Coromandel Valley and Districts Branch

GOVERNMENT EXPERIMENTAL ORCHARD

Corner Turners Avenue and Main Road – Hawthorndene

Orchard Manager's Office Building; *Photograph 2012 by Jenny Skinner*

Background

The Government Experimental Orchard (also known as Blackwood Experimental Orchard) operated from 1908 until 1960's.
The 1-roomed Office Building is the only building still remaining on the property but physical evidence of this Experimental Orchard's rich history is also present in the stone-lined drains, dry stone walling and remnant fruit trees on the site.
The property was named **Blackwood Forest Reserve Recreational Park** in Nov 2001 and is now permanent open space under the management of the **National Parks and Wildlife Service**.
Community carers are volunteers of **Friends of Blackwood Forest.**

A Brief History

Purchased in 1908 from local landowner George Frederick Dall, the 52.5acre/ 20.8 ha Government Experimental Orchard (also known as Blackwood Experimental Orchard) played a crucial role in the development of horticulture in SA, the orchard was the main research facility serving orchardists in the cool temperature production areas of the state. The facility played a pivotal role in the development and introduction of new technologies within the horticultural industry, both in South Australia and Nationally..

Thomas Playford Snr, an Orchardist, market gardener, former Premier of SA and Agent General of SA in London from 1894-98, had varietal fruit trees sent back to Adelaide's Hackney Experimental and Demonstration Orchard. Situated on Hackney Rd, near the Botanic Gardens, the site proved to be too small and so a Type Orchard was established at

Mylor. As this site had problems of poor drainage and frosty winters, land at Blackwood was acquired in 1908.

Before mechanisation, clearance and cultivation was carried out using 2 and 4-horse teams and also 8-bullock teams.

The course of the ephemeral east-west creek was realigned to provide more arable area and the new watercourse lined with stones removed in that process.

By 1909, a significant portion of the land had been cleared using oxen teams. Fruit trees – sourced from named scion material from nurseries locally, interstate and overseas – had been planted. By 1927 there were over 4,100 distinct varieties of fruit trees planted here including:

Almonds 46, Apples 1,624, Apricots 115, Citrus 112, Cherries 218, Figs 137, Filberts & Cob nuts (Hazelnuts) 30, Loquats 17, Nectarines 80, Olives 4, and Peaches 362, Pears 893, Persimmons 43, Plums 379, Quinces 42, and Walnuts 12.

The trees were initially watered using 2 wells established on the property – one equipped with a pump and 5,000 gallon tank. In 1934 a new bore was sunk and equipped with a pump to give up to 1,500 gallons per hour for irrigation.

They also held collections of strawberries, gooseberries, currant and raspberries.

This was considered to be the largest collection of varietal fruit trees planted in one place anywhere in the world.

Comprehensive records were kept for each tree detailing flowering times, fruit yields and quality. Records were also kept in regard to pest sprays, manure and fertilizer trials, tillage and cover crop trials. The Blackwood Experimental Orchard was a major source of named budwood scions supplied to commercial nurseries.

The Orchard was revamped in the 1940's and many of the fruit trees were ripped out. The focus of operations changed to conducting trials on 20-30 varieties of apples and pears – the main commercial crops in the area. Because of erosion issues, the new plantings were established using the 'contour method' – believed to have been the first time that this method was used commercially in SA.

In the 1950's the focus again changed to experimenting on replanting, irrigation, cold storage, disease control and fruit handling.

In the most active times there were 3 technical staff and 8 orchard hands, many being from local families. Their roles in the orchard reflected across the wider community where fruit and vegetable growing was a major source of income. Many of today's residents are unaware of the importance of this quiet activity that had a major influence in our State and nationally.

In 1965 operations began transferring to Lenswood because that area was more suited to the growing of apples, in particular. Housing was replacing many commercial orchards in Coromandel Valley and by 1967 the Government Experimental Orchard had left the valley.

In 1968 the land was returned to The Crown and there were plans for use as housing allotments. Thankfully, major action by the community saw a significant change as the area became protected for open space community use, as it now remains.

Buildings.

Office Building, (pictured on front page) built in 1909 from local stone by John Weymouth II. This one-roomed building always served as an office and is the only building remaining on the property.

Sheds. Until demolished in 1997, the area north along Minno Creek contained galvanised iron sheds used for the storage of equipment, chemicals, machinery and as work areas; stone

stables (for the plough horses); a cold storage facility (built in 1953 and thought to be one of the earliest in the state); glass houses and quarantine facilities for the importation of plant materials (built in 1957).
Manager's House. Built in 1911 by John Weymouth II from local stone and situated at the end of Devonshire Rd. This louvre-roofed villa of 6 main rooms + cellar had been vacant for many years before being damaged by fire and demolished in 2009.

Managers over the years.

Mr Clarence G Savage	- appointed 1st Manager – Aug 1917
Mr Rodney Fowler	- April 1918 - Nov 1941
Mr Edward (Ted) Leishman	- Nov 1941 - July 1948
Mr John B Harris	- Sept 1948 - 1954
Mr Robert (Bob) W Cowley	- 1954 – closure

Story text by **Friends of Blackwood Forest**.

If you would like more information visit Web sites:
www.pir.sa.gov.au/ag.history/agriculture/blackwood experimental orchard

www.communitywebs.org/friendsofblackwoodforest/links