

## Chapter 6 The Adelaide / Gawler Plains

How did European eyes interpret the new environment beyond Gepps Cross?

The focus had been around Adelaide, Mt Barker and in the south of the State. The first ploughing match in the colony where farmers displayed their skills took place at Willunga in 1848 and it had included classes for both bullocks and horse teams.

The Plains region between the Mount Lofty Range and the Gulf had been pronounced 'unpromising and barren' by Captain Sturt but as early as 1842 the Rev. Thomas Stow wrote "It is now beyond dispute, that these denounced plains, after five years experiment are likely to form a most important corn district." A reporter from the *Register* paper had witnessed a ploughing match near Salisbury where, "the fine rich, mellow soil" was revealed for the first time. In the article the reporter wondered why, "the greater portion of these plains had been passed over by settlers choosing land." By 1856 there were 1,500 cultivated acres between Gepps Cross and Gawler. (1)

As far as vegetation was concerned, Eliza Sarah Mahoney, an early settler in 1839, described the Gawler Plains as covered with very high kangaroo grass. (*Themeda australis*) (2) Accounts seem to suggest that the southern and eastern sections of the Plains were flat and open. Kangaroo grass was dominant on the fringe of the Plains and made ideal hay. It could only survive two or three harvestings, so it probably died out quickly.

From the kangaroo, wallaby and spear grass on the fringe of the Plains, vegetation such as mallee and wattles probably increased in size and rose to the central part of the Plain where the peppermint gum, a medium size tree, enjoyed a non-saline water source and could reach up to 45 feet in height. The red gums towards the river were larger again. Following an expedition on 22 November 1838 special surveys of 4,000 acres were made in 1839, one at Gawler and another at Pt Gawler.

The following description was provided by a party that set out on 30 October 1839 with a dray and six bullocks at 9 am from the city:

*"The first four miles of the road to Gawler was poor soil, kangaroo grass and rather thickly wooded, principally with the box tree, but known as Pine Forest: after which the country becomes flat, with some wattles at first and then a perfect Plain. About six miles from town we crossed a dry creek known as First Creek and came to the Little Para at twelve minutes past two."* (3)

A special survey was made at Little Para but it was not until the mid-late 1840s that the first farmers came north to settle along the Little Para and Gawler River. *Deal Court*, Bolivar (1845) Port Gawler Station, 1839. (Buckland Park) With tall red gums and alluvial flats, prominent, enterprising people with money and influence picked the productive spots with water before other surveys were undertaken for settlers.

Other late accounts in 1851 read:

*"The mail is an open four horsed omnibus, carrying about 15 passengers . . . the fare to Burra is one pound. It leaves at 3 pm. arrives 6 pm. at Gawler, leaves 6 am, arrives at Burra at 6 pm. The road from Adelaide to Gawler traverses a flat open country along the coastline of St Vincent Gulf: Each side of the road the country is subdivided into small farms, reaching on*

one side to the gulf and on the other extending to the long range of hills. The country in February presented a brown parched appearance owing to a long and unprecedented drought. Very few objects of interest are met on the road, being limited to the teams of German farmers and bullock drays laden with bars of refined copper". (4)

