

CORANDERRK A STATION NEVER A MI

**CORANDERRK
ABORIGINAL STATION
IS SOMETIMES CALLED
A MISSION: IT WAS
NEVER SUCH, THOUGH
ITS FIRST MANAGER,
JOHN GREEN WAS
A LAY PREACHER.**

colony were taken there, and in some years there were 2000 local visitors as well. Initially the government reserved 2300 acres. It doubled the size of the reserve in 1866, then halved it in 1893, selling the land to Europeans under the Closer Settlement Act.

Except for paid labour by Europeans

water races that channelled the water from Badger Creek first to the houses, then to the hop fields. They also drained the hop fields.

The station had its share of bad years when floods, wind or pests resulted in total failure of one or more of the crops, but overall, only the cattle appeared not to do well. In the nineteenth century the poor state of the herd was attributed to the cold climate, but as cattle do well in the area today on improved pastures, it is more likely that the failure of the herd to thrive was due to poor grass.

Income from Coranderrk for many years exceeded expenditure and the excess went to the Board's funds to be used in support of other Aboriginal stations. Comparisons of the panoramic views of Coranderrk taken in 1865 and 1883 depicts most vividly the results of the people's work.

Daily living began with the ringing of the Coranderrk bell which called the people first to prayer and then to a discussion about, and allocation of tasks for the day. The children attended school on the station until 1899 and they did well. European children also attended after Badger Creek was settled. But when the Europeans pressed for a school at Badger Creek the Education Department closed the Coranderrk school, and the station children went to Badger Creek where they did not do as well.

The hours of work were 8 am to 5 pm with an hour off for dinner, and a half hour off for smoko. Rations were distributed by the government, but they had to purchase their own meat which displeased everyone. A matron inspected homes every week, and Board Inspectors visited occasionally. Most houses were well-kept and furnished to a standard that was said to be decent and respectable and higher than that of working-class Europeans. The

Coranderrk was a government reserve, about four kilometres south-west of the town of Healesville. It was established in March 1863 after the Parliamentary Select Committee of Enquiry of 1858-59 recommended that land be set aside for the Aboriginal people in compensation for what they had lost. It closed formally at the end of January 1924.

Aboriginal leaders from the Melbourne and Goulburn tribes had earlier selected a piece of land on the Acheron River for a station, where they proposed to settle and cultivate the soil in the European mode. They were moved from here as a result of neighbouring settlers' objections about dogs belonging to Aborigines killing sheep. Strenuously objecting, they were moved to a nearby station called Mohican. This did not work out because it was not their choice, and eventually the site at Coranderrk was found agreeable to all parties.

Forty Aborigines lived at the site, but within four months this number had grown to 117, some of whom had been in the Native Police Corps, and some of whom had attended the school at Merri Creek in the 1840s. Coranderrk developed into a showpiece for Victoria. Distinguished foreign visitors to the

and Chinese to pick hops and build fences and buildings, the Aboriginal people did all the work at the station. The women did most of the gardening, shared the work of hop picking (so did the children), fished and made baskets, hats, mats, and opossum rugs, which they sold for cash. The economic importance of rugs to Aboriginal men brought them high regard within marriage. Some women also had savings bank accounts.

The men ran the cattle herd (which numbered over 200 at its peak) and some pigs. There was one acre of fruit trees (which produced over 500lbs of fruit each year for eating and jam), three acres of potatoes, an acre of pumpkins, and an acre of other vegetables. Twenty acres of oats and lucerne provided winter hay for the horses and cattle.

Then there were the hops. Again at its peak, Coranderrk had twenty acres under hops, producing over ten tons per year. There was scarcely a year when Coranderrk hops did not command the highest price on the Melbourne hop market. They also won a number of gold medals at Royal Agricultural Shows. As well as all this agricultural and pastoral work, the men built bridges, and the

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government did not supply furniture - it was all purchased from their own earnings.

The people made their own entertainment at night in the school-room with games, singing and wrestling, and there were two Church services on Sundays. Marriages, baptisms and funerals were conducted by Presbyterian ministers and occasionally a Catholic priest. Most people went away visiting relatives at Christmas, and the men spent time away on contract shearing, bullock-driving and general pastoral work.

The doctor visited from Healesville and seriously ill people were admitted to the major Melbourne hospitals. Outbreaks of measles and influenza resulting in bronchial - pneumonia caused substantial deaths at certain times. Twice the manager closed the station to outsiders as a preventative measure - once against scarlet fever raging in Healesville, and later against the post-World War I flu pandemic. In both cases this was successful in protecting the health of the people.

In later years the people looked back on the early years as a golden age, but the fact is that there was always tension between the Board and the people, even in John Green's time, 1863-74. Two government enquiries the Royal Commission of 1877 and the Board of Enquiry of 1881, considered the people's grievances. Aboriginal men gave detailed evidence to both.

The Board for the protection of the Aborigines formed the view quite early that Coranderrk was an unsuitable place for an Aboriginal station because it was conducive to chest diseases. They thought that the moist and humid climate caused TB (this was before medical science recognised that the cause of TB was a bacillus). From as early as 1875, only 13 years after establishment, it wanted to close the station or health grounds.

