

A History of Cooriemungle Prison Farm

By

Linda Kivimets

October 6, 1990

A History of Cooriemungle Prison Farm

The Cooriemungle Prison Farm was the first open, minimum security camp in Victoria, located in the Heytesbury Forest 160 miles [257 kilometres] from Melbourne and 11 miles [17 kilometres] from Timboon. It was established in 1939 when 16,300 acres of land were set aside “tentatively” for the Penal Department, and it was first occupied on 21 October 1940, by eleven prisoners and three officers.¹ Only the administration section of the buildings was then completed. Instant action was taken to commence work on the remaining buildings, to fence and clear the site, complete a road, form a vegetable garden and “otherwise make the place habitable”.² By the end of that year, thirty-two prisoners and five officers were installed and ready to begin work.

The aim of Cooriemungle was to employ a selected group of prisoners in fencing, clearing and sowing allotments of land, preparing them for farms for settlement. As each farm reached the productive stage, it was handed over to the Lands Department for disposal to some settler. He would then be able “to take possession at once and pay his way, instead of waiting long years to bring his land into production”.³ The buildings at Cooriemungle were so planned that they were able to be moved to a new site in a few years when all the land within reasonable distance of the present site was cleared, fences, and settled. The original 16,300 acres was reduced to approximately 4,000 in 1946 when control of the area was relinquished to the Soldier Settlement Commission for development. Therefore the buildings at Cooriemungle were never re-sited and became semi-permanent.

It was envisaged that the work undertaken by prisoners at Cooriemungle would help to open up the remote Heytesbury area for settlement. For many years Port Campbell and the surrounding areas was served only by sea – tourists and later

¹ This project had been “sponsored” by the Member for Warrnambool (Mr. H.S. Bailey) when he was the Chief Secretary of the Penal Department – *Warrnambool Standard*, January 7th 1949.

² Victorian Government Report and Statistical Tables, Penal Establishments, Gaols and Reformatory Prisons 1939.

³ *Ibid.*, 1938

A History of Cooriemungle Prison Farm

settlers arrived only after the completion of the Great Ocean Road by returned First World War soldiers in 1932.

Of course there is evidence of the early presence of aboriginal groups along the coast south of the farm, and indeed around the Cooriemungle Creek, from which the Prison Farm derived its name. The open coast, with shellfish and fish in abundance, was generally preferred by tribes to the dense Otway forests to the east, while the cooler conditions of the summer attracted groups of the Colac tribes down to the area. The aboriginal people of the area were part of the Coagulac tribe and lived between the Camperdown and the Otways. “Coagulac” means “livening on a sand-edged lake”. If any of the tribe broke the law they were sent from the tribe to the edge of the Otways. They were in effect “people of the wilderness”. The aboriginal words for this phrase are Koorie (people) and Mungle (wilderness). Hence Cooriemungle or “people of the wilderness”.

The prison Farm was heralded as a “big step forward” in prison work in Victoria, because its ultimate aim of establishing settlers on the land, “add[ed] to the wealth of the community”. As a small selected group its overhead costs for supervision were small, it was to become virtually self sufficient, therefore the Penal Department was confident that a “profit on the system can be assured”.⁴ However, in their Report to the Government in 1939, they were at pains to point out that the envisaged success of Cooriemungle “should not be looked at solely from the point of view of the material benefit to Victoria arising from the settlement of people on the land”⁵. Indeed, it was emphasised the “too much attention must not be given to profits won or losses sustained, nor can it be argued that a prison system as a whole can be made to pay”.⁶ There was a wider view than this, concerning the “reform” of the prisoners. In 1939 it was advised that,

⁴ Victorian Government Report, op. cit., 1938

⁵ Victorian Government Report, op. cit., 1939

⁶ Ibid.

A History of Cooriemungle Prison Farm

“Many of the prisoners so far transferred to this camp have never previously known what hard work means. Their first efforts are ludicrous in the extreme, but gradually they become inured, gain confidence and skill in the healthy open air and the free atmosphere here, gain a leaner and better outlook leading inevitably in many cases to what is aptly termed ‘reform’”.⁷

Certainly Australia’s penal systems have tried very much to reflect international trends, where there has been a change of emphasis in the aims of imprisonment, moving from retribution and deterrence towards reformation and rehabilitation. As early as 1840, Alexander Maconochie, superintendent of the infamous Norfolk Island Penal Settlement, was carrying out some far-reaching penal experiments for the time. At the core of these experiments was his belief that the criminal must be ‘treated’. The aim of such treatment was to restore him to society after he had undergone his punishment. He introduced a task system, whereby each prisoner was allotted a specific work task while in prison. Such work was rewarded by marks and these marks were accumulated so that as the prisoner reached a certain number, he progressed to a higher stage with given privileges which were in three stages. On reaching the third stage, each prisoner was eligible for a ticket of leave which was to become the foundation of the parole system.⁸

Between 1892 – 95 the famous Gladstone Committee was convened in England. The most significant and far-reaching effect of its report was to place reformation, not deterrence, as the prime justification behind the sanction of imprisonment. Most importantly, prisoners were allowed to talk. The Committee’s recommendations were taken up almost immediately in New South Wales and in 1896 the then Comptroller General, Frederick Neitenstein, laid down definite guidelines

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ R.Tomasic and I. Dobinson – *The Failure of Imprisonment: An Australian Perspective*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1979, p.9

A History of Cooriemungle Prison Farm

and principles for the operation of New South Wales prisons. These were referred to in the 1896 Annual Report and included,

1. Imprisonment was to take the aim of reformation as well as deterrence:

5. Prisoners were to be put to meaningful productive labour, it being proposed that the treadmill and the like to be done away with; and
6. Prisoners to have both educational and moral instruction.⁹

Between 1922, and 1945 in England, reform within the penal system was again undertaken with enormous fervor, with ‘freedom’ being emphasised. It had begun within the Borstal training centres and had spread to the mainstream of prison administration, leading to ‘open institutions’ springing up all over England. In Australia this trend was adopted with the establishment of a number of Afforestation Camps from about 1910 onwards. Cooriemungle would seem to fit in to this phase of our penal history.