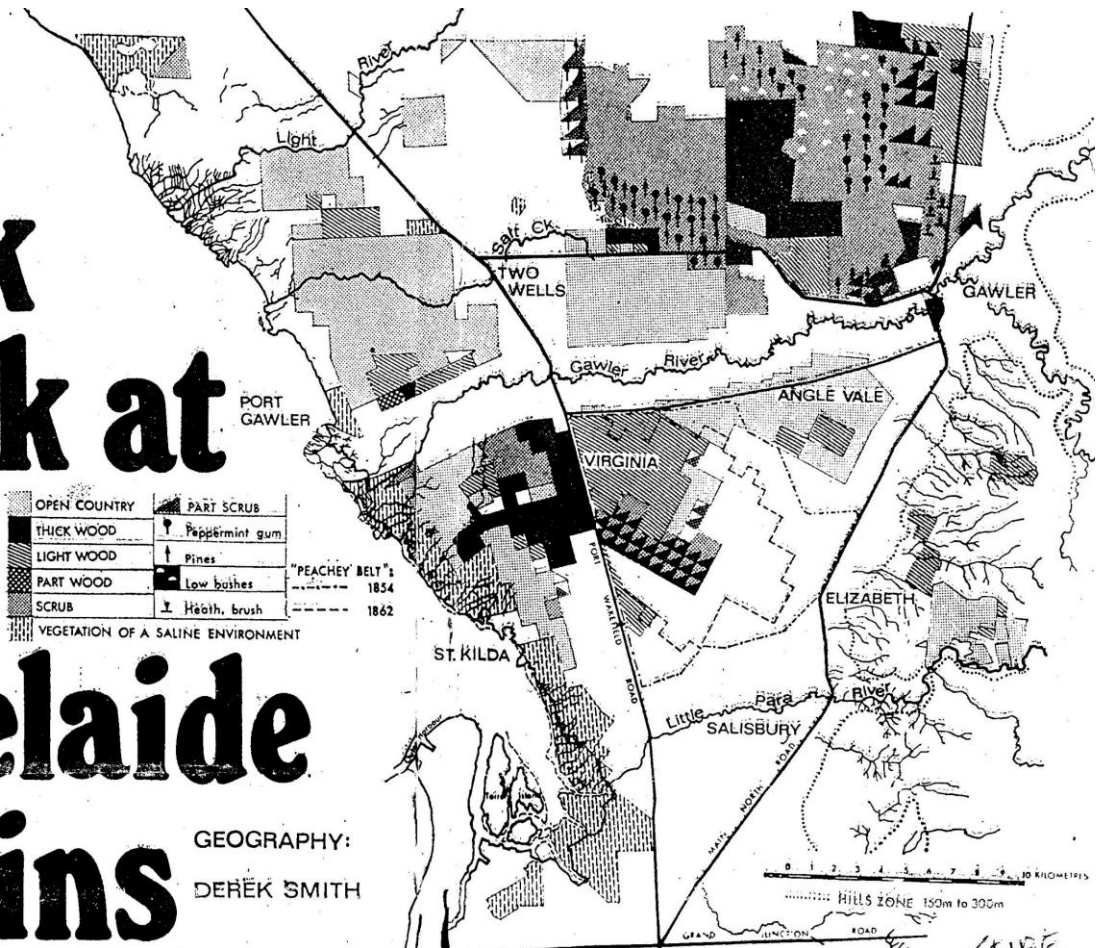
"It was the month of January 1851, the roads hot and dusty and by the time we got to Smithfield I was in a bad state. Next morning three of my bullocks were missing. I recalled that the bullocks had been owned by a man at Dry Creek. I surmised that they might have wandered off to their old beat. So I headed off on foot to find the farm owner. Upon telling him of my dilemma, he pointed in the direction of some pine trees lying some miles away towards Peachey Belt and said. "You 'll find them there". (5)

The area between the Gawler River and Little Para was known as the Adelaide-Gawler Plains and it was surveyed for settlement in 1852. Some like Thomas Curnow (Snr) had been in the colony for a number of years and probably following some success on the Victorian diggings decided to begin farming by selecting an 80-acre section for his son Thomas Curnow (Jnr1).

