

DEMOGRAPHY

By 1918 the population of the Phillips River District had dropped considerably. This was due to the decline in mining, closure of the copper smelter and soon after closure of hotels and banks. 58 local men and boys had enlisted for WWI due to lack of employment or else a desire to fight for their country. Eighteen were never to return - their bones lie buried in the soil of Europe. Post war a few returned to the district. Further unemployment was caused by the closure of the railway in 1935 and closure of the Hopetoun port in 1937. The Great Depression of the 1930s proved there was little to keep families in the area. The Rabbit Plague of the 1940s and 1950s drove farmers and their families off the land, leaving only twelve farms in operation.

WWII ten local men lost their lives. Some ex servicemen returned to the area and returned to their farms and some found employment in mining on a small scale. The short lived salmon fishing industry at the 12 Mile Beach, Hopetoun started 1942 until 1952, was a welcome employment opportunity.

1958 reopening of copper mines and the allocation by the WA State Government of 325 new virgin bush land blocks for farm development brought back life to the depressed district.

2018 government services such as schools, police, health, land care, national parks, local government and community resource centres contribute a large percentage of local employment. With increased farm sizes and large machinery, population on the land has fallen. A recent decision by the Education Department to send year 7 students to high schools has hammered another nail in the coffin as when the eldest child finishes year 6 the whole family moves to a bigger centre. On-line shopping has meant the closure of some shops and reduced selection in others.

Fluctuations of population numbers has played a big role in Ravensthorpe history.

MINING

In 1918 Ravensthorpe gold and copper mining, established 1898, almost closed after WW1. In the years since, active gold, copper and other mineral mining have fluctuated. Often miners and families used to live in tents or corrugated iron dwellings. Exports were taken by rail to Hopetoun port and sold to Britain. Miners dug shafts to reach the ore. Miners and families used to live locally. Miners walked to work for meagre pay, now families mostly live in distant cities and the miner travels by FIFO (fly in fly out) earning large incomes. Today nickel and lithium are extracted

by open cut mines with large machinery and exported through the port of Esperance to China.



Nickle Mine 2009

AGRICULTURE

In 1918 farmers tilled the land by horse and plough. In fact, all farm machinery and implements were horse drawn. Manual labour was the norm. Farmers rose early to feed and harness the horses before commencing on a day's hard slog. Farmers were self sufficient as they grew crops of wheat, oats, barley, chaff for horse feed and all their own fruit and vegetables. Women worked milking cows, making butter, raising calves and orphan lambs, tending poultry, baking bread and aided in

seasonal work like hay making. Farms had mostly stock: horses, cattle, sheep, pigs, poultry as well as crops. Produce was exported by the isolated Hopetoun/Ravensthorpe railway to Hopetoun port until 1935. Grain was in bags which were lumped manually onto the train. Road transport became available and produce was transported by road after 1937 to the railhead at Newdegate and thence to Fremantle.

After the WWI, returned servicemen were offered farmland to help them re-adjust to normal life and to make a living for themselves and their families.

In the 1930s the European bee had found its way to Ravensthorpe. The Shire of Ravensthorpe is still two thirds natural bush. This enables bees to collect nectar all year round. This is now quite a substantial industry, but mostly by absentee beekeepers.

Since 1918 agriculture has experienced unimaginable advances. 1918 many farms were about 25 hectares, whereas today farms can vary roughly from around 1,000 hectares up to 10,000 hectares.

Today many farms carry no animals. Crops are the order of the day with canola, wheat, barley, oats, lupins and peas. Machines are large, and many are computerised. Ploughing has been replaced by no-till. Cultivation has been replaced by use of chemicals to kill weeds. Harvest is transported on sealed roads by road trains carrying 70 tonnes per load to Esperance port for export. Fine Merino wool no longer occupies the mainstay of the land like it once did. Now those graziers who kept their sheep are reaping the rewards of the highest prices ever. Beef cattle and meat sheep, however, are in great demand and fetching very good prices. The Shire of Ravensthorpe is sustained by agriculture.



Headers



Horses harvesting
TRANSPORT

1918 the only means of transport of goods and people was still mainly by riding a horse, horse drawn wooden carts and wagons and the train which ran between Ravensthorpe and Hopetoun. From there goods and passengers went by steam ship to other ports.

This changed when the railway closed in 1935 and the Hopetoun port closed in 1937. By this time mechanised vehicles were in common use. A weekly rail road bus service to and from Perth commenced in 1950. After the railway from Perth reached Newdegate in 1925 passengers and goods were transported by primitive dirt road to and from the Newdegate railhead.

When the copper mines reopened in 1958 the boggy sandy track to Esperance was upgraded to a narrow-sealed road to enable trucks to haul copper ore to the port.

Aerial transport arrived at Ravensthorpe when Dr Hanrahan from Albany commenced three-weekly visits in his Tiger Moth and landed on the former racecourse. Later RFDS flights used this point to land until a landing strip was formed in 1967 on Aerodrome Road. There was a big step forward in 2004 when the 1400 metre airport runway was opened on the Ravensthorpe Hopetoun Road to service BHP Billiton nickel mine at Bandalup Hill. These serviced hundreds of FIFO workers. Seats were available for local residents. Currently the mine is in care and maintenance, but the airport is used by RFDS and Galaxy lithium mine workers and charter planes. The small airstrip at Hopetoun is used by the local aero club. Since 1935 there is no railway servicing in the area. All goods, mail and passengers are transported by road. All main roads are sealed and good gravel roads service the farms.



