NOTICE OF GENERAL MEETING

The 4th General Meeting of the Society for 1988 will be held in:-

THE CONSERVATION CENTRE, 120 WAKEFIELD STREET, ADELAIDE

ON

MONDAY 27TH JUNE 1988 AT 8.00 PM

AGENDA

1. Apologies:

2. Minutes of the Previous General Meeting:
   Minutes of the previous general meeting, held in the Conservation Centre, 120 Wakefield Street, Adelaide on 23rd May 1988, having been circulated in this journal, to be confirmed.

3. Papers and Journals:
   Papers and journals received from other societies and organizations since the last general meeting, will be tabled at this meeting.

4. Speaker:

   Mr Tom Gara will address the Society and the subject of his illustrated address will be:-

   "Ooldea Soak"

5. Supper will be served at the close of the meeting.

R. Allison
Hon. Secretary
120 Wakefield Street
Adelaide, SA 5000
OOLDEA SOAK
by Tom Gara

Introduction

Ooldea Soak, known to the Aborigines as “Juldi” or “Juldil kapi” (kapi = water), was a permanent freshwater soak in the dunes on the southern fringe of the Great Victoria Desert, about 250 km north-west of Ceduna. As one of the few permanent waters, it was an important drought refuge in prehistoric times for the Aborigines of the desert. Being a meeting place for many tribes, it was also an important ceremonial and trade centre. In the post-contact period Ooldea has had an interesting history; it first served as a base for a number of the early explorers of the Great Victoria Desert and then, after 1917, became an important watering point on the Trans-Australian railway. Ooldea Siding, 6 km south of the soak, was home for Daisy Bates for about 15 years and later the soak itself became the site of a United Aborigines Mission which operated until 1952.

It was intended that Ooldea would be included in the Maralinga Lands when they were handed back to the Maralinga Aboriginal people in 1984 but, due to an administrative oversight, Ooldea Soak and a sizeable block of land around it reverted to the Crown when the Maralinga Land Rights Act was proclaimed. The Aboriginal Heritage Branch recently commissioned ANUTECH Pty Ltd, an archaeological consultancy firm based at the Australian National University in Canberra, to carry out an archaeological and anthropological survey of Ooldea to assess its significance to Aboriginal people. The field survey was undertaken in April by a field team from ANUTECH consisting of Dr. Scott Cane, Sarah Colley, Sally Brockwell and myself. Three Aboriginal men and one woman from Oak Valley, all former residents of the mission, accompanied us during our visit to the soak. ANUTECH’s assessment of the site’s significance will form part of the AHB’s submission to a Parliamentary Select Committee which is enquiring into the proposed incorporation of the Ooldea area into the Maralinga Lands.

This paper gives a brief account of the importance of Ooldea to Aboriginal people in prehistoric times. A summary of the soak’s history since the coming of Europeans is provided along with a description of the soak today. Daisy Bates’ campsite, which the Aborigines pointed out to us near the siding, is also described.

The Soak

Ooldea Soak is located about 6 km into the sand dune country from the northern edge of the Nullarbor Plain. Further north in the desert the terrain is dominated by closely-spaced easterly trending dunes generally 10-20 m in height but near the edge of the plain the dunes are generally lower and more haphazardly scattered. These steep red dunes support mallee, black oak, false sandalwood and mulga, with an understorey of spinifex and grasses. The distinctive Ooldea Mallee (Eucalyptus pyriformis) grows on some of the dunes near the soak.

The soak is situated in a large, sandy depression ringed by high, red sand dunes. The depression is roughly circular in shape with a diameter of about 250 m. The floor of the depression consists of pale white sands, which vary in depth from 1-5m. These
sands are perched on a layer of blue and red clays, which retains the water in the sands above. Some early surveyors and geologists believed the soak to be fed by an underground spring but it seems more likely that the water was that which collected from runoff from the surrounding circle of dunes. However, the amount of water in the soak was evidently quite staggering; during the early 1920s up to 45,000 litres per day were being pumped to the siding to supply the requirements of the railway.