### Peachey Belt

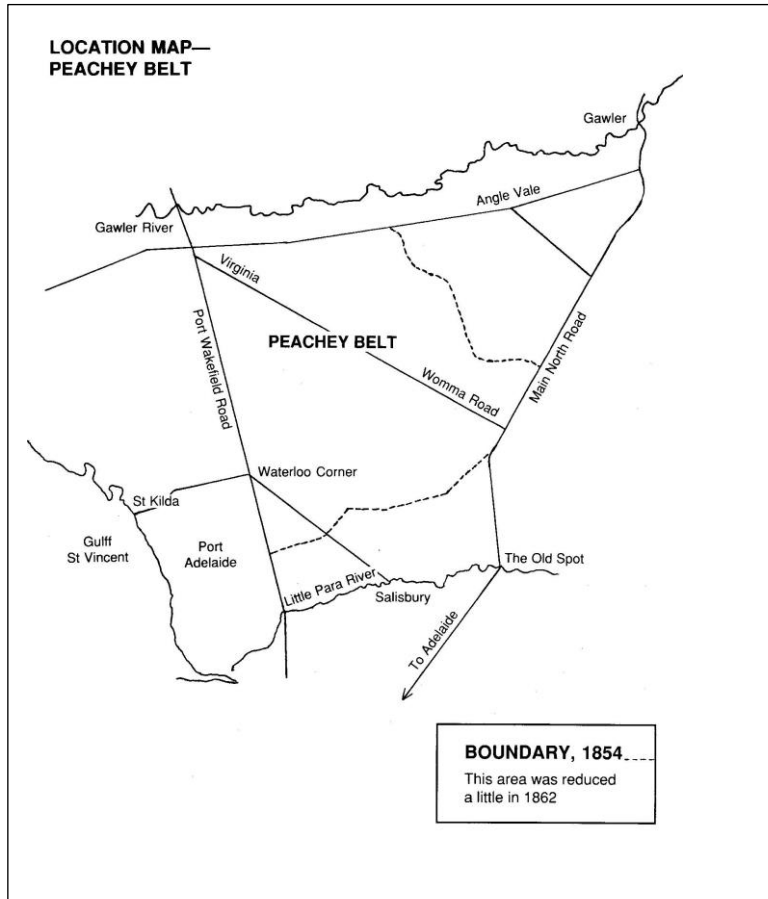
# A look back at the Adelaide Plains

GEOGRAPHY:  
DEREK SMITH



Today it is almost impossible to imagine the early Peachey Belt landscape that was used by early pastoralists but we are told the first surveyors worked in a landscape "relatively unaltered by European settlers." The Virginia township was granted to Mr Brady in 1858 but the Peachey Belt area was not gazetted as Peachey Belt until 1862. The source of the name Peachey Belt

remains uncertain. It could have been named after the early surveyor Peter Peachey, although another view has suggested that perhaps the name derived from the presence of the native peach or quandong. Geoffrey H. Manning in his *'The Romance of Place Names of South Australia'*, prefers the latter view.



Early reports in the 1840s-50s indicate that wild life was common and birds (Cockatoos) nested in larger trees of the woodlands. Most explorers passed through the area quickly on their way to greater things but the field notes of early surveyors and the study of senior lecturer in geography of the University of Adelaide, D. L. Smith have been invaluable. Notes on vegetation, water, timber and soil have been used to gain a picture of how the land was found. In the main the Curnow's land was part scrub near to what was a thickly wooded forest belt.

Some said the Peachey Belt reached towards Gawler about 15 × 5 kms and consisted of Mallee grey box, quandong, emu bush, prickly wattle, golden wattle and native pine shrubs

thrusting into open country south east. While for others it was a strip of heavily wooded country about three miles wide which stretched across the Gawler Plains in a sort of semi-circle from Carclew on the Gawler River to the Gawler foothills. (6)

A correspondent in the South Australian Advertiser, 3 June 1851 described the journey from Adelaide to Gawler. As he entered the area where roughly Salisbury now stands, he observed that:

*“from this point and at some distance across the plains to the west in line with the gulf, stretches the Peachey Belt,”* which he described as a *“forest tract,”* chiefly, *“peppermint gum timber”* (*eucalyptus odorata*) *extending 10 miles in length from north to south by average breadth of three miles”*.

