

PEEL-HARVEY

The Decline and Rescue of an Ecosystem

Excerpt from book by Keith Bradby
1997

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Early Settlement in the Peel-Harvey

In December 1829, the first 169 settlers tied to Thomas Peel arrived at Clarence (north of Rockingham). Within six months the number had grown to over 400, ensuring Peel's eligibility for a grant of 250,000 acres. The excerpts below, from Chapter 2: 'Claimed and Tamed: The process of European settlement', pp.24-27 and 31, take up the story.

'In February 1830, Peel used the brig *Industry* to sail down to 'the Murray'... shortly afterwards he sent a small group to establish a settlement in the area. By mid-1830, 12 men and a family of seven were settled at Peeltown (which became Mandurah).'

'But by this stage, Peel's grand plans were dissolving around him. Within six months, his settlers and indentured labourers were facing genuine hardship. Twenty-nine had died within the first few months of the makeshift Clarence settlement, and some returned to England or moved on to other colonies.'

'Peel retained a small workforce of around 20 at Peeltown, and a military post of 15 soldiers had been established there by October 1830.'

'There was an initial flurry of speculation in the area... but then the push for expansion southward faltered, and little, if any, of the land allocated was occupied or farmed until at least 1835. In the interim, large numbers of

stray cattle were reported to have found their way to the rich soils of the proposed Pinjarra townsite.'

'Peel and the other settlers established their camps and farms close to major Nyungar camping and foraging areas, thus disrupting a well-established system of food gathering. As Captain Fremantle noted in 1832: "We take possession of their country, occupy the most fertile parts, where they are in the habit of resorting to for nourishment, destroy their fishing and kangaroo, and almost drive them to starvation ..."

'Friction between the two cultures steadily increased and led to inevitable skirmishing. The Nyungars' initial wariness and caution of the settlers was soon replaced by contempt as the newcomers disrupted their traditional lifestyles... armed conflict between white and black became more common.'

Fatalities on both sides and ongoing hostilities, combined with the settler perception that conflict was impeding settlement, culminated in a tragic event at Pinjarra on 28 October 1834: 'Before dawn the next morning, the [military] party was saddled and under way, and they reached the Murray at Pinjarra as the morning mists cleared. A Nyungar camp of 60 to 70 – men, women and children – was there.

The mounted and armed Europeans attacked, and in the next 90 minutes it is estimated that between 30 and 40 Nyungars were killed, with "very few wounded being suffered to escape".'

'Settlement spread slowly. While cattle grazed far and wide, by the late 1880s settlement was confined to small islands of farms in a sea of bush. From the scattered homesteads on the Serpentine, it was a long way south through the bush to the next settlement at Pinjarra. Most of this country was sandy, with only a few fertile areas on the North Dandalup River, which were selected by William Pollard ('Mundup' is still held by the Pollard family) ... South of the Murray, the only areas taken up were on Logues Brook at Cookernup, and in the Harvey district.'



The only known likeness of Thomas Peel taken in part from an 1829 caricature by T McLean in the WA Art Gallery, published from Ronald Richards 'Murray and Mandurah'. Courtesy Mandurah Community Museum.

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Chronology

Jan 1830: Thomas Peel granted 250,000 acres, extending from Cockburn Sound to the Murray River and inland to the Darling Scarp.

Jan 1831: 20,000 acres allocated to Captain R.G. Meares, one of the first to apply for land on the Murray River after Peel received his portion.

March 1835: A formal truce between the settlers and both the Murray and the Swan Nyungars was agreed to at a ceremony held at Perth.

1993: "People that lived here had a vision for the future, even though they did not at times fully understand the dynamics of the change that they helped engineer", Ronald Richards, Author 'The Murray District of Western Australia: A History', when referring to the early settlers in Murray and Mandurah.