

Collins Settlement Historic Site, Sorrento

1803 - First European settlement in Victoria

Lieutenant-Colonel David Collins established the first official European settlement in Victoria in 1803 at Sullivan Bay, 1km east of Sorrento Township. Previously under private ownership, the State Government and public donations acquired a small part of this historic site in 1982.

The 1 hectare reserve contains 4 old graves, outdoor information panels and lookouts over Port Phillip Bay. The Leggetts Way entrance gives access to the reserve on the Eastern Sister headland, which is open everyday between sunrise and sunset. (Melway map 157 G10)

The background

At the beginning of the 1800s, the British government decided to establish a settlement at Port Phillip.

There were several possible reasons for this including:

- to forestall French occupation of the southern coastline of the Australian continent, which was regarded as part of the British Empire
- to establish another centre of population in the vast, empty continent, particularly for convicts
- to set up a base for a future fishing industry in Bass Strait, known to be a rich source of seals and whales

The new settlers

Lieutenant-Colonel David Collins of the Royal Marines was appointed to be Lieutenant-Governor in command of the Port Phillip expedition, which comprised civil officers, 301 convicts, a contingent of marines, free settlers, wives and children.

They sailed from Portsmouth England in April 1803 in two ships. HMS *Calcutta* was a Royal Navy vessel of 1200 tons carrying 50 guns under Captain Daniel Woodriff.

The *Ocean* was a merchant vessel of only 481 tons commanded by Captain John Mertho. It carried the civil officials, free settlers and most of the stores for the new colony.



HMS Calcutta at Sullivan Bay in 1803
Painting by Commodore Dacre-Smyth

Victoria's first town in the making

Soon after arriving in Port Phillip in early October, Collins chose Sullivan Bay for the settlement, although fresh water was very scarce.

Deputy Surveyor George Harris, who accompanied Collins, sketched the layout of the settlement. The 1803 sketches show tents and huts of the governor, chaplain, mineralogist, surveyor and two other people. They were situated on the Eastern Sister and formed the administrative centre, which was identified by a flagstaff.

The sketches also show some settlers' huts that stood a short distance inland from the site, the commissary (store) and accommodation for the marine officers. The convicts occupied



Further Information

Parks Victoria
Information line
Ph. 13 1963
www.parkweb.vic.gov.au

Parks Victoria District Office
P.O. Box 400
ROSEBUD 3939
Ph. 5986 9100

Peninsula Visitor
Information Centre
Point Nepean Road
DROMANA
Ph. 5987 3078

Nepean Historical Society
Museum
Melbourne Road
SORRENTO 3943
P.O. Box 139
SORRENTO 3943
nepean@satlink.com.au

Friends of Collins
Settlement Sorrento Inc.
www.collinssettlement.org.au

2003 Bicentenary
Committee
www.2003.org.au

Caring for the environment

Help us look after this reserve by remembering these guidelines:

Take your rubbish home with you

All native plants and animals are protected

Do not walk or climb on cliffs

Leave the reserve as you find it

Do not disturb or remove material or items on or below the ground

the flat area behind Sullivan Bay, while the surgeons camped next to the hospital at the foot of the Western Sister, then called Church Top or Church Hill.

Aborigines

For centuries before the arrival of Collins, Boon wurung (Bunerong) people had used the site on a seasonal basis for collecting and cooking shellfish. Shell middens on the cliff tops contain evidence of their activities. Descendants of the Boon wurung (Bunerong) still live on the Mornington Peninsula.

The decision to leave

Shortly after arriving, a party led by James Tuckey was despatched to explore Port Phillip Bay. It reported that the land was poor and there was little fresh water. Explorers failed to find the Yarra River.

Collins decided to abandon the Sullivan Bay site and move to the more promising Van Diemen's Land. The ships *Ocean* and *Lady Nelson* left Sullivan Bay for Hobart with most of the convicts and settlers and about half the marines and civil officials on 30 January 1804. The remaining settlers at the site stayed until 20 May, when they too left for Van Diemen's Land in the *Ocean* – except for the escaped convict William Buckley. He lived with the Aborigines for more than 30 years.

At Hobart Town, Collins served as Lieutenant-Governor until his death in March 1810.

Why Sullivan Bay is important

The area is significant to the aboriginal people. It is also the first attempt to settle Europeans permanently in what is now Victoria. John Pascoe Fawkner, a founder of Melbourne, was at Sullivan Bay with his mother and convict father in 1803.

Because of its temporary nature and the passing of two centuries, little physical evidence of the settlement has survived. However it is rich in written

records including many first hand accounts of life at the settlement. Records show 30 people died between October 1803 and May 1804 although only four graves at the Eastern Sister are known.

Managing for the future

In 1875, the Victorian Government established a small reserve to protect the graves, and this now forms part of the Historic Site. Another small picnic area abutting Sullivan Bay and opposite Westmore Avenue is the site of the western end of the settlement's parade ground.

Following a public appeal, the State Government acquired part of the settlement site on the Eastern Sister in 1982, and it is now managed by Parks Victoria with community input via Collins Settlement Historic Site Advisory Group. During the last 20 years, access has been improved, landscaping work carried out, and the indigenous vegetation of the area is being restored with the help of the Friends of Collins Settlement Sorrento.

A Future Directions Management Plan is currently being prepared by Parks Victoria and Mornington Peninsula Shire Council. This plan will guide the future use of the total settlement site which encompasses 2km of coastline on Port Phillip Bay. The area is registered on the National Estate and has a Heritage Overlay of the local Planning Scheme. In May 2002, a coastal risk audit identified the Eastern Sister cliff as unstable consequently the Collins Site Display Centre was closed and will be removed before October 2003. The Eastern Sister will then be stabilised, landscaped and appropriate interpretation signage installed.

A variety of information is available including recently published books that are available from the Friends of Collins Settlement Sorrento Inc, Nepean Historical Society or the internet.

There are no public toilets.

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