Early historical accounts (e.g. Brown 1885, Bolam 1923, Bates 1921) indicate that water could be obtained by digging down a metre or so into the sand at several spots within the depression. According to Mrs Bates (1938: p. 167), at some places the merest scratch on the surface sand would bring the fresh, sweet waters welling up. However, the quality varied greatly from one area to another; fresh water might be found at one spot while another well only a few metres away would yield brackish or bitter water. One particular area on the northern side of the depression was favoured by the local Aboriginal group for its water supply; this was apparently the "original" Ooldea Soak. Not far from the freshwater well there was a bitter well, whose waters were believed by the Aborigines to have curative powers.

The importance of the soak in prehistoric times

Historical and ethnographic sources document the great importance of the soak as a drought refuge. Mrs Bates wrote that:

long before the days of the white man Ooldea Water ... was the gathering place of those tribes and groups which had to temporarily abandon their own localities in times of great drought ... They trekked to Ooldea only when their own semi-permanent waters, which held over ordinary seasons, dried up ... Ooldea was known amongst the groups far and wide as a refuge when drought struck their land (Australasian 28/7/1923).

Traditionally the soak belonged to the Kokata (Tindale 1974), but neighbouring tribes including the coastal Wirangu and Mirning and those from the interior, the Ngalea and Pindini and others, had access to the water. When visiting groups came, they were each given their own soak to use during their stay. The visiting groups camped in the surrounding dunes, each in the direction of their own country i.e. groups from the south camped on the southern side of the soak and groups from the north camped on the northern side (Bates Australasian 25/4/1920: p. 837-8).

Ooldea was also an important meeting-place and ceremonial and trade centre. The explorer, Richard Maurice, a frequent visitor to the soak around the turn of the century, stated that Ooldea was:

a permanent native well used by the natives for many generations as a tribal meeting-place. There the blacks would barter, settle disputes, give and take in marriage, and initiate the boys into the mysteries of the tribe. Here in the old days I have seen hundreds of natives assembled at a time (Maurice 1905: p. 360).

Maurice noted that groups came from Boundary Dam, 300 km to the north-west, and Fowlers Bay to join the Kokata people at Ooldea for ceremonies and trade (Maurice Papers 158/36). Bolam, the first station-master at Ooldea Siding wrote that the soak has been known to the blacks since time immemorial. For century upon century it has been the gathering place of blacks from North, East, South and West. They went there to perform their sacred ceremonies, their corroborees, and their tribal customs (1923: p. 14).

He noted that Aborigines from as far away as the mountain ranges of central Australia and others from Fowlers Bay, Kingoonya and Kalgoolie came to the soak (1923: p. 66, 103). Mrs Bates wrote that Aborigines gathered at Ooldea "in their hundreds for initiation and other ceremonies" (1938: p. 167).
Being a meeting place for many tribes, the soak was a centre for trade. The tribes that gathered there bartered and exchanged spears, boomerangs, shields, ochre and other items (Bolam 1923: p. 14). Mrs Bates (1921: p. 77) stated that flint from the Wilson Bluff quarry on the Nullarbor coast was brought to Ooldea to trade. Other visitors also brought stone artefacts or raw material from their own country. Australites, called nulu by the Aborigines and believed to be "magic stones", were brought into Ooldea from the desert country beyond. Pituri and quartzite flakes were traded south to Ooldea from the Everard and Musgrave Ranges in exchange for ochres from a claypan near Pedinga Rockhole, south of Ooldea (Johnston 1941: p. 40, 43). Pearlshell ornaments from the Pilbara and Kimberley coast reached Ooldea and other parts of western SA along recognized trade routes (Mountford & Harvey 1938).

