

MURNINNIE GRAVES

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Whyalla City Council
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1. Murninnie graves



Site Identification Reference: CR 5758/616

Local Government Area: Whyalla

Site Address: Lot 78 Lincoln Highway, Murninnie Beach 5601

Total Site Area: 1800 m²

Land Status: Land dedicated for Grave purposes pursuant to the Crown Lands Act 1929 by Gazette 28/06/1979

Site Purpose: Cemetery

Consideration: Subject to Barngarla Native Title Claim

Site Description: The Grave Reserve is located approximately 43km from the township of Whyalla, and 2km from the small fishing town of Murninnie Beach. The four graves are those of Chinese miners, dating back to 1866. The site was proclaimed a Reserve and dedicated to the National Trust of South Australia in 1979.

Identified Stakeholders/Community Interest Groups: Whyalla City Council; Barngarla Native Title Claimants

National Trust Review of Management of Crown Properties Working Group, Site Assessment Criteria 2016:

The Murninnie Graves reserve was proclaimed in 1979 to commemorate the pioneer miners who laboured in the copper mines in the 1860s.

There has been minimal investment made to the Reserve, as the site only requires some vegetation control.

The National Trust of South Australia has previously undertaken maintenance of the Murninnie Graves, but that has now ceased.

Options for Future Management of Site: Revoke and rededicate to Council

Working Group Recommendations: It is recommended that the dedication to the National Trust of South Australia be removed and that the Local Council be requested to take on responsibility for maintenance of the site.¹

¹ National Trust Working Group, Murninnie Grave Reserve, Version 1.0, 27 July 2016

2. Murninnie mine



1863 – First opened by Bismuth and Copper Mining and Patent Smelting Company, SA. Proprietors Messrs. Darwent, Ward, Hallett, Bonney, Swaffer and Cossins. Mr. Cossins, analytical chemist, developed process for separating the two metals.

September 1865 – Mr. Cossins boarded *Lubra* at Murninnie on the way to Port Adelaide. He stated that there were about a dozen men with their families at the mine and that about 120 tons of valuable ore was ready for shipment. (South Australian Advertiser, 11 September 1865)

April 1866 – Operations at the Murninnie are for the present confined to the sinking for water. There is neither fresh nor salt water to be procured at the mine and the expense of procuring sea water for distillation is so great that the proprietors of the mine have resolved to sink until a water of some sort is reached. When this shall have been accomplished the raising of ore will be resumed. It is said that upwards a thousand tons of ore are ready for “stopping”. It is intended next week to relight the furnaces at the Yatala Smelting Works for the purpose of poor class copper ore from Murninnie. The smelting of the bismuth ore is to be held in abeyance until an improved method for doing so shall be satisfactorily completed. Under the old process adopted at the smelting works a large proportion of the bismuth was vaporised, but, notwithstanding the imperfections of this process, the quantity of bismuth realised is stated to have been £78 worth to the ton. (South Australian Register, 3 April 1866)

1867 – Operations suspended.

1900 – Reopened by an English Company, abandoned after 3 months.

1967 – 1969 – shortly reopened and abandoned since.

Latitude: 33° 17' 22" South

Longitude: 137° 17' 36" East

The Murninnie Mine is a copper and bismuth mine noted to contain nickel, cobalt and silver within the lode. The only mineral of noticeable quantity is malachite. The early analysis gave results of 30% bismuth and 40% copper. However, later operations gave results of 5% bismuth and 10% copper from 60 tons of ore, leading to the mine's closure.

Developed on secondary Cu-Bi mineralisation formed in shear zones related to the intersection of two major faults. Host rocks were schist, quartzite and phyllite of Palaeoproterozoic age. The mine consisted of an exploratory adit driven west for -27m. The first 2.5m was in weathered clayey rock, thence into fresh phyllite, -8m from the portal was 2.5m wide NS fracture zone, and a similar zone at the end of the adit. There was no obvious mineralisation. A second adit, described as the "South Mine", had pockets of secondary, malachite ore stoped out at 15 and 30m from the entrance. On the opposite side of the creek was an adit known as the 'North Mine', with 4 winzes sunk in the floor of the adit. There were several, small surface workings above the North Mine. The only ore mineral seen was malachite forming in two minor NS faults. Bismuth was reported in the early mining. Ni mineralisation was reported from a vertical shaft. The host sequence was intruded by basic dykes of unknown age. Incomplete production records estimated >1020 tonnes @ 10-20% Cu, 18-75% Bi.²

² www.mindat.org (Murninnie Mine, Whyalla, Eyre Peninsula, South Australia, Australia)

3. Early Chinese in Spencer Gulf and South Australia

1847 – an unknown ship sailing from Port Adelaide to Port Pirie brought in a number of Chinese settlers.³

January 1856 – 210 people of Chinese descent landed in Port Pirie and proceeded to Victorian goldfields.⁴

1861