

THE OLD GUM TREE

Dieuwke Jessop

There was controversy surrounding the site and the tree virtually from early on. In 1855 when Glenelg was proclaimed a municipality, George Stevenson, his wife and daughter Margaret were holidaying at the Glenelg Inn. Osmond Gilles who was at that time residing in Glenelg accompanied the family party in search of the historic tree under which the pioneers had assembled 19 years previously to hear Stevenson read the Proclamation. Their search led them to a tree of which the trunk was singularly bent. Margaret, who became Mrs de Mole, wrote in later years ' there was no mistaking the tree, at that time it was a beautiful object...Blown over in its youth, the top of the tree struck the ground and was forced into an arch about 14 – 15 ft high (de Mole, Margaret: Letter in the Register May 9, 1914).

They were so convinced that they had identified the right site and tree that John Hector, owner of the land, transferred as a gift to the town of Glenelg that allotment of 62 ft square with the tree thereon, with the memorial of the transfer, dated December 28, 1857, South Australia's 21st birthday. The Corporation increased the land by purchase to 64ft by 114ft. The site was further enlarged in 1957 when Council bought the adjoining land for £800 assisted by a SA Government Tourist Bureau grant of £400.

The guns at the reserve are off the Buffalo and as far as we know were last fired at the 21st birthday celebrations in 1857.

Mary Thomas discounted the tree's authenticity. She had resided close to the historic site from November 1836 until June the next year with her children and claimed that her children had often played beneath the old bent tree, calling it Temple Bar. Moreover she believed it to be a considerable distance from the spot where the colony was first proclaimed. . Instead she recalls a magnificent tree providing ample shade for the banquet she had attended. [(Mary Thomas Diaries and letters). Dulcie Perry *The Place of Waters*.]

SA Register Dec 29 1857 –

The venerable relic in question stands about a quarter of a mile from the beach, and is remarkable from having become so bent that the top of the trunk touches the ground, so that it forms a complete arch about 12 feet high along which here and there are signs of vegetation.'

Register 29 December 1894

We landed at Glenelg for the first time December 28 1836, on which day about noon Captain Hindmarsh read the proclamation beneath the old tree at Glenelg.....It is a pity that the chronicler of the past, when making that now historical entry in her diary, did not distinguish 'the old tree' at Glenelg by the epithet 'crooked' or 'straight' – she would have prevented a controversy. There must have been many old trees at Glenelg then, as there are now old colonists who unfortunately do not identify this particular one – they are all dubious.

The Advertiser December 31 1895

It is a curious fact that as the years come and go ...thinning the ranks of the original pioneers, the list of those who saw the ceremony which has conferred on Glenelg an honor no other watering place has ever had...annually increases, and the doubt as to the identity of the old gum tree continues to grow.

Mark Twain 'As I approached it seemed bent with age and possibly with discouragement and despair; but as I came nearer, I saw a perfect arch- a symbol of strength and perpetuity'. So happy a metaphor should silence the murmur of a dozen sceptics.

The doubt remains, but does it matter? No one will argue that the heritage listed tree (albeit now dead and incorporating large amounts of concrete) has taken on a life (maybe not the correct word to use in this case) of its own. It has become an icon and a symbol for the event that took place on 28 December 1836 – the public ceremony marking the founding of what became the State of South Australia. It's almost as though as the tree grew less and the concrete more, our veneration for the object increased accordingly. We needed an identity icon and now have our identity icon. With this symbol, we can put our hands across our hearts and say 'We are South Australians'!

The bent tree also became the symbol for Glenelg and featured on the original Corporate Seal. It's the most frequently used image on souvenirs. Holdfast Bay has in its collection a Bossley ware commemoration plate made for the Centenary celebrations of 1936, showing the tree and also a jigsaw puzzle produced by the Savings Bank of South Australia. Copies of the tree are made to put on floats and were incorporated into the reenactments of 1936 and 1986 (albeit that the copy was installed on the beach).

The tree over the years also suffered quite a bit of people damage. . As far as I know, the State Library still has a leaf off it in its collection, which was donated as part of the Voules Brown family papers. William Voules Brown collected this leaf, when he and his family had camped near it after landing off the Coromandel 12 January 1837. A descendant of William Voules Brown works as a volunteer at the Holdfast Bay History Centre. Early Council was not above taking bits off the old tree either. In 1895, Mt Gambier Museum obtained a piece for their collection from the Town Clerk Mr Bickford, after formally asking Glenelg Council for a piece. This practice was later stopped. How many bits were souvenired by the public in general we will never know. Early photos show people sitting and standing on the tree. It is still a popular backdrop for wedding photos.

There have been various attempts at preserving the tree. These range from an early Council attempt of pouring cement around its base to stop it from collapsing, to iron rods bolted into the arch to prop it up (the bolts in the tree are still there) and according to the official Council history of Glenelg 'Historic Glenelg' the rotted shell of the Old Gum tree was remodelled in cement and plastic in 1963. Bark obtained from a similar red gum tree was used to match the new bark with the old. This exercise enabled the struts to be removed and

allowed the tree to once again stand alone. Artlab had another go, I think in 1988, when the canopy was also installed. On looking at it recently, it has the appearance of driftwood with blended cement. I think it is going to need some more conservation work in the near future as some of the capping bits seemed to have come away exposing the rotted timber below.

There are 3 healthy looking gums on the site (I think red gums) that have larger diameter trunks than what remains of the old gum tree and could be of the same vintage and are probably the same species.

Someone suggested that we find out if they are indeed the same, and if so, gather seeds, plant them in pots, bend them over when they get to the right age (a bit like bonsai) and plant them out at the main entrances to the City of Holdfast Bay as a gateway statement. Council could even sell potted versions and make them pay for the maintenance of Gum Tree Reserve and the conservation of the Old Gum Tree. They might even compete with the Wollomi pine in plant collectibles.