History since European contact

Two well-sinkers, Venning and Howie, were the first white men to see Ooldea Soak. In the late 1860s they were working at Fowlers Bay when some of the local Aborigines told them about Ooldea and its permanent water supply. The Aborigines later guided Venning and Howie to the spot. When they returned to Fowlers Bay they told the local policeman, Richards, of their discovery and he subsequently made a trip out to the soak (Bolam 1923: p. 11). In 1875 Ernest Giles used the soak as a base during his crossing from Port Augusta to Perth and Ooldea was later visited by a number of explorers, surveyors and prospectors, including Tietjens in 1879, Jones in 1880, Brown in 1885 and 1897, Maurice on numerous occasions around the turn of the century and George in 1904. Ooldea was also used as a depot by many of the kangaroo-shooters who operated along the northern edge of the Nullarbor Plain in the 1880s and 1890s.

After the construction of the Trans-Australian Railway in 1917, the soak was acquired by the Commonwealth Government to supply water for the steam locomotives. A siding was established on the line 6 km south of the soak, which had a staff of about 20 people. The soak also supplied their requirements, as well as the staff of the other sidings along the line. Many of the desert Aborigines, forced to abandon their homelands in the face of severe droughts at that time, drifted into Ooldea and other sidings. Daisy Bates made her camp near the siding in 1919 and lived there for 15 years, providing food, clothing and medical treatment to the hundreds of Aborigines who gathered there. During her stay there she also collected a vast amount of information on the customs, beliefs and lifestyle of the Aborigines.

In the early 1920s up to 50 shallow wells had been sunk at the soak and these were supplying 45,000 litres of fresh water to the siding each day (Bolam 1923: p. 18-9). Due to over-exploitation and increasing salinity, the soak failed in 1923 and thereafter water had to be brought in by rail from Kingoonya to supply the siding's requirements. The Aborigines were not permitted to obtain water from the tanks at the siding and instead had to go to the soak, where a little water was still available from one well. Mrs Bates was permitted to get water from the siding and made several trips there and back each day carrying her water in kerosene cans (Bates 1938: p. 212).

The United Aborigines Mission established a station at the soak in 1933. A church, dormitory for the children, residences for the mission staff and other buildings were erected over the years. Government rations were provided to the Aborigines, who had
their main camp a kilometre or so from the mission. During the mission years and even before that time a number of important anthropological studies had been carried out at Ooldea. T. D. Campbell and A. J. Lewis recorded anthropometric data there in 1926 and Elkin visited the soak in 1930 during his survey of South Australian tribes. Field teams from the Board of Anthropological Research at the University of Adelaide went there in 1934 and 1939. Tindale, Cleland, T. H. Johnston, Ronald Berndt and others participated in these expeditions. In 1941 Ronald and Catherine Berndt stayed six months at Ooldea and afterwards published a series of papers in Oceania which provide a detailed account of the culture of the Aboriginal people who were gathered there at the time.

The mission operated until 1952 although conditions at the soak became increasingly difficult. Drift sands, activated by the loss of much of the vegetation from the ravages of rabbits and the mission goats and the chopping down of most of the trees for firewood, threatened to engulf the remaining well and the buildings. The well was yielding a decreasing quantity of water and game animals were scarce in the area (Hampel 1977: p. 3-4; White 1985: p. 221). Recognizing the need to resettle the Ooldea people, the SA Government purchased Yalata Station near Fowler's Bay in 1951. However, in June of the following year an internal dispute within the federal/state hierarchy of the UAM led to the sudden closure of the Ooldea Mission and the departure of the staff. The Lutheran Church, who were in charge of the Koonibba Mission near Ceduna, were asked to take charge of the Ooldea people and resettle them at Yalata.

From 1954, most of the Great Victoria Desert was closed off to its traditional Aboriginal owners while the British conducted its nuclear weapons testing programme at Maralinga. Most of the desert remained as a Prohibited Area until 1984 when the Maralinga Lands were handed back by the State Government to Maralinga Tjarutja, the incorporated body which represents the Yalata community. The Maralinga people have since established an outstation at Oak Valley, near Lake Dey-Dey, about 150 km north-west of Ooldea.