In both Australia and England, the period from 1950 has seen a re-emphasis on security, but also the emergence of individually tailored programmes of rehabilitation. Increased use has been made of probation services, programmes of work release, halfway houses and the weekend imprisonment of offenders. Certainly Cooriemungle was unsuited to these trends, and this would seem to have contributed to its eventual closure.

Prisoners as Cooriemungle were required to sign a pledge that they would ‘work industriously and never by word or deed bring the prestige of the camp into disrepute’. Moreover, it was reported to the Government that, “Inmates transferred to this prison [were] very carefully selected after consideration of the whole tenor of

⁹ Ibid., p.11

A History of Cooriemungle Prison Farm

each man's life and his likelihood of reform'.¹⁰ The average length of sentence being served by a prisoner at Cooriemungle was between six and eighteen months, the crime being mostly larceny, false pretences, and the like. Usually no murderers, violent, or sex offenders were sent to the camp, although in a feature article in *The Herald*¹¹ in September 1961, it was reported that convicted murderer John Bryant Kerr after 11 years in Pentridge was due to be transferred to Cooriemungle that week and released in April. Kerr had gained notoriety because he had originally been condemned to death in September 1950 for the murder of a twenty year old female at Middle Park Beach. The sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. The article went on to mention another convicted murderer amongst the Cooriemungle inmates, Albert Michael Allen. He was a former apprentice mechanic convicted in July 1954 of the murder of a thirty three year old male nurse on the Yarra Bank near Princess Bridge. When the Herald reporter and photographer visited the camp, Allen was helping to build eleven new huts for prisoners.

Cooriemungle was run as an 'open' prison with the inmates working in accordance with an honour system. By 1950 it was reported that approximately 700 prisoners has passed through the camp in 11 years and only 12 had escaped, although "not having bars, locks, or walls ... there was ample opportunity if one wished to escape".¹² All of the twelve escapees, with one exception, had been recaptured, and "very few have returned to prison after serving there, which is a very creditable record"¹³. The first escapee was recorded in 1941 as an 'absconder' who duly received corporal punishment. He was by and Order of Courts, birched¹⁴. The last recorded escapee was in 1962, "the first for nine years" and he surrendered after 48 hours.¹⁵

¹⁰ Victorian Government Report, op. cit., 1949

¹¹ *The Herald*, Monday September 18, 1961

¹² Victorian Government Report, op. cit., 1950

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Victorian Government Report, op. cit., 1941

¹⁵ Victorian Government Report, op. cit., 1962

A History of Cooriemungle Prison Farm

Nevertheless, in the first 10 years of Cooriemungle's operation, local residents were very dissatisfied with the minimum security of the farm, and with the number of escapees. On March 27, 1947, a public meeting was held in Timboon to discuss the camp. Penal authorities assured the meeting that the prisoners sent to the camp were "hand selected" and essentially "harmless". The townsfolk were not convinced. It had been recently reported in the newspaper that two men who escaped from Cooriemungle "had hit a policeman on the head in an effort to avoid capture: they [were] desperate men".¹⁶ Cr. R.E. Harris, at a meeting of the Heytesbury Shire Council, moved that the Council should take immediate action and write to the Chief Secretary demanding, not asking, that only those who had committed mild offences should be sent to the camp. The Shire President (Cr. A.T. Currell) said that he was of the opinion that the camp should be abolished, because of the "disturbing psychological effect prisoners had on the surrounding districts".¹⁷ The motion was carried and the request was sent to the Chief Secretary.

Despite the local residents' dissatisfaction, Cooriemungle continued to flourish, with the Penal Department selecting prisoners not essentially according to the crime they had committed, but by an examination of their past histories. Prisoners generally stayed at the camp for a bout 12 months, although some stayed longer. Often prisoners served the last 6 months of a 20 year sentence to enable them to again become used to outdoor life. In order to emphasize that the prisoners had much freedom and were on trust, the staff did not carry arms. The Penal Department reported frequently that "the most important aspect of the farm [was] the rehabilitation of men".¹⁸ In a newspaper interview the officer in charge, Mr J. Gihm said "Discipline is as easy as we can make it while properly conducting the camp. As long as the men are all there at the right times and behave themselves in between there's not much to worry about. Many's the time they go out to work on the timber and we don't see them all day". One of the prisoners acknowledged his relative

¹⁶ *Warrnambool Standard*, April 16, 1947

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Victorian Government Report, op. cit., 1950

A History of Cooriemungle Prison Farm

freedom when he told the interviewer. “The lace is a million per cent better than Pentridge. The “screws” aren’t on your back all the time”.¹⁹

During the 1940’s the prisoners’ cubicles were increased to thirty, constructed in an arc so that they could all be viewed from the main camp office. The prisoners also constructed roads, a garage, stables, a dairy, workshops and a dam to store water, so that it could be pumped into the camp from the Cooriemungle Creel. By 1945 the home farm, consisting of 140 acres, was completed, and supplied the camp with meat, milk, butter and vegetables. The camp had 40 cattle and 160 sheep and several horses – lambing reached the high figure of 125%. The camp vegetable garden amply supplied the needs of the camp with practically every known vegetable being grown and on the prison menu. Although fresh fruit was not regularly served, the prisoners were able to dine on strawberries and cream, when in season, until they were “sickened” of them! Sheep, cattle and produce from the farm competed successfully in the Cobden Autumn Show and the Lower Heytesbury Show. In 1946, 6 first prizes and 5 second prizes were obtained, and the Red Poll Bull was awarded Grand Champion Ribbon.²⁰