But the people maintained doggedly over the years that it was theirs and reacted assertively against any suggestion of closing and moving them elsewhere. Sometimes they sent deputations down to Melbourne to meet the Chief Secretary. Sometimes they put their protests in writing. In 1917 they spoke directly to the Governor when he visited Coranderrk.

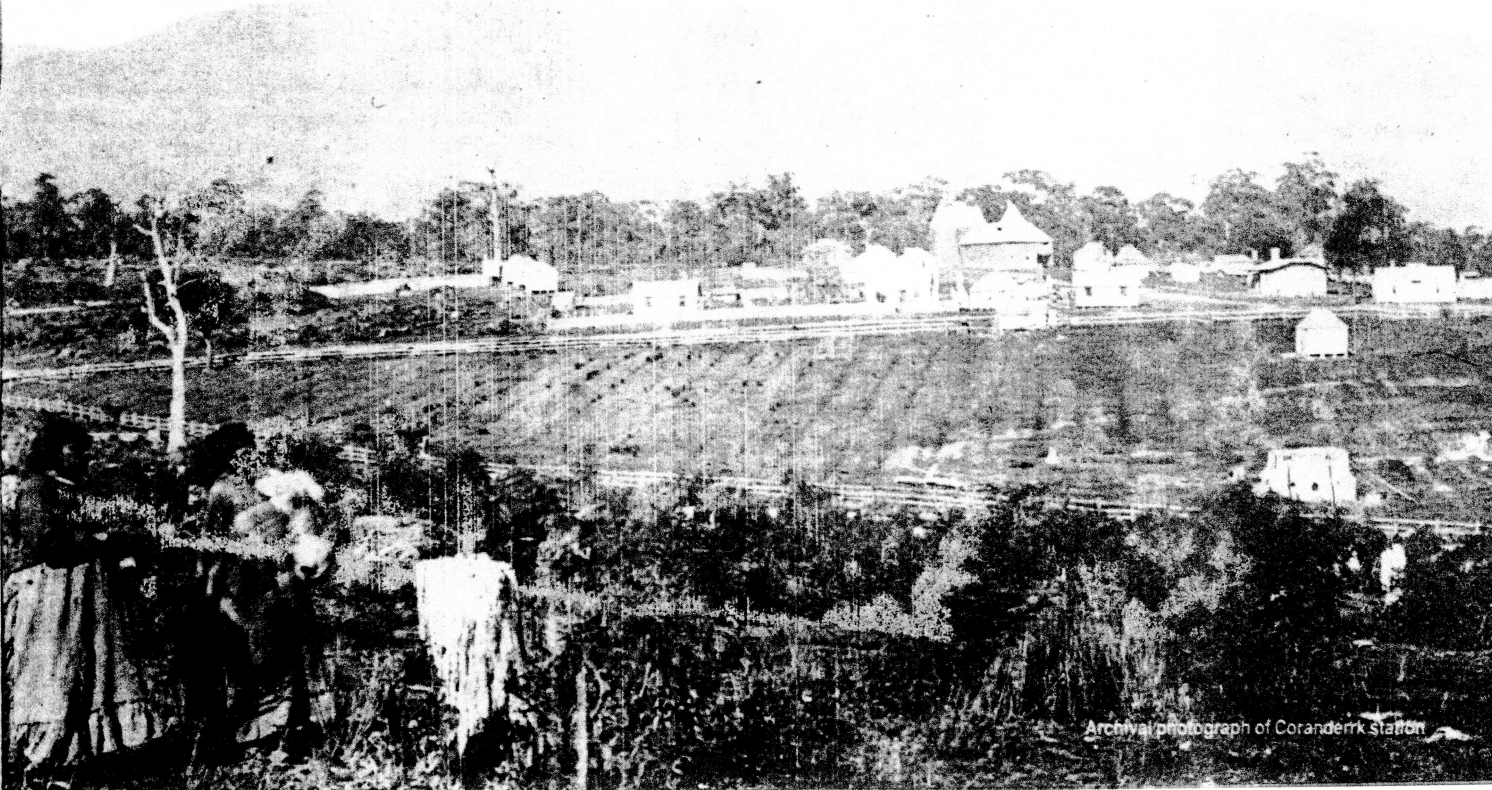
But the government of the time wanted to rationalise services to the Aboriginal people, and the plan included congregating them at Lake Tyers. Most

of the Coranderrk people went there, though the Board permitted a few of the aged and infirm (and their families) to remain at Coranderrk under the general supervision of the local police constable.

A large amount of the research time of this project was spent on determining the land history of the small part of the reserve containing the graves. The cemetery is now administered by an all-Aboriginal Trust body.

The major building constructed in 1884 for the superintendent still stands and is privately owned. As well, the documentary sources were sufficient to construct a chronology of buildings as they were constructed or renovated, and as they were demolished, as an aid to subsequent archaeological work. **S**

Dr Marie Hansen Feis recently undertook the historical component of a survey of Coranderrk Station, jointly undertaken by the Healesville and District Aboriginal Community and VAS through a National Estate Grant provided by the Australian Heritage Commission. The information in this article is drawn from her research for that project.



Archival photograph of Coranderrk Station