Since the time of the closure of the mission, Ooldea Soak has been deserted. The soak itself was about 2 km outside the Maralinga Prohibited Area declared in 1954. It seems that although Aborigines from Yalata could have visited the soak, such visits were discouraged by the authorities during the nuclear tests and for some time afterwards. Over the years a number of people have visited the soak, including doggers and rabbit-shooters, Government officials, adventurous tourists and, in more recent times, a number of anthropologists and other researchers. Aborigines also make occasional visits to the area, although they are reluctant to camp near the soak because of the presence of many burials in the vicinity.

**Ooldea Soak today**

Ooldea Siding is situated almost exactly on the northern edge of the Nullarbor Plain. The siding was manned until the 1950s but is abandoned today and all the buildings and other facilities there are gone. A small memorial to Daisy Bates has been erected by the side of the track. The nearest settlement is at Watson Siding, about 30 km to the west along the railway line. At Ooldea Siding the "long straight" begins; from there the railway runs in a dead-straight line westwards across the Nullarbor for over 500 km to Nurina Siding in Western Australia.
A little-used track, accessible only to four-wheel drive vehicles, leads north from the siding. Despite numerous attempts our vehicle could not be coaxed over the top of the second to last dune so we left it there and were led on foot by our Aboriginal informants a kilometre or so across country to the soak. The soak is just as it was described in many of the early accounts; a white sandy hollow ringed by high red dunes, apparently just like any of the other many hollows among the sandhills in this area. A number of large pepper trees, planted in the mission times, grow near the centre of the depression. The area is beginning to revegetate to some degree after the ravages of earlier this century; the surrounding dunes are sparsely covered with acacias and black oaks and some shrubs and grasses grow within the depression. From the top of the dunes that surround the soak one can see southward to the edge of the Nullarbor Plain, distant about 6 km. Looking north the terrain is a jumbled sea of dunes stretching off towards the Ooldea Range, a dark mass of higher dunes about 20 km further north. Beyond the Ooldea Range is the Great Victoria Desert, a formidable wilderness of salt lakes, sand dunes, mallee scrub and spinifex.

From where we left the car, stone artefacts were noticed on the surfaces of the dunes and the scatters became gradually denser as we approached the soak. Descending into the depression, the density continued to increase and by the time we reached the soak itself the artefacts had reached a density in excess of 500/sq m. Almost every conceivable rock type is present at the site including many distinctive cherts and silcretes, various quartzites, quartz, jasper, flint and chalcedony, as well as various granites and sandstones for grinding and hammerstones. Australites are common, occurring either as whole specimens or as small worked pieces. One flaked piece of what appeared to be amethyst was also found. All these rock types are foreign to the area and all were brought in by visiting tribes. In the main depression alone there must be several million artefacts; dense scatters of artefacts occur in other deflated areas and blowouts in the surrounding dunes and continue for hundreds of metres in most directions.

The majority of the artefacts are small flakes, blades and waste material. The most common tool types are tula adze slugs, often made from a distinctive fine-grained grey chert, small circular scrapers, backed blades and pirri points. A high proportion of the flakes and blades show evidence of retouch and/or edge-wear. Small multi-platform cores are common and hammerstones and small fragments of grinding stones were also noted. Charcoal from campfires and ovens and fragments of animal bones are everywhere. Other faunal remains noted at the soak include burnt quandong stones, emu eggshell and a few pieces of freshwater mussel shell.

Many relics of post-contact times litter the area of the soak. Broken glass, tin cans, billies and pots and pans are everywhere, dating back to the mission times or earlier. Circles of rusted meat tins mark places where Aboriginal family groups sat down to eat their rations. Marbles, metal tools, beads, children's toys, pieces of leather and rusty horseshoes lie among the stone artefacts. Old pumping machinery and lengths of piping are found here and there. Our Aboriginal informants showed us the original soak; a little water can still be obtained by digging down a metre or so into the sand there. Most of the mission buildings where dismantled in the 1950s and the material was later used at Yalata. The Aborigines pointed out the remaining traces of
the buildings, partially covered by drift sands and the pepper trees. They showed us where the church and ration shed used to be, the school some of them attended and where the missionary’s house was, the latter now marked only by the top of the front gate sticking out from the sand. The swing they used to play on when they were children is still there, although now unusable; the goat pen and a few other structures also remain. They also pointed out the mission well, now hidden beneath the pepper trees, and the remnants of some of the old railways wells.