An Advisory Committee, comprising experts from the Land and Agriculture Departments and 2 local representatives (Messrs A.G. Trotter, J.P. and R. Neale), frequented the camp, offering expert advice and guidance. The local members in particular were praised in the Government Reports for “rendering very valuable assistance in planning the work to be carried out from day to day”.²¹ By the end of 1950, 140 acres of camp area was cleared and sown in pasture, 2540 acres were surveyed into 15 allotments for development, 1188 acres (seven allotments) were fenced and partly developed, 409 acres (2 allotments) were partly fenced and ploughed and 568 acres (3 allotments) had been made available for selection. In 1949 a sawmill had been constructed, the timber being used for fencing and buildings. 20

¹⁹ *The Herald*, Monday September 18, 1961

²⁰ Victorian Government Report, op. cit., 1946

²¹ Victorian Government Report, op. cit., 1945

A History of Cooriemungle Prison Farm

acres of heavy timber and 20 acres of light timber were cleared. 1700 fence posts were cut and erected and 1000 posts were supplied to French Island (Reformatory Prison). In addition 6,000 super feet of timber was cut and sent to Langi Kal Kal.²²

During the 1940's the farm suffered from a shortage of materials, due in large part to the Second World War, but compounded by its remoteness. The annual Government Reports recorded that work was hampered at various times owing to inadequate sheep dip, lack of wire for fencing and delay in essential parts for the saw mill. The nature of the work carried out at Cooriemungle was such that it was vulnerable to climatic extremes and natural disasters. In 1948 work was hampered considerably by abnormally dry weather during the first three months of the year, followed by excessively wet weather in April and May. There were dramatic losses of potatoes and pumpkins due to heavy frosts. In 1952, 75 inches of rain fell, making it the wettest year recorded since the camp opened. Severe bush fires occurred during summer, and local residents and fire authorities often called upon the prisoners for assistance in fire fighting. Moreover, the prisoners' farming implements were really quite primitive – axes, picks, and shovels were used, and only in March of 1948 was a new tractor obtained. This was recorded with a formal photograph, as were most new additions to the farm, with prisoners and guards posing proudly!

In April 1946 a conference was held at Cooriemungle to discuss soldier settlement in the Heytesbury Forest. Members of the Soldier Settlement Commission were given an inspection of the camp by horseback so that they had “a first hand impression and demonstration of what could be done with that class of country”.²³ The members of the Commission were reportedly “impressed with the way that the land was being worked, and the results”.²⁴ They journeyed down to the Prison Camp mainly because that road extended further into the Crown lands than any other, the part proposed for settlement. They were shown around by the officer in charge and

²² Victorian Government Report, op. cit., 1950

²³ *The Argus*, April 16, 1946

²⁴ *Ibid.*

A History of Cooriemungle Prison Farm

entertained at lunch, where they very much admired the lawns and gardens surrounding the prison camp. It was decided to recommend soldier settlement in Crown areas under proper conditions to ensure success. Blocks were to be 150 acres in timbered areas and 200 acres in grass – tree country. It was suggested that there was 50,000 acres of first class land in the district, which would repatriate 300 soldiers. It was at this stage that approximately 1900 acres, previously under the control of Cooriemungle, was relinquished to the Soldier Settlement Commission for development.

During the 1950's Cooriemungle increased its prisoner accommodation to 40 separate cells, in inside walls of which were varnished, and increased staff accommodation was built. Other additions to the farm included a new petrol store, large tank stand, hay shed, boiler house, new dairy, drying room, and new recreation hall. A powerful crawler tractor had been acquired for clearing the areas of forest and grass land which were so thick 'that it was impossible to sit down'. Timber was being cut at the saw mill and regularly sent to other gaols, as were bags of potatoes. In 1952, 65 bags of potatoes were sent to Geelong Gaol. The penal authorities happily reported that, "virgin forest was being converted to a valuable asset for the state".²⁵

Indeed, at this time Cooriemungle was enjoying a high public profile.

The Herald reported that, "it [was] the sanest use of prison labour ever seen – saner even than the factories and workshops which are the sanest and happiest parts of Pentridge".²⁶ A field day was held at the farm where 200 visitors, including the Chief Secretary and the Inspector General of Penal Establishments inspected the camp and its productive areas. They declared that the Cooriemungle experiment, which had begun in 1939, had proved so successful that other camps, situated in other parts of Victoria, would be planned. Cooriemungle itself, however, was not to be enlarged because its present size – accommodation for 40 men – was ideal for the purpose. (Accommodation was in fact increased gradually, until the camp housed 60 prisoners

²⁵ Victorian Government Report, op. cit., 1953

²⁶ *The Herald*, Monday June 4, 1945, p.6

A History of Cooriemungle Prison Farm

by 1964). Reflecting on the success of the field day, the editor of the Warrnambool Standard benevolently told his readers that,

“The people of South-Western Victoria should not limit their thoughts to only one penal institution in this part of the State. For the general public the wider question of giving a chance to society’s misfits is of great importance. Cooriemungle offers prisoners productive employment, a healthy open air life, spare time activities – all these modern methods in the treatment of prisoners are not pandering to them. Even from the taxpayers point of view money spent on helping the inmates of penal institutions is an investment, for keeping a man in gaol is very costly. Treating him in such a way that he is less likely to return to crime is economical as well as humane.”²⁷

