

A brief history of Merbein

MERBEIN was established by the State Rivers & Water Supply Commission of Victoria and was the first State owned pumped irrigation settlement in Victoria.

Early river traffic identified the Merbein area as White Cliffs, because of the impressive white cliffs on the southern banks of the Murray River. These sandstone, 60 metre cliffs were a conspicuous landmark for all travellers, both on land and water.

The Merbein irrigation blocks, originally ranging in size from 50 to 60 acres, were allocated for dairying, and many were linked to a dry land block in the Wargan-Yelta district, west of the irrigation area.

E. J. Kenny was appointed the State Rivers & Water Supply Commission's 'Officer in Charge of the Merbein Irrigation Area'.

He supervised the forming of the irrigation channels and the nearby installation of steam driven irrigation pumps, adjacent to the white cliffs.

The pumping stations' furnaces were

fired with wood and many trees in the area were cut, carted and neatly stacked next to the pumps.

The SRWSC officially identified the area as 'White Cliffs Irrigation Settlement Parish of Merbein', yet the Lands Department called it Merbein, reputedly an aboriginal name of a local sandhill.

'Merbein', the preferred spelling by many settlers, was also claimed to be an aboriginal word meaning "throwing a stick by hand" and was reputed to be the spelling on the surveyor's notes, but incorrectly transferred as 'Merbein' on early maps.

On an 1863 Map of the Grazing Leases in Mildura, Merbein is spelt as it is today. However, the local aborigines identified the Merbein cliffs area as 'Mondelmin'.

Early confusion with the NSW opal township of White Cliffs had E. J. Kenny recommend an official change of the settlement's name from White Cliffs to Merbein.

The hot climate and the distance from mar-

kets saw the settlement quickly change from dairying to growing less perishable crops of citrus and grapes for drying and spirit making. The railway opened in 1910 and the rapidly growing township was soon able to supply all the needs of the settlers.

Soldier settlement blocks were established in Birdwoodton and Merbein West during and after the first World War.

The district's horticulture and viticultural industries attracted many European immigrants to the area.

Today, Merbein remains true to its historical roots. It continues to be a successful irrigation district, diversifying from the growing of dried grapes and citrus to a wide variety of wine and table grapes, asparagus, almonds, mushrooms and vegetables.

As well as a wine bottling and packaging industry and a vegetable juicing facility, Merbein has also developed as a regional transport hub for the export of products.

Compiled by Bernadette Wells.