Jetty with ship transport



Transport 2018

COMMUNICATIONS

In 1918 passengers, goods and mail arrived by ship at the port of Hopetoun. This was virtually the only contact with the outside world. As shipping became less frequent in 1923 a private contractor took and brought mail by road from Lake Grace in a car and trailer once a fortnight. Local writings record that goats roamed the main street and ate the notices on the post office notice board! And in 1950 when the first rail road bus commenced service it had the mail contract to and from Perth. Manual telephones were replaced by STD access telephones in 1976.

Today the post office is operated by an in-store agency. Introduction of two-way radios in the 1970s, especially for bush fire fighting, was invaluable. Now mobile phones, computers, internet, iPhones, apps, EFT, on-line shopping and Facebook are used.

HEALTH SERVICES

There was no doctor in the area in 1918. The small hospital at Ravensthorpe was staffed with sometimes only one nurse who treated all complaints and injuries. She not only dealt with patients but also cooked meals for inpatients and did the cleaning. There were always midwives around the district who delivered babies.

Serious illnesses or injuries, where possible, were taken by ship to Albany or Adelaide for treatment. The hospital closed in 1937 and reopened in 1958 when copper mining resumed. Again, nurses treated patients with sporadic visits from doctors. With the introduction of a gravel road patients were transferred to Lake Grace hospital by the newly established volunteer St John ambulance service. Ravensthorpe enjoyed the luxury of a full time resident doctor in 1976 which has been continued ever since with sometimes a husband and wife team. Critically ill patients are transferred to Perth by RFDS for treatment.

Ravensthorpe has visiting specialists in speech therapy, physiotherapy, podiatry, dieticians and a Telehealth service. There are four beds for elderly full-time care patients.



TECHNOLOGY

Technology for gold and other mineral excavation has improved out of all recognition. No longer does a prospector manually dig a shaft in the hope of becoming rich. International companies mechanically bore to ascertain the depth, amount of product and access the viability of the find for development. Mining mechanization has taken over on a large scale from manual labour. Haul packs have

replaced wheelbarrows and horse-drawn carts. The same can be said of farming which now mostly operates on a grand scale. Drones are a great novelty.

Electricity came into being in this area 1932 when a local shopkeeper generated limited power for the hospital, the main street and some homes. When the Elverdton copper mine reopened and generated power it supplied Ravensthorpe town 12 kms away. SEC (State Electricity Commission) took over power supply to Ravensthorpe in 1983. It is now supplied by Synergy. A Horizon power house at Hopetoun supplies electricity to the town and surrounding farms – 40% generated from two wind turbines. Some homes in the district have solar power.

EDUCATION

Early in the 20th century primary schools were established at Ravensthorpe, Hopetoun, Kundip, Desmond and the Chambers Farm School. By 1918 following the closure of the mines Ravensthorpe School was the only one remaining. In the 1960s local land development boom new primary schools were established at Munglinup, Jerdacuttup, Fitzgerald and North Ravensthorpe. School buses delivered students to school. In 1971 Ravensthorpe School was promoted to Junior High School status. It is currently Ravensthorpe District School. This time a fall in farm population North Ravensthorpe and Fitzgerald schools have closed with enrolments at the remaining Munglinup and Jerdacuttup schools being dangerously low.

Once again due to mining when BHP Billiton commenced building their Nickel Processing Plant at Bandalup Hill a new primary school was opened in Hopetoun in 2004 where local miners were encouraged to live. Students over primary school age are bussed to Ravensthorpe. With so many outside influences affecting population growth it is difficult to believe there will ever be a local Senior High School. Not least of all the Education Department must take some blame. Senior High School students live away from home to attend senior high schools or private schools in Perth, or else as previously mentioned the whole family moves away. Despite the drawbacks it is surprising how many former students have graduated at university to be highly qualified and prominent members of society.

SOCIAL LIFE

Social life throughout the district has always been remarkably good. Agricultural shows, drama groups, choirs, brass bands, fetes, horse races, sports, church activities, group picnics, concerts and summer camps at the beach (when people took their cows, hens and other supplies with them) have all played a part to make life. In the days of being remote, and virtually isolated, before the times of phones, televisions, good roads, fast reliable cars, residents made their own fun. Now they are inclined to visit the big smoke for modern upbeat concerts and support State and International sport.



Paperbark House Hopetoun 1957



2018 Home

TOURISM

In 1918 it is difficult to think Ravensthorpe could know what tourism meant. In 2018 the Ravensthorpe area enjoys the company of many visitors from interstate and overseas.

What is Ravensthorpe's claim to fame?

Ravensthorpe's claim to fame is the natural environment exhibited at the annual wildflower show which displays around 700 different flower varieties at the two-week show in September. Not to forget the unique Fitzgerald River National Park and Biosphere with its varied geology and fabulous coastline of pristine white beaches, spectacular rocky headlands, valleys, rugged hills, mountain ranges inlets and rivers. All these attract visitors to this area.

EXCURSION

Ravensthorpe has Kukanerup Reconciliation Memorial established three years ago to recognise the differences between the Noongar people and early white settlers in the 19th century. This is in the bush (although close to the highway) and provides a moving experience.



Fitzgerald National Park



Fitzgerald National Park