Locally the farm was also enjoying popularity because of the place the prisoners came to occupy within the local sporting clubs. The camp entered a cricket team in local district competitions and remained undefeated for many seasons, with all matches being played on the prison oval, because of course; ‘away’ matches were not permitted! Similarly, football matches being played regularly with outside teams, although not as part of the local competition. [In 1946, 4 prisoners were permitted to play in the local football team at the request of the Simpson Club, and in 1968 one prisoner won the Best and Fairest award in the local football league and also Cricketer of the Year award.] It was reported that sport was important in occupying prisoners’ idle time, “otherwise they may become engaged in less satisfactory activity”.²⁸

In 1959 the Chief Warder at Cooriemungle reported to the Penal Department on the spirit of the recreational programme of the prisoners,

“For prisoners’ leisure hours’, football and cricket matches are arranged whenever possible. They can and do play tennis on the tennis court adjacent to the football field. Evenings are filled with the usual indoor games, cards being popular and swimming when the weather permits. Swimming facilities at the camp are very good. Impromptu concerts are also a popular and recurring feature and several times during the year public spirited people from the surrounding district bring concert parties which are very well received. It is understood by prisoners that good behaviour results in a minimum of restrictions and

²⁷ *Warrnambool Standard*, January 7, 1949

²⁸ Victorian Government Report, op. cit., 1958

A History of Cooriemungle Prison Farm

regulations and they appreciate this latitude with the result, we have, generally speaking, a very happy camp".²⁹

Certainly the prisoners came to be active participants in the local community. They donated blood regularly to the Red Cross at Timboon Hospital, and made a variety of wooden and soft toys for the Retarded Children's Home at Terang and the Apex Clubs of Camperdown and Cobden. By the late '60's they were donating furniture to local schools, infant welfare and preschool centres. Once a month, on a Friday night, a concert was staged in the recreation hut by members of the C.W.A. and a group from Cobden. A local primary school teacher, Mr Ivan Beechey, who was a regular participant, recalls his motivation was to partake of the magnificent supper provided by the prisoners!³⁰ In 1937, a prisoners' drama group performed a 3 act play, 'The Naked Island' before a large audience in Terang. Throughout the years the local residents returned the prisoners' generosity by donating 2 televisions and a piano to the farm, as well as regularly providing them with Christmas gifts. The local Rotary Club frequently donated money to the prisoners for hobby tools, paying it into the 'Prisoners' Welfare Account'.

Despite the relative freedom of the Cooriemungle prisoners, the daily organisation of the farm very much emphasised the penal nature of this work camp. Their daily programme consisted.

6.45 am	Rouse Bell (7.15 on Sunday and Public Holidays)
7.15	Breakfast, parade, muster
8.00	Parade, muster, work
10.00	Tea Break (10 minutes)
12.00 noon	Lunch
1.00 pm	Parade, muster, work
3.00	Tea Break (10 minutes)
5.00	Cease work
5.15	Tea, parade, muster
7.00	Muster

²⁹ Victorian Government Report, op. cit., 1959

³⁰ Mr. Beechey was the only teacher at the remote Childers Cove Primary School for many years. He and his wife regularly visited the prison farm.

A History of Cooriemungle Prison Farm

9.00	Lock up (later on special occasions)
9.30	Lights out

The prisoners worked a 5 day, 37 hour week. If the weather prevented work on the farm or in the bush, the prisoners were returned to their huts or to the recreation hut. Muster took place on a concrete square outside the Central Offices where each prisoner took his place on an evenly spaced painted dot. A large blackboard was updated daily and clearly displayed which prisoners were allocated to which work 'gangs' and any prisoners who were currently in the infirmary.

The prisoners were accommodated in separate 6' x 8' wooden huts grouped in a semi circle around the main administrative building. It was perceived that this arrangement gave officers a reasonable visual surveillance, whilst also giving the prisoners a feeling of privacy. The huts contained a bed, mattress, five blankets, two sheets, pillow, and pillowslip, bedspread, coir floor mat, table, stool, commode, and night bucket. (These huts were unsewered although the camp did have a septic tank system). These huts were unheated and were lit by a single globe operated by a switch outside the hut. Prisoners were allowed a transistor radio, three family photos, football boots and jumper, books and hobby work in their cells. If their visitors brought them, they were allowed to hang curtains in their huts. It was reported that rooms were "small but comfortable, with each prisoner adding his own personal touch".³¹ Indeed, the walls were usually adorned with 'girlie posters'.

The huts were, of course, locked at night. This precaution was taken "for the good of the men, for if there is any unlawful activity in the area during the night, none of the prison inmates can be accused".³² Nevertheless, there is much oral anecdote regarding the nocturnal exploits of some inmates. This suggests that by whatever means, some prisoners regularly 'borrowed' local vehicles for midnight joyrides and brewed their own alcohol in carefully hidden distilling apparatus. Unfortunately these often exploded!

³¹ H.M. Prison Camp, Governor's Report, Tuesday September 4, 1973

³² Ibid.