The ANUTECH field team spent several days at Ooldea, recording a representative sample of the archaeological features there and collecting some artefacts and faunal remains for further analysis. Discussions with the Aborigines also took place concerning the significance of the site. These people have traditional knowledge of the mythology of the Ooldea area. Their versions of these myths are similar to those recorded by Mrs Bates more than 50 years ago.

Daisy Bates’ campsite

Although Daisy Bates was a frequent visitor to the soak, she had her camp 5 km away, close to the siding. In her autobiographical account, “The Passing of the Aborigines”, she wrote that when she arrived at Ooldea in 1919 she first set up camp just south of the siding. After a short time she moved her camp: to a sandy gully a mile north, on the track that led to the Soak, with a convenient tap in the pipeline for water supply. There I built an enclosing breakwind of mulga bushes, and set up the little household that was to be my home for 16 years. There was an 8 x 10 tent for my living and sleeping, an upturned tank... which I utilized as library, storing there my manuscripts and my books; a bough shed “storehouse” that held everything from my daily provender and supplies for the natives to their most sacred totem boards and initiation properties, and a smaller bough shed on the crest of the hill, with a ladder leading to its leaky roof, that was my observatory. Here in the bright, still evenings, I studied the skies (1938: p. 190).

From her camp she distributed food and clothes to the Aborigines coming out of the desert, provided simple medical treatment and introduced them to the white man’s laws and customs:

my first task, as the groups stepped over the threshold of civilization, was to set them at ease and clothe them, learn their names and their waters, explain the white men’s laws and tell them of the resources and the dangers of this new age they had stumbled into (1938: p. 172).

Mrs Bates remained at Ooldea, caring for the Aborigines until 1934 when sickness and old age forced her into retirement in Adelaide, where she died in 1951 at the age of 92. A small memorial to her has been erected by the side of the railway track at Ooldea Siding. The plaque depicts Mrs Bates and one of the Ooldea Aborigines, King Billy, and bears the words “Mrs Daisy Bates CBE 1859–1951, devoted her life here & elsewhere to the welfare of the Australian Aborigines”.

Our Aboriginal informants were young children when Daisy Bates lived at Ooldea but they all remembered her well and still referred to her as “Kabbarli” (grandmother). They told us that her campsite could still be seen near the siding and, after visiting the soak, we drove back towards the railway line, stopping near the crest of a low dune about a kilometre from the line. We had not expected to find much evidence of her camp remaining and were greatly surprised when we arrived at the spot. There the Aborigines pointed out the outlines of Mrs Bates’ tent, marked by lines of kerosene cans standing upright, partially buried in the dune. We were told that the cans, filled with sand, had been placed there by Mrs Bates, to act as a windbreak and support for the base of the tent. The outline of the cans is rectangular in shape and measures about 3 x 3 m, corresponding roughly to the size of Mrs Bates’ tent – 8 x 10 ft. A dense
scatter of rusted fragments eroded from the kerosene cans covers the area. Several metal and wooden stakes, presumably tent pegs, protrude from the sand near the corners. A low mound of sand, apparently all that remains of the larger mulga breakwind that surrounded the camp, is evident a little downslope from the tent site. This mound is also marked by a scatter of eroded fragments of kerosene cans which may have been used to help support the mulga branches. Although its outline is incomplete, it appears that the breakwind formerly enclosed an area of about 10 x 10 m, with the tent in the north-eastern corner. No sign of the bough storehouse is apparent today although it is possible that some remains of the structure and its contents may exist beneath the sand within the breakwind. The upturned water tank used by Mrs Bates as a library is gone.