He observed that the importance of this vast range of material for fencing and firewood-- ‘particularly the latter---so close to Adelaide is incalculable. *“It would seem from its yet dense appearance to be almost inexhaustible, but at any rate will afford an abundant supply for many years.”* (7)

Derek Smith concludes, “*The inference from this description is of an area of dense woodland extending from a short distance north-west of Salisbury possibly to the Port Wakefield road, and running northwards to the Gawler River in a belt about five kilometres wide.*”

In fact this endless supply was cleared by farmers and woodcutters so quickly that the deforestation was attracting alarm in the Adelaide paper in 1873. In fact within eight years the supply was threatened and by 1880 it had almost completely disappeared. (8) Post and rail fences was universally used into the 1850s. We know there were farmer-teamsters operating from properties around Virginia. They carted ore from Burra to Port Adelaide and would have needed a return load. Huge quantities of timber were required at the Burra mines so wood from the Peachey Belt provided a ready back-load. In 1852 a miller at Gawler advertised for 3,000 tons of firewood to feed his mill for four months. (R.M. Gibbs, ‘*Under the Burning Sun*’, p149) Then new rail lines needed loads of red gum sleepers. All of this led to the early pillaging of the natural forest.

In any case the natural forest seemed to cover an extensive area bordered by the Gawler River and the eastern foothills. It included what is currently known as Virginia, Angle Vale, Penfield, and today's Elizabeth, Edinburgh Airfield and Evanston Gardens.

Thomas Curnow (Snr) was documented as a farmer of Peachey Belt in both land transactions and the South Australian Almanac, under the District Council of Munno Para West. Early Assessment Books belonging to the District Council of Munno Para West use the term Peachey Belt to locate or describe specific land sections.

The McCallum family of Virginia arrived in the area in 1851 and Aborigines often visited their home and children of the family recalled following native turkey towards Port Gawler. While there were no kangaroos or wallabies, oral tradition says the bush contained a variety of wildlife—rabbits. snakes. curlews. mopokes and owls. to name a few. (9) As the mallee, pine, native peach and low shrubs were cleared the open plain lost its natural covering and as the years passed it often turned to a cloud of red dust. (10)

In what must have appeared to be a forbidding countryside, new arrivals in Australia had often preferred to live in the city. Homesickness was not uncommon so that when people moved onto country blocks it was not unreasonable for them to gravitate towards common meeting places. For most Cornish people life was a mixture of folk law and religion---the chapel and the hotel were important meeting places. This is where Penfield. Virginia. Waterloo Inn. Angle Vale and the Old Bolivar were important for the early settlers of Peachey Belt.

## **Selection**

As the potential of growing grain on the Plains dawned so land sales increased rapidly. Lucky miners and settlers who had purchased good land in the early days made up the bulk of first buyers. Settlement of Peachey Belt was a popular preference rather than the more open eastern plain.

The Curnow Section 4245 purchased in 1853 by Thomas (Snr) on Waterloo Corner Road was described as being covered with ‘*light wood*’. (11) This meant that after clearing light bush it could be ploughed without delay. The surveyors field notes and comments in identifying timbered or wooded blocks indirectly pointed to good soil and ground water. The Curnow

selection then was probably land of great promise although we have a report of scarce water in 1876. (12)



*Nathan  
Curnow*

*(of the 6<sup>th</sup>  
Australian  
generation)*

*1984: (18)*

*Photo looking  
south towards the  
Mt Lofty Ranges.  
Viewing Section  
4257. Now saline  
ground.*

*Later Brumfield  
Tank and old  
family home site  
in the background*

In keeping with the family's close proximity to Mounts Bay and the sea in Cornwall, the Curnow's blocks were convenient to St Kilda. Besides providing relief from the Australian summer, as far as could be recalled by the family, the Curnow's always owned a boat and enjoyed fishing and so their land was well located. Section 4257 leased by Thomas (Jnr 1) and later the site of the Brumfield farm was described in 1854 as being '*uncleared pasture land*' that was enclosed on three sides by owners of adjoining sections. Section 4059 leased by Thomas (Snr) was '*unenclosed pasture*' in 1854 and by 1862 had become '*arable land*'.