A History of Cooriemungle Prison Farm

In fact, during the late '60's there was much press coverage concerning "alleged irregularities at Cooriemungle"³³ with regard to lack of security measures and prisoners trespassing and entering homes of local residents. On the 12th August 1966 *The Age* and *The Sun* published reports of two families on properties near the prison farm claiming that they had been "terrorised" by prisoners leaving the farm at night. Mr Jim White, whose property is a few hundred yards from the farm, reported disturbing a man opening his daughter's bedroom window.³⁴ The wife of a nearby dairy farmer was allegedly tied up whilst prisoners stole her car and joy rode through the town – interestingly Mrs Morris claimed that these men were not desperate, but quite gentle and courteous!³⁵

At a meeting of the Cobden Country Party branch a resolution was moved and passed requesting the Parliamentary Country Party to investigate the security lapses. The Director of Social Welfare investigated the complaints from nearby farmers and submitted a report to the Chief Secretary that "he was satisfied adequate security precautions were being taken at Cooriemungle". One prisoner was returned to Pentridge after his fingerprints were found on the property of nearby farmer Mr J. White – "but there was only one man involved and there have been no problems since".³⁶ This would seem to have appeased the local residents who had "been afraid to leave their homes or leave their womenfolk unprotected".³⁷

Visits to prisoners were permitted once a month from 1 to 4 pm and were held in the mess room under supervision. These were introduced in 1959 and were reported as being "beneficial". The prisoners were searched before the visit, and often afterwards. Visitors were required to notify the camp before they came, and the number of visitors was not to exceed six at any one time. One outward letter a week

³³ *Cobden Times*, August 10, 1966

³⁴ *The Age*, August 12, 1966

³⁵ *The Sun*, August 12, 1966

³⁶ *The Age*, August 13, 1966

³⁷ *Ibid.*

A History of Cooriemungle Prison Farm

was permitted to the prisoners, although they were able to receive any amount of inward mail. Additional outward letters were permitted at the Governor's direction, and all letters were censored.

The prisoners' clothing consisted of an issue of 3 pairs of trousers, 2 jackets, 2 flannel undershirts, 2 shirts, 2 pairs of socks, a pair of slippers, pair of boots, pair of rubber boots, slouch hat, and overcoat. Even at Cooriemungle, no underwear was issued and no private clothing was allowed. Prisoners had to shower at least twice a week, but a daily shower was encouraged.

The prisoners ate all meals in a common dining room, sitting six to a table. They were able to sit with whom they wished and were able to talk during meals. As previously mentioned, fresh fruit was not regularly served, nor was fish available on Friday. However, prison rations were supplemented amply by farm vegetables and sheep. Cooriemungle employed 4 cooks, one of whom was in the officer's mess.

The staff at Cooriemungle worked a shift of 20 days on duty and 8 days off. While on duty they resided in staff quarters in the camp. During the early years of the camp it was emphasized that the staff made "big sacrifices in an effort to aid the prisoners as they were cut off from their families".³⁸ By 1964 the staff numbered 9, comprising one Chief Prison Officer, one Senior Prison Officer, and 7 Prison Officers, supervising 60 men. Two part time Anglican and Roman Catholic chaplains visited once a week and conducted services monthly. Salvation Army Officers visited and conducted services once every three months and the Pentridge chaplains visited quarterly. The local Cobden doctor called monthly; otherwise urgent cases were driven to him. The camp had only a small dispensary for first aid. The hospital and dentist, when needed, were at Camperdown, and prisoners needing psychiatry were returned to Pentridge.

³⁸ Victorian Government Report, op. cit., 1950

A History of Cooriemungle Prison Farm

Certainly, the position of Chef Prison Officer at Cooriemungle demanded a man with certain qualities because unlike the other metropolitan prisons and especially in the earlier years, he did not have immediate access to help in case of accidents or sickness or other emergencies. It was reported that he must be “a man of initiative, able to keep control and deal with emergencies, able to rely on his own authority and command respect from staff and prisoners”.³⁹ In 1968, for example, Cooriemungle was the worst hit prison during the drought. The farm’s main water supply, the dam, dried up completely. This caused great hardship to staff and prisoners, as well as dramatic farm and stock losses.⁴⁰

The prisoners were allocated to work ‘gangs’ which were supervised by a prison officer. A bush gang of 16 prisoners cleared the virgin forests, fenced, ploughed and sowed the cleared land, supervised by a prison officer. A gang of 6, under a prison officer, milled timber for buildings at the camp and other prisons. Ten men were employed in the farm gang, 4 in the vegetable garden, 2 each in the dairy and piggery, and 2 as stockmen – this gang was supervised by the farm manager. A further 15 men worked around the camp under the supervision of a duty officer, as poultryman, librarian, cleaner, firewood cutter, carpenter, laundryman, painter, workshop handyman and officer’s steward.

Each of the prisoners was encouraged to maintain a small garden in front of their cell and in time these were to become very attractive. During the late ‘40’s the officer in charge, a keen gardener, insisted on the lawn and gardens being made around the camp buildings and cubicles. A large hedge was planted around the buildings and in time this grew to offer a protective wind break to the somewhat exposed prison buildings.

Indeed, lines of communication between prisoners and staff were encouraged at Cooriemungle. A prisoners’ camp committee, consisting of 4 men, one each

³⁹ Victorian Government Report, op. cit., 1968

⁴⁰ Ibid.

A History of Cooriemungle Prison Farm

selected from the bush, mill, farm, and camp groups, met the Chief Prison Officer, who was referred to as the Governor, to pass on requests and suggestions. A weekly news sheet written by a member of the committee was typed by the staff and posted on the noticeboard. An inspection of the camp in 1973 recorded that,

“The relationship between the staff and prisoner is good. This may be due partly to the type of prisoner sent to Cooriemungle and security is maintained by trust and periodic supervision and as such tension between the two groups is broken down and mutual respect has developed.”⁴¹

Cooriemungle was not a training prison and as such educational, trade, and technical courses did not form part of the normal routine. Prisoners were, however, encouraged to commence correspondence courses but few did. A debating club met once a week, and one debate a month was held with outside groups. Prisoners were actively encouraged to pursue hobbies and were allowed to purchase hobby materials from earnings or have them brought in by visitors. A hobby room was established with tools and equipment for the prisoners' use. One prisoner, known as Norm, received newspaper coverage as an exhibitor at a Timboon art show in 1969. He exhibited 90 paintings after having begun painting two years previously and devoted himself “entirely to artistic work” in his spare time. Another prisoner, Bill, who had been at the farm more than twelve months, specialised in woodwork of which he had had “no experience before he was sent to Cooriemungle”. He made a wide range of wooden ornaments to help the Timboon Hospital and also made a plaque which was erected on the new Timboon swimming pool. When asked to comment on the hobby work, the prison governor said, “It keeps their minds on a good, clean line”.⁴²

A library of 2,000 books, mostly supplied by Pentridge, was cared for by a prisoner. Books were able to be borrowed every night. One uncensored copy of ‘The Sun’, ‘The Age’, and ‘Weekly Times’ was provided for use in the recreation hut.

