



# Lake Bellfield: what an absolute beauty

## A history of Lake Bellfield

The 12th and final reservoir to be built in the Wimmera-Mallee headworks system.

THE setting for this key reservoir in the Wimmera-Mallee headworks system is the Fyans Creek Valley in the Grampians. Aboriginals were the first inhabitants who, according to historical records, had occupied areas in and around the Grampians National Park for more than 10,000 years.

Historical records indicate that as parts of the Grampians during the winter would have been accessible only with great difficulty, it would have been used by Aboriginals during summer for hunting possums as a source of food and skins for protection from the winter weather. Early archaeological records indicate several tribes shared sovereignty over these ranges, the western portion, including the Black and Victorian Ranges fell within the boundaries of the Jaadwa tribe.

The most significant evidence of their presence still remaining are the rock art sites, of the known 39 painted shelters, 28 are grouped on the eastern slope of the Victorian Range to the east of Glenisla Homestead.

Aboriginal culture is showcased in the Brambuk Cultural Centre in the Fyans Valley, south of Halls Gap. The centre represents Wimmera and Western district Koori communities of Gooloom Gooloom, Kirrae Whurrong and Gunditjmarra co-operatives, Framlingham Aboriginal Trust and Winda Mara of Portland, Heywood and Hamilton.

The first recorded European contact with Aboriginals in the Wimmera occurred in 1836 and is contained in the diaries of Scottish explorer Major Mitchell when he passed through what was later to become some of the richest gold bearing land in the world.

His line of route was between Stawell and Deep Lead where so much gold was removed in the years to follow.

On July 14, Mitchell crossed the Mt William Creek prior to scaling what he described as a magnificent mass of mountains which he named the Grampians after a similar mountain range in his homeland.

After spending the night camped on the highest peak, he named it Mt William to honour the reigning sovereign of England.

The next recorded visitor to the area was Edward John Eyre, who in March 1838 followed Mitchell's tracks through the Wimmera while overlanding 300 head of cattle from NSW to SA.

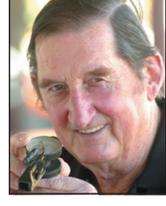
His account of the journey also mentions his ascent of the Grampians.

Unfortunately for Eyre, the season during his trek through the Wimmera was exceptionally dry and after reaching Lake Hindmarsh, which he named to honour the governor of SA, he was forced to retreat back through the Wimmera, then north to the Murray River which he followed to Adelaide.

One of the first of the pastoralists to settle in the Grampians area was stockman Charles Browning Hall. Influenced by the overstocked cattle markets in NSW, in August 1840 Hall gathered 1300 head of mixed cattle with the intention of driving them to the markets in what was then the Port Phillip District, later to become Victoria.

On finding the Melbourne market overstocked, Hall proceeded west, eventually striking the Wimmera River which he noted was dry and appeared not to have run for some years.

Following the watercourse and the still visible tracks of Mitchell's wagons, he found unoccupied land near the Grampians and settled on an



Researched and written by Bob McIlvena

area adjoining Captain Bunbury's Barton Station near Mt William.

The land Hall settled on was known as Mokepilly, a corruption of an Aboriginal word meaning a few trees.

Hall later established Lexington, Mokepilly and La-Rose Stations with a total area of 49,000 hectares.

He grazed up to 2000 cattle and up to 20,000 sheep on the land.

On one particular day, while inspecting his cattle grazing around the northern fringe of the Grampians, he discovered a native pathway leading to a gap through the mountains into a beautiful valley, known today as Halls Gap.

Settlers soon discovered the area which provided an abundance of grasses and water, the land suitable for all types of farming enterprises, as well as a pleasurable environment for family life.

Later came the tourists, campers, and day trippers, followed by those who wished to change their life style by residing in the area.

The structure of this valley was later recognised as a prime location for the construction of a water storage impounding the waters of Fyans Creek and a portion of the Wannon River.

The creation of Lake Bellfield in the 1960s inundated an area of 445 hectares and submerged 13 homes, including the historic Myrtlebank Guest House.

Fyans Creek was named to honour Captain Foster Fyans, the first Commissioner of Lands.