## Clearing

The Adelaide Plains was reasonably easy to clear. The clearing of this sort of land in 1842 cost about £2 per acre where, according Philip Payton, the cost in Tasmania was about £10 per acre. Peachey Belt was not just short mallee scrubland. Taller timbers had to be cleared for farming and so felling would have occupied the farmer in one form or another. This was followed by grubbing and burning. No equipment other than that of the axe and mattock was available, although the pulling of bullock or horse would have helped.

By 1854 a large part of the eastern area and along the Gawler River was cultivated. Inroads were being made into Peachey Belt forest and questions were being raised about this in the '*Observer*' paper.

*"The corn (wheat) is most luxuriant and most farmers are now busy fallowing—and those having timbered land are grubbing, preparatory to ploughing. In how far they are doing right by waging a war of utter extermination against the timber I do not pretend to say; but certain it is that unless peace be proclaimed in time, their descendants will look in vain for a tree in that which was once Peachey Belt". (13)*

According to council assessment information by 1854 Thomas (Snr's) Section 4245 was described as 'mixed cultivated and pasture'. This makes it clear that Thomas was in the process

of improving his property. The same section is listed as having a house. the earliest record we have of a home owned by the Curnows.

The activities of close neighbours assist in providing a picture of this period and Mr John Nash, while being a progressive man of some substance, was a farmer of Virginia and close to the working environment of the Curnow family. During 1859-65 Nash was actively involved in clearing and fencing his property while cropping the already cleared areas. (14) In 1861 Nash purchased Block 83 in the Hundred of Port Adelaide on the western side of Port Wakefield Road. While it contained some arable land it was mainly still scrubland. This is consistent with stories from the Ryan family that recalled peppermint gum trees overhanging the fence bordering the western side of the Port Wakefield Road on land owned by the Kings. It was a hardy timber often used for fence posts (15)



*Peppermint gums on Willow Grove. Section 3005.  
Remnants of Peachey Belt. (19)*

In August of 1862 Nash contracted Mr George Krauz to grub eight acres on Block 83 at 17/- per acre and in 1864 were being burnt on sections 3065, 3064 and 3066. Also in 1862 Nash purchased wire priced at 15 shillings a half hundredweight to fence the important parts of his property. This included a stockyard with four wires. (16)

Before fences were erected straying stock proved to be a nuisance. To encourage neighbours to restrain their wondering animals landowners placed a note in the local Gazette as a warning that any strays would be placed in the districts public pound.

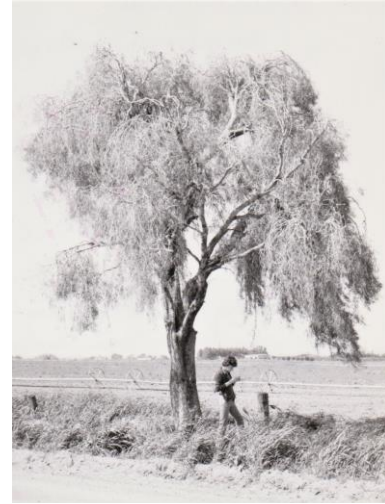
‘Live fences’ such as boxthorn or prickly pear, derived from English farming were common. They were hard to plant and their rapid spreading was often hard to control. (17) By the 1860s wire was cheaper, allowing for much more widespread use and by 1879 stock were required to be branded in order to identify the owner.