⁴¹ Governor's Report, 1973, op. cit.

⁴² *The Colac Herald*, November 28, 1969

A History of Cooriemungle Prison Farm

Other newspapers could be sent to individual prisoners if paid for by friends or relatives and sent through an authorised newsagent.

Cooriemungle was the only Victorian prison which did not install a radio system throughout the accommodation; however the prisoners were able to have their own transistor radios in their huts. “Radio”, it was reported, “was used mainly as an educational factor, but it has an immense effect for good upon the discipline and tone of the institutions”.⁴³ There was no restriction on programmes or listening hours, provided the volume was turned down after lights out. By the late ‘60’s prisoners and staff had television sets in their respective messes. Prisoners were allowed to watch T.V. every night from 7 pm until 9 pm, and programmes were selected by the prisoners’ camp committee subject to the approval of the Governor. At the time of the alleged breaches of security in the late 1960’s, local residents had claimed that the prison farm was closed as late as 11.10 pm because “if there was a good show on television, prisoners knew they would not be locked down until it was over”.⁴⁴

During the 1960’s the Prison Department became a division of the Social Welfare Department, which began a policy of making “a more rational use of the Prisoners Division’s resources”.⁴⁵ There was speculation regarding the continued existence of Cooriemungle. In 1970 the last three allotments of land became ready for disposal and it was noted in the Government Report of that year that, “future policy concerning the prison’s programme will have to be reviewed”. The Governor’s Report of the camp in 1973 lamented that, “Although this prison farm could be running at a profit, or at least paying its way, the Government seems reticent to provide basic amenities or even allocate funds for basis maintenance and improvement”. He reported that the toilet and washing facilities, and the dining room

⁴³ Victorian Government Report, op. cit., 1940

⁴⁴ *The Age*, August 12, 1966

⁴⁵ Victorian Government Report, op. cit., 1961

A History of Cooriemungle Prison Farm

were inadequate – “they were built to cater for thirty men”.⁴⁶ Sadly, it would seem that Cooriemungle was no longer “self-supporting”.

However, in 1972 Cooriemungle established a new large seedling nursery in a joint operation between the Forests Commission and the Parole Division, and in 1975 a Guernsey Stud was introduced. It seemed the camp was taking on a new and stronger direction. Moreover, in March 1975, a press release by the Victorian Minister for Social Welfare, Mr Vasey Houghton, announcing the closure of the McLeod Prison Farm on French Island, stated that:

“The Cooriemungle Prison Farm [was] currently being redeveloped and plans [were] to bring it to a stage where it [would] supply much of the meat and other farm produce requirements for the Social Welfare Department.”

Improvements were still being made to the camp. In 1974 a new bridge was constructed at the entrance of the camp over Cooriemungle Creek from logs and timber obtained on prison property. A chapel was donated by local residents – it was dismantled, transported to the prison, and re-erected by prisoners. Certainly the farm equipment was modernised, with the purchase of a new Landrover, a 3 ton International truck, a bulldozer and two tractors.

Nevertheless the decline of Cooriemungle Prison Farm began on the 24th and 25th of February 1976, when the entire staff was interviewed about their preferences if the camp were ‘phased out’. These were recorded and sent to the Director of Prisons who was satisfied that “all were able to state preferences with the exception of one who required time to think over the proposition”.⁴⁷ In correspondence between the Director General and the Director of Prisons in April of that year the decision to close the prison had obviously already been made previously, as they discussed whether the farm should be retained under a skeleton staff after the prison itself had been closed.

⁴⁶ Governor’s Report, op. cit.

⁴⁷ State of Victoria – Department of Community Welfare Services, File No: 83/797, File Title: Prisons – Closure – Cooriemungle. Correspondence:- To Director of Prisons, From T.S. Manifold (Farm Management Officer), 25th February, 1976

A History of Cooriemungle Prison Farm

There was concern that “funds were not available for the purchase of farm lands at Bacchus Marsh or elsewhere to compensate for the loss of the Cooriemungle farm land”.⁴⁸

All correspondence concerning Cooriemungle after this date records the gradual winding down and closure of the farm. There was no annual Government Report of the farm after 1975, except a brief statement the following year recording that in August 1976 the Cooriemungle Prison closed, and there had been only 6 prisoners remaining in June 1976. There was an exchange of correspondence between the Director General and the Forests Commission regarding the tree nursery, as the sowing for the 1977 season of trees would have had to commence in July 1976 and cease in January 1977. The Forests Commission expressed the hope “to establish a tree nursery at Ararat to replace that at Cooriemungle”.⁴⁹ In August 1976 the Colac Stipendiary Magistrate was notified that it would be unnecessary for him to visit the farm because of its closure.⁵⁰

In July 1976, the six remaining prisoners at Cooriemungle were: A. Reardon, P. Hall, G. Sance, A. Stevens, T. Elrey, and T. McInerney. They were advised to “apply to Classification for reclassification to a prison of their choice”.⁵¹ It was noted that, “it [was] difficult to ration for six prisoners”! At this stage there were six prison officers still employed at the farm. They were transferred shortly afterwards with the exception of three officers who remained to maintain the farm and supervise the removal of all machinery, equipment and stock to other institutions.