Broken glass, fragments of pottery, enamel plates and mugs are scattered across the site. The lid of a camp oven, said by the Aborigines to have belonged to Mrs Bates, lies a few metres away. Small heaps of stone artefacts occur within the outlines of the store; these were evidently some of the artefacts collected by Mrs Bates. Pieces of porcelain, broken glass, tin cans and other material is scattered across the campsite. A few wooden artefacts and carved animals, made by Aborigines to sell to passengers on the passing trains, were found nearby.

About 10 m further upslope the Aborigines pointed out three or four wooden posts, about 15 cm in diameter, protruding about 50 cm from the sand. The Aborigines thought that these stakes were Daisy Bates' tent-peggs. However, from her own description and that of Ernestine Hill (1973: p. 107-8), a journalist and close friend of Mrs Bates, it seems more likely that this structure was her "observatory". The upper surfaces of some of the posts showed evidence of charring, indicating that a fire has gone through the area at some time in the past.

The dunes near the camp are sparsely vegetated with acacias, black oaks and mallee. Many of the trees in the vicinity have been chopped down in the past for firewood. From the dune where the camp is situated, one has a clear view south towards the siding and the railway line; beyond that the nearest settlement is Yalata Reserve, about 140 km away across the limestone expanse of the Nullarbor Plain. Looking north, the high dunes that surround the soak are just visible in the distance among the other sandhills. A trail of kerosene cans, apparently used by the Aborigines to carry water, meat tins and broken bottles leads northwards from the campsite to the soak. The pipeline which formerly carried water from the soak to the siding has gone, probably salvaged at some time in the past. However, a few of the concrete blocks that used to support the pipeline can still be seen close to Mrs Bates' campsite.

Stone artefacts as well as bottles, cans and other material are sparsely scattered through the dunes near the railway line. A few jawbones of sheep and cattle were noted in the area; a number of historical sources indicate that the butcher at Tarcoola loaded sheeps' heads and other offal onto the train for distribution to the Aborigines at Ooldea. Several coins dating to the 1920s and 1930s were found at these sites. These coins were probably obtained by Aborigines who sold wooden artefacts to passengers on the trains. Some of the other campsites in this area may date back to the time of the construction of the railway, when Aboriginal groups first began to drift in from the desert country.
Conclusion

Ooldea's significance as a drought refuge and ceremonial and trade centre is well-documented in the ethnographic literature. The dense artefact scatters at the site provide further clear evidence of the soak's importance to Aboriginal people in prehistoric times. There would be few surface sites in Australia that could surpass Ooldea Soak in terms of the numbers of artefacts present and the density and range of material. The soak was the place where many of the desert Aborigines had their first sustained contacts with white people and the site has the potential to provide a unique insight for archaeologists into the process of culture-contact and adaptation. As the setting for the important anthropological studies by R. & C. Berndt in 1940, Ooldea has also played a valuable role in the development of our understanding of the culture of the Western Desert Aborigines.

Ooldea Soak is of great importance to Aboriginal people at Yalata and Oak Valley as well as others living today at Koonibba, Ceduna and elsewhere on the west coast. Many of these people were born in the vicinity of the soak and spent their childhood and early adult years there. Strong historical and cultural links have developed through the Aborigines' long association with the area. The soak is also of some historical significance to white Australians. As one of the few permanent watersources in the region, the soak played a key role in the exploration of the northern Nullarbor Plain and the Great Victoria Desert. Several noted explorers, including Giles, Tietkins and Maurice, used it as a depot at various times. Ooldea is also closely associated with the Trans-Australian railway and the United Aborigines Mission. To many people, the name "Ooldea" is linked inextricably with Daisy Bates, still a legendary and somewhat controversial figure in Australian history. The remnants of her camp near the siding constitute an important historical site to both Aboriginal and white Australians.

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