**Chronological history of related events:**

**1865:** Mr Robert Graham, a worker on Mokepilly Station, became the first recorded settler in the valley when he obtained a small area of land in the Fyans Valley on which he established a dairy; hence the name Dairy Creek, a tributary of Fyans Creek.

From records of this period, it appears that land at Halls Gap was as popular then as it is today.

In July 1884, Robert Graham applied to the secretary and members of the Lands Board at Ararat for a grazing licence for 450 acres at Halls Gap.

In the same year, Graham contacted the board complaining that two stockmen, Wilson and Williamson, had taken possession of the land he had applied for and were pasturing 2000 sheep on it.

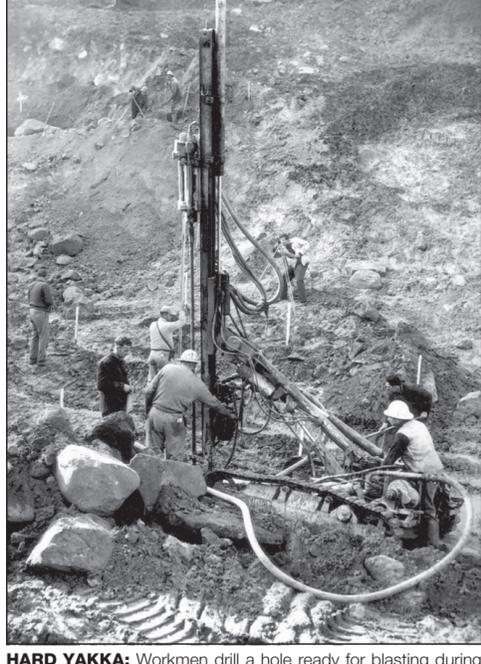
In March 1891, Robert Graham and others, again lodged a petition against an application for grazing rights on allotment 24, consisting of 400 acres of unoccupied land located between Robert Graham and James Hood.

This section of land included the main water hole along the Fyans Creek, an essential point for watering stock.

The petition was signed: James J. Hood, D. Austine, J.D. Buckler, Robert Graham, Francis Watkins, James Stephens, George Stephens, and William Codd.

**1874:** The Victorian Government Chief Engineer for the SR & WS Commission George Gordon visited the Fyans Valley to inspect a possible water scheme to supply the township of Stawell.

Proposed by Stawell Borough engineer Mr John D'Alton it



**HARD YAKKA:** Workmen drill a hole ready for blasting during the construction of Lake Bellfield. Pictures: CONTRIBUTED

## Letter to the editor

Thank you to everyone for support

**SIR:** As the history of the Wimmera-Mallee Reservoir series has concluded, I wish to express my sincere thanks to your paper for creating the opportunity to share 171 years of water information with your readers.

I would also like to thank those who expressed their appreciation in various forms for the information provided.

The value of our history, for better or worse it is done, it may be misconstrued or misinterpreted but can never be altered, is there for us to shun, dispute, argue about or learn from.

Our local history is rich in all aspects of the settlement and development of our land and its society.

The knowledge of it can only enrich our individual current and future lives.

No water, no life.

**Bob McIlvena, Horsham**

**Editor's note:** The passion and dedication Bob McIlvena shows for water history is a great credit to him. It has been our pleasure to publish Mr McIlvena's work to ensure a permanent record of the history of water in the Wimmera can be preserved forever. We hope our readers enjoyed the series.



**1963:** The official launch of the Lake Bellfield project on May 3. Victorian Premier Henry Bolte was guest of honour.



**1963:** Work continues on the construction of the Lake Bellfield dam wall.

flow by means of a 25-mile long contour channel into the Mt William Creek, then into Lake Lonsdale.

Commenting on the proposal, Mr Cattanauch stated: "The scheme would be very expensive and the Wannon was the natural supplier for Hamilton, Penshurst, Koroit, Warramboul and Port Fairy."

"If it were advisable to divert water from the south to supplement the Wimmera-Mallee scheme, the Glenelg River would probably prove the better source, but the Commission believed that a more effective and cheaper supply could be obtained from the Loddon River where supplies could be drawn in winter in such a way as to not affect other districts dependent on the Loddon for their summer supply."