⁴⁸ Cooriemungle File, *ibid*, Correspondence: - To Director of Prisons, From Director General, April 26, 1976.

⁴⁹ Cooriemungle File, *ibid*, May 26, 1976.

⁵⁰ Cooriemungle File, *ibid*, August 3, 1976.

⁵¹ Cooriemungle File, *ibid*, ‘File Note’, July 9, 1976.

A History of Coorriemungle Prison Farm

By the end of 1976 a 'closure plan' had been set in operation. Land had been purchased in Watson's Road, Sunbury, and the steel machinery shed and saw mill building, dismantled at Coorriemungle, were re-erected on this site, using working parties from Pentridge. One of the Coorriemungle Prison Officers, M.L. McAuliffe, was allocated to Sunbury for two months to oversee the re-erection of the farming sheds and the storage of the equipment being transferred from Coorriemungle. He later employed for another month to supervise the freight of other equipment and livestock to various prisons around Victoria. A Weatherboard house was moved from Langi Kal Kal to the Sunbury site because, "if there [was] no house, then the farm buildings would be vandalised".⁵² The Stores and Property Officer was responsible for the removal of the house – the anticipated total cost of re-siting was in the vicinity of \$10,000, \$6,000 for moving and \$6,000 for moving and \$4,000 for plumbing, electrical and painting work – and obtaining permits from the Bulla Shire Council. The Stores and Property Officer was to complete a stocktake of all equipment and stores, in order that "all farm materials, stationary and mobile equipment and livestock should be placed where the Department will obtain the most value from them".⁵³

It was not until 29th August, 1977 that information regarding the closure of Coorriemungle was released to the Press. It was to be formally closed on December 1st 1977 after operation as a prison for thirty-eight years. The decision to close down the prison had been made in May 1976 when the total number of prisoners in Victoria was 1550 and the accommodation available at that time was 2240, with accommodation at Coorriemungle for 60 prisoners. The reason for the closure of Coorriemungle was because of a fall in numbers of suitable prisoners available for classification to "open" camps and because of the high cost of maintaining the prison. The Public Works Department would caretake the property after December until a

⁵² Coorriemungle File, *ibid*, Correspondence:- To Director of Prisons, From Mr. T.S. Manifold, May 16, 1977, August 24, 1977.

⁵³ Coorriemungle File, *ibid*, July 14, 1977.

A History of Cooriemungle Prison Farm

Government decision was made concerning the future used of Cooriemungle.⁵⁴ Certainly the local feeling about the reasons for the closure of the prison farm was that ‘the nature of prisoners had changed’ and consequently fewer of them were suitable for this type of penal institution.

The closure of the prison aroused much local and statewide interest in the future use of Cooriemungle. As early as August 1976 there was correspondence between the Director of Prisons and the School Camps Branch of the Education Department officers and inspectors. They advised that, “the Department has received many representations on the future use of the area”, and that this would be “reviewed toward the end of the year, when they would be informed of the outcome”.⁵⁵

A local dairy farmer, Mr Alan Morris, whose property “was almost completely surrounded by the prison farm” wrote to the Minister for Social Welfare expressing interest in leasing a portion of the bush land “which [he] believed [was] controlled by them”. He had already been grazing his cattle on this land “during the recent dry conditions” and was “willing to erect a suitable fence around it”.⁵⁶ He received a reply informing him that the land he described did not belong to that Department but came under the auspices of the Crown Lands Department. It was, furthermore, the subject of an Environmental Study which was expected to take upward of twelve months and that he “[would] no doubt be acquainted with the result of this study through [his] local newspaper”!⁵⁷

By November 1977 the local community were feeling aggrieved that no decision had been made with regard to the future use of Cooriemungle, despite very many expressions of interest and proposals. A public meeting was held in Timboon

⁵⁴ Cooriemungle File, *ibid*, Information for Press Release: To Assistant Director of Prisons, From L. Cox (Administration Officer), August 29, 1977.

⁵⁵ Cooriemungle File, *ibid*, Correspondence: To Officer in Charge Correspondence, From Mr. Harry Penhall, Secretary, School Camps Branch, August 9, 1976.

⁵⁶ Cooriemungle File, *ibid*, June 18, 1976.

⁵⁷ Cooriemungle File, *ibid*, July 22, 1976

A History of Cooriemungle Prison Farm

on the 11th November which was attended by approximately thirty people including Mr. Phillip Gray (Youth, Sport, and Recreation), T. Manifold (Social Welfare) and the two officers still remaining at Cooriemungle. Other people at the meeting were there for self interest and/or Service Clubs.

Mr. Gray stated that he had inspected Cooriemungle in May and estimated that it would cost in excess of \$200,000 to bring the property to a satisfactory standard for a Youth Camp. He believed that the property was not suitable for a holiday camp or farm for a multitude of reasons, included in these was that single and/or double unsupervised hut accommodation was not acceptable for children. Mr. Manifold told the meeting that Cooriemungle had been established as a camp for clearing of bush country in 1938 and that the buildings were never intended for permanent use. Cooriemungle has served its purpose as there was no longer farming use. All Government Departments had been given the opportunity of suggesting alternative uses for the camp when the closure decision had been taken. A number of people has inspected Cooriemungle and all had stated that the buildings were in a bad state of repair – in fact they had been described by one Government body as not being suitable for human habitation. The water supply, sewerage, ablution block, mess facilities and power poles were also well below standard.⁵⁸

Some of the people present vigorously challenged the Minister for Youth Sport and Recreation in his encouragement of Victorians with the “Life Be In It” slogan. If the Minister wanted people to look at trees and go for walks then he should be prepared to give the camp to the locals. People were always wanting to get away from it all – where better to do this than where there was nothing?⁵⁹ Mr. Manifold interjected at this point asking why there was an eleventh hour interest from the local people. This bought a storm of reaction from some of those present stating that various service clubs and the Shire of Heytesbury has on numerous occasions written

⁵⁸ Cooriemungle File, *ibid*, Report of Public Meeting held in Timboon Civic Hall Foyer on 10-11-77 at 8pm, 11th November 1977

⁵⁹ *Ibid*.

