

# SERPENTINE

By Serpentine Historical Society.

<http://www.serpentinevalley.com.au/community-directory/residents-progress-associations/serpentine-historical-society-inc>

Serpentine includes the locality and town of Serpentine plus localities of Hopeland, Keysbrook and Mardella.

Up until the end of World War 1 Serpentine was an area of mostly very small mixed farms (cattle, sheep, pigs and fruit) an exception was 'Lowlands', farmed by the Richardson family and at approx. 6400ha produced beef, wool and horses for commercial work. The farm was originally Thomas Peel's 'Serpentine Farm' in the locality of Mardella, he had settled there in 1840. Serpentine was settled in 1849 where the South Western Highway crosses the Serpentine River. A school was built there in 1858, the brick school building at the site was built in 1902 and was in use until 1954. At various times the School, Turner Cottage (1856) and Baldwin Cottage (1856) were stop overs for Cobb & Co. coaches (1880-1893). When the railway from Perth to Bunbury was completed in 1893 the town of Serpentine was gazetted beside the railway. Twenty-five servicemen from the area served in the Australian Forces and ten died while serving our country.

Big changes commenced in 1920 when the Group Settlement Scheme was established by the WA Government to open up land for farming (mostly dairy) by WW1 returned servicemen, UK immigrants and out of work miners. Approximately 150 farms of about 45ha each were allocated in 8 groups west of Serpentine, included all the Hopeland locality. Unfortunately, state-wide the Scheme was a social and financial failure due to most farmers having no experience, poor soil, not enough land in their allocation and being unable make enough money to live let alone make mortgage payments. An added local problem was that the land was so wet in winter that a system of drains had to be built to remove surface water from the land. Many farmers left. Over time those who survived bought neighbouring farms and with fertilizers, improved pastures and by developing farming methods to suit the area the farmers began to progress. When the 1930 depression arrived, the farmers were already having difficulty selling their milk, but they were resourceful and banded together and established a successful cheese factory. A large area of land at Keysbrook was sold for farming and the bigger purchases were to the Elliott's from a Goldfields pastoral station and the Kentish and Henderson families who had been farming in South Australia. The women on the group settlements had the difficult task of feeding the family by growing vegetables, keeping chickens for their eggs and often using rabbit or kangaroo meat. In town the 1920s saw the establishment of two general stores, tearoom, butchers shop and a garage. The Race Club had regular meetings with a train bringing people from Perth, the Depression saw the end of the Club in 1934. At the weekends hundreds of cars and a train on special occasions would bring people to Serpentine to visit the Serpentine Falls. The late 1930s saw the founding of branches of the Country Women's Association and the Australian Red Cross and a group at Mardella called the Mardella Ladies Club. The women in the area became involved in the social welfare of the community and

particularly befriending and helping other women who had suffered the stress of living through the depression.

World War 2 was a difficult time for the community, rationing meant that farmers had problems in purchasing sufficient petrol, building materials, farm equipment, spare parts and there was also a shortage of farm labour. The women were also faced with the difficulty of rationed food, clothing and many household items. Quite a few products were unavailable. There was a good feeling in the community as people shared and helped one another. In the summer of 1940/41 the river stopped flowing for the first time since 1914 and in the winter of 1945, there was an extreme flood and the river broke its banks and flooded most of the farm land to the north of the river. The rabbits were in plague proportions and remained so until the Myxoma virus was introduced in 1951. The Serpentine branch of the Red Cross was very active in raising funds to assist servicemen fighting overseas they also remained active into the 1950s to assist in helping the huge number of refugees in Europe. A Junior Red Cross was also active at the school. Five servicemen from the area died while on war service.

After the war the Serpentine district thrived, Whitakers Timber Co. built a mill and began milling in 1946 and remained in Serpentine until they moved to Welshpool in 1964. They had staff of about twenty men and quite a few men had young families and they moved into the company houses. Along with the 'baby boom' after the war it was not long before a new school was required. In August 1954 the children packed up their books etc. and marched from the school on the South Western Hwy. to the new school in town. Socially there were new sporting clubs, Junior Farmers Club, Guides/Scouts, St John Ambulance and the Serpentine Agricultural Show. Dances, concerts and movies were held at the Soldiers Memorial Hall. In 1964 the Pony club was formed, and it is now a large and successful equestrian centre which also caters for a lot of people from other areas. Polocrosse has also become a popular sport in the area and their playing fields adjoin the Pony club. There is also a private polo business operating at Serpentine (Kidogo Polo). The 1990s saw the establishment of a Police & Citizens Youth Club and The Hugh Manning Tractor Museum.

In 1951 the Cheese Factory closed. The dairy industry had a milk quota system and local farmers had a guaranteed income supplying milk to metropolitan Perth. In the 1950s the Milk Board of WA required farmers to upgrade their dairies to an improved health standard. Some farmers found it was not financially viable and began farming beef cattle. In the latter half of the 1900s dairy farms have gradually disappeared, some bought by neighbours needing more land, others as piggeries, poultry for meat and eggs, life style blocks and closer to town sub divided into large household blocks. The dairy industry has moved to better suited areas in the lower South West. There are only four dairies left in the area supplying Mundella Cheese in Mardella and cheese factories in Byford and Armadale. There had always been a small horse industry in the area but in the 2000s urbanisation has pushed the horse industry into the Serpentine area with horse studs, horse training and agistment of horses now being a major industry.

In the 1960s there were developments in the hills of Serpentine when the Serpentine Dam was completed in 1961 and 1963 when the Karnet Rehabilitation Centre was completed. The water from the dam is used for the metropolitan water supply. The

dam overflowed at the spillway in 1964 which is hard to believe if you visit the dam today. Since the early 1970s the annual rainfall has steadily decreased. The Karnet Centre is a farm worked by the prisoners and provides some of the food used in the WA Department of Corrective Services prisons.

### **The 100 years between 1918 and 2018.**

The Group Settlement Scheme brought people to the area and the establishment of 100 dairy farms, then to see them gradually disappear to only 4 in 2018.

The establishment of horse and beef industries in the area should give the area a good future. A large portion of 'Lowlands Farm' returned to the WA Government to be retained as Bush Forever. The building of the dam and the effect it has had on the river flow which has been rectified to some extent by the Water Supply releasing an environmental flow during the summer/autumn months. The witnessing of the close-knit community during WW2 and the years after the war.

The change in the community where the team sports are centred at Byford and Mundijong. Serpentine has lost most of the clubs established in the 1950s and others are struggling to exist.

The Old Bridge School on the South Western Hwy is available for tours and is set out as it was in the 1950s. Neil Coy, the author of the book 'The Serpentine' has produced a history timeline and a large area map on the interior wall which indicates the early settlements and Group Settlements. There are 4 plaques with photos from the past in Wellard Street at the corners outside the Hotel and the corners at Maxwell Street. Further down Wellard Street is the Tractor Museum. There are walk trails from the Serpentine Falls car park through to Jarrahdale and up to Baldwin's Bluff.

If you would like to arrange a visit to Serpentine and I suggest a day trip to include Jarrahdale.