**1956:** In May, an avalanche of rock from Devils Peak came close to demolishing the Bellfield Hotel at Halls Gap.

Gathering thousands of tonnes of rubble and smashing trees on its destructive course, one huge boulder halted 200 yards from the hotel.

The rock fall was attributed to 18 inches of rain received at Halls Gap since early March.

Water gushed down the track

would be reduced to three shillings and six pence.

**1960:** In May, a report from a committee investigating the conservation and use of the waters of the Wimmera River and its tributaries was causing much public debate in a Parliamentary Public Works Committee that: "The proposal for a low level storage at Glynwylln could not be justified as it would reduce the Wimmera River flows by 25 per cent and alternative road and bridge systems costing \$288,000 would be required making the project uneconomical."

Also, as the result of a reservoir on the upper Fyans Creek, it would permit an additional 8000 acres of irrigation; 10,000 acres if combined

with diversion from streams at the headwaters of the Wannon."

**1961:** Plans for a water storage on the Fyans Creek costing \$2,200,000 were submitted in January to the Public Works Committee by chief designing engineer of the SR & WS Commission, Robert A. Horsfall.

A site was selected for the reservoir embankment, which would rise 150 feet above the flats at Halls Gap.

It would be half a mile long and contain 500,000 cubic yards of clay; two million cubic yards of earth; 50,000 cubic yards of rock and 15,000 cubic yards of earth on the downstream face.

An area of 1200 acres would be inundated and 3.5 miles of the Halls Gap-Dunkeld Road would have to be re-located above the full supply level.

The Myrtlebank Guest House and several timber homes would be flooded.

A part of Mr Horsfall's evidence, in regard to irrigation potential following the completion of Lake Bellfield, he stated that: "Stored water would not flow past Dimboola and the provision of a number of low weirs would be necessary to provide

pooling from which irrigators could pump water."

Staunch supporters of the Bellfield project were Victorian Premier Henry Bolte, W.J. Mibus MLA, K.S. Gross MLC and Horsham councillors E.F. Gerlach and W.J. Morson.

On May 9, State Government approved, in principle, two recommendations of the State Parliamentary Public Works Committee for a water conservation scheme in the Wimmera-Mallee.

The recommendations were: 1. Construction of a dam on the Fyans Creek near Halls Gap. 2. To be augmented by the annual diversion of small streams from the upper nine square miles of the Wannon River catchment through an aqueduct from May to November. The estimated cost of the diversion was £70,000.

On 20 September, headlines in all western Victorian newspapers heralded the news of the Victorian Government's decision to defer the recommendation to build a dam on Fyans Creek.

## Lake Bellfield

**Lake Bellfield reservoir at a glance:**

**Construction started:** 1963.

**Construction ended:** 1966.

**Total cost:** \$6,500,000.

**Height above sea level:** 305 metres.

**Fore-shore:** 12 kilometres.

**Embankment length:** 745 metres.

**Catchment area:** 96 square kilometres.

**Full supply level:** 276.50.

**Capacity at full supply level:** 78,540 megalitres.

**Surface area at full supply level:** 480 hectares.

**Depth at full supply level:** 36.3 metres.

**Recreation:** Sailboats, rowboats, canoes, fishing, and swimming.

**Management authority:** GWMWater.



**2006:** The Channel Seven helicopter sits on the barren bottom of a drought-affected Lake Bellfield during the historic launch of the Wimmera-Mallee Pipeline project on October 20.

represented 30,000 to 40,000 people; most of whom were opposed to the diversion of Wannon water for use in the Wimmera-Mallee.

Member for Dundas Sir William McDonald, a grazier from Neaurpur, stated: "I am opposed to any water supply scheme which would affect the headwaters of the Wannon River."

**1962:** At the opening of the Shire of Wimmera Centenary celebration dinner in April, the Minister for Water Supply, Mr Mibus announced State Government approval of the Fyans Creek project, stating that: "Water from Fyans Creek storage at Halls Gap will permit expansion of irrigation along the Wimmera River from Horsham to Dimboola."