A History of Cooriemungle Prison Farm

to the Department regarding the future of the camp during the last twelve months. They stated that the Minister had always replied by saying that before decisions were finally taken, that the writers would be informed. Apparently this had not been the case.

One person (Mr. W. Pope) of Popes Bus Lines stated that he had personally called at the Prison Division's Head Office to investigate the future of Cooriemungle. Apparently because of a presentation or celebration he had not received any attention for the half hour that he remained at the office. The Shire President as Chairman (Mr. Howarth) stated that local interest was not taken as a last ditch resort but the locals did not wish to see part of their heritage disappear. Adjoining landholders (of which there were four present) seemed to be more interested in their fencing problems than anything else.⁶⁰

After considerable debate a motion was moved, seconded and passed appointing a Committee of Management to investigate the property and to prepare and present a submission to the Minister through the Heytesbury Shire Council. Parties interested in helping prepare a submission were:-

- Cobden Technical School
- Cobden Rotary Club
- Timboon Progress Association
- Cobden Primary School
- Cobden Quota Club
- Cobden Pony Club
- Heytesbury Pony Club
- Timboon Lions Club
- Timboon and Cobden Apex Clubs
- Simpson Progress Association
- Girl Guide Movement

⁶⁰ Ibid.

A History of Cooriemungle Prison Farm

The people present could not understand why they were not able to enter the Prison Camp without prior written authority from Director of Prisons or other higher ranking Social Welfare Department officials. Both the entry gate and exit gates to the camp were kept firmly locked, although the camp was currently unattended.

Despite the enthusiasm of the local representatives at this meeting, the camp was left disused for seven years, and the interest of those comprising the Committee of Management waned. In the early 1980's the Department of Social Welfare called for tenders to sell and remove the prisoner's huts. The underground power cables linking each hut to electricity were cut and the prison farm was on the verge of being disassembled. Local feeling was once again aroused, and the Committee of Management rallied to prepare a submission which proposed using the farm as a camp for disadvantaged youth. This was accepted by the Government, provided the camp fulfilled the necessary health and building regulations. The Apex Clubs of the zone made Cooriemungle "their project" and organised a number of working bees to paint and repair the prison buildings, which had by this time become quite neglected. They repainted the buildings in the prison's regulation colours of blue and white, which remains to the current time. The Heytesbury Shire financed the necessary structural changes, plumbing, rewiring, and so forth. The Committee of Management employed a caretaker, and the first camp was organised in 1984 by the City of Footscray (a sister municipality of Heytesbury) for a group of urban Vietnamese teenagers.

Footscray were so impressed with the potential of the camp that they commissioned Don McDow from the Camping Association of Victoria to research and write a "Leaders Manual" for use at the camp by other groups. As the camp was primarily for the use of disadvantaged youth the Shire kept its fees very low. However, by the late 1980's the Shire found that they were losing money on the maintenance and caretaking costs of Cooriemungle. At this time they were approached by Heather and Andrew McGuckian who proposed to lease the camp

A History of Cooriemungle Prison Farm

from the Shire and turn it into a more financially viable school camp, offering full accommodation, catering and organised activities. The Committee of Management agreed to their proposal after some reservations about the heritage of the camp disappearing. In fact the new proprietors were keen to investigate and maintain where possible the rich and unique penal history of the camp and have incorporated this into the activities available for school groups.

Certainly Cooriemungle Prison Farm was an experimental milestone in Victoria's penal history, being the first open, minimum security prison in the state. The first Government Report on the farm reported that its aim was, "the remaking of men, the making of spiritual not monetary profits",⁶¹ and indeed they would seem to have with a genuine objective of rehabilitation. Prisoners and staff together developed a successful and profitable farm and saw mill and did contribute "to the wealth of the community" by making 15 allotments suitable for sale to settlers by the Crown Lands Department. Sadly the reasons for the closure of the farm seem very much to reflect the changes in our society, out law and out treatment of criminals. Nevertheless the prison farm remains a rich contributor to the local history and identity of the Heytesbury area.

⁶¹ Victorian Government Report, op. cit., 1938

A History of Cooriemungle Prison Farm

Bibliography

Primary

- Johnstone, S.W. & Fox, R.G. *Correction Handbook of Victoria*
Commando Business Services
Pty/Ltd, 1965
- Hardwick H.M. Prison Camp – Governor’s
Report. Tuesday 4th September
1973
- State of Victoria – Department of Community Welfare Services
File No: 83/797 – File Title:-
Prisons – Closure - Cooriemungle
- Sate of Victoria – Government Report & Statistical Tables, Penal
Establishments, Gaols &
Reformatory Prisons, 1938 -
1976

Newspapers

- The Age*, August 1966
The Argus, April 1946
Cobden Times, August 1966
Colac Herald, November 1969
The Herald, June 1945, September 1961
The Sun, August 1966
Warrnambool Standard, April 1947, January 1949

Secondary

A History of Cooriemungle Prison Farm

Tomasic, R. & Dobinson, I.

*The Failure of Imprisonment:-
An Australian Perspective.* (Allen
& Unwin, Sydney, 1979)

Mc Dow, D

Camp Cooriemungle – Leaders
Manual