Although the exact location of ‘Uralia Scrub’ remains unknown. John Nash carted 46 sticks of good quality native pine from that area during this period. There is little doubt that where possible homes were built of local raw materials. The rafters of the old Helps home are said to be of native pine. The Helps family were neighbours of the Curnows. Their modified house was still standing at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



*Left: Help's Cottage*

*(See 'Pioneering Para Plains'  
E.A Curnow, p 24)*



*Right: Native Apricot tree (Pittosporum phylliraeoides)  
considered a remnant part of the Peachey Belt forest and  
between 300 to 400 years old (20).*

## References:

- (1) G.H. Dury. MI Logan, *Studies in Australian Geography*. S. A. Register 13 September 1851, 'McLaren Vale Sea and Wines', p 42. 'On the Margins of the Good Earth'. p. 12.,
- (2) Derek L. Smith, 'Land Use and Ground Water. History of the Northern Adelaide Plains'. For E.W.S. 1979. p 8.
- (3) E. H. Coombe, 'History of Gawler 1837-1908,' M.P. Austral Print. 1978. p. 11
- (4) 'Sydney Morning Herald' Report. January/April 1851.
- (5) Dr Philip Payton, 'The Cornish Farmer in Australia', 1987, p58. Thomas Hair, 'Hope Farm Chronicle', Geoffrey H. Manning. Pub. 1984. Gillingham. p. 59.
- (6) One Such Reference: L. A. Roberts. 'Methodism on the Gawler Plains' December 1959, p. 6. D. L. Smith, 'A Look back at the Adelaide Plains', Advertiser 17 March 1981. *South Australian Register* 3 June 1851. Peppermint gum was a twisty and hard timber that made good fence posts. Bill Gammage, 'The Biggest Estate on Earth', 2011. The river red gums along the Gawler Para rivers could yield 1,000 posts per tree.
- (7) *South Australian Register* ' 3 June 1851. Peppermint gum was a twisty, slow growing, hard timber that made good fence posts and fuel.
- (8) M. Williams, 'Changing Rural Landscape of S. A', 1977. Heinemann (Educational Aust.). p. 22. Smithfield is described as having had an abundance of timber until cleared away. 'Encyclopaedia of S.A.' p. 353, Vol. 11. 1909. \*Remnant of forest existed on section 3005, property L. J. Rowland—5-6 acres (November 1983).
- (9) Source: Kate Ryan, 'Virginia', December 1970.
- (10) Derek L. Smith, 'Land Use and Ground Water, History of the Northern Adelaide Plains' by for E.W.S., March 1979.p 25.
- (11) 'Land Use and Ground Water. History of the Northern Adelaide Plain's. Fig 2.

(12) *'Land Use and Ground Water. History of the Northern Adelaide Plains'*. Fig 2. The farmhand/ assistant Moyle who worked for the Curnows reported having to strain tadpoles from his water.

(13) *'Adelaide Observer'*, 30 July 1859.

(14) Farm Diary of John Nash 1859—65 (held by Mr Ron Baker. 1979). The Nash sections being 3064. 3065. 3060. perhaps 3066 and 83 in the Hundred of Port Adelaide.

(15) Source: The mother of Miss Mary Ryan, Virginia. Mary was born on 15 September 1907. She also recalled her mother saying there was quite a nice scrub on Kings block (only) and the Kings had pulled some out.

(16) Farm *'Diary of John Nash 1859-65'* (held by Mr Kevin Sheedy. 1986).

(17) Source: Harold Lewis Curnow recalled his father telling of pioneers who planted hedges by dropping boxthorn berries down a hollowed bamboo as they walked.

(18) Nathan Curnow. May 1984. First leased by Thomas (Jnr1) at 14 years of age. Thomas grew potatoes on this Section.. This picture indicates the recent saline level had probably risen closer to the surface. The tank and bamboo on right locates the site of the Brumfield's home later built on this Section. Source : Brumfield Family, see heading 'Potatoes', next Chapter.

(19) Supplied courtesy of Munno Para Library History Collection Three kinds of Peppermint Gum and Native Myrtle grew in the Virginia area.

(20) Supplied courtesy of Munno Para Library. Photo taken November 1981 on Taylors Road, A protected species east side of road. Angle Vale.