Civic leaders, parliamentarians, and guests at the reception stood and cheered at the announcement.

Mr Mibus also announced that the personnel and plant, currently employed on the construction of the Eppalock Dam on the Campaspe River in the Bendigo area, would be transferred to the Bellfield site.

Most of the Fyans Valley residents whose homes were to be submerged by the new reservoir were in support of its construction.

Among those to be affected were a recently married couple who had just completed building their new home and it was now to be submerged.

Another loss to the community was to be the beautiful old Myrtlebank Guest House among whose features included a large swimming pool.

In July, 90 Halls Gap residents unhappy about the proposed name for the new reservoir submitted a petition to the SR & WS Comm protesting about the name of Lake Bellfield.

An attached letter stated: "The name Bellfield was the name of the local hotel and a mountain peak, it is not the oldest name in the district, we don't like the name or its origin."

Most people in Halls Gap at the time preferred the dam to be named the Halls Gap Reservoir.

In August, the Minister for Mines and Water Supply W.J. (Mick) Mibus announced it was his prerogative to name the water storage and he had chosen the name Lake Bellfield after a Scotchman who was one of the first settlers at Halls Gap.

Mr Mibus also said that as the Lake was in a mountain reserve it

should be named a lake and not a reservoir, as suggested by the people of Halls Gap.

Former Horsham footballer Don Little was appointed construction engineer in charge of the Lake Bellfield scheme in September.

The announcement was made by the president of the Horsham Football Club and the Minister for Water Supply and Mines, W.J. Mibus.

Don Little had played for the Horsham Football Club 10 years previous when he was employed on the Rocklands Dam project.

**1963:** On Friday, May 3, approximately 600 people witnessed the official ceremony to mark the start of the Lake Bellfield project.

Victorian Premier Henry Bolte pushed a button detonating a charge of high explosive on the spillway area and remarked: "It's a great position for me being able to make a big noise without making a speech."

The Stawell Brass Band assisted during the opening ceremony by creating a celebration atmosphere.

Chairman of the SR & WS Comm, Mr L.R. East, stated during the ceremony: "The lake's capacity will be needed to carry forward the flows of wet years to meet the deficiencies of the years of drought."

This man-created lake will provide a beautiful sheet of water, forever providing a joy for tourists and no power boats with their stuttering and roaring motors will be permitted to destroy the peace of this beautiful resort; rowing boats and small sailing craft will be permitted and angling encouraged."

A significant historical record was produced when Mr East stated: "I have in my hand the original telegram dated July 25, 1885, received by the Minister for Water Supply, from Wimmera Shire president, Mr Robert Grant, regarding Lake Wartook."

The telegram reads: "The Wimmera Shire respectfully apply for £1000 under the Local Governing Bodies Loan Act 1872 for water conservation, Parish of Burong, Wartook; based on J.D. Derry's report which is attached to this telegram."

The telegram was sent to Lt. Colonel FT. Sargood, M.L.C. and three days later a reply was received by the shire president advising that the minister had approved a £1000 loan to start construction of the works known as the Mackenzie River Works.

By June, initial works commenced including foundation excavation, establishment of a construction depot and the deviation of the main road between Halls Gap and Dunkeld.

In July, all work stopped on the road work when 44 truck operators maintained they were losing money due to the material cartage price paid by the Country Roads Board.

A meeting in Melbourne between the operators and the Chief Engineer for the CRB failed to reach a settlement. The operators were being paid 7.5 pence per yard mile; they were demanding nine pence per yard mile. The problem was later resolved and the work continued.

During construction at the dam wall site in November, workers located a small seam of brown coal. Engineers declared it was of no commercial value and it was removed to allow excavation to the bedrock for foundations.

**1964:** In January, the Horsham Rotary Club obtained permission from the SR & WS Commission, to develop a plantation of giant redwood trees around the lake.

The club's international committee had received several packets of the seeds from a club in California. In their natural habitat, the oldest tree so far determined by a count of the growth rings was 2200 years and was known to grow to a height of 300 feet and 20 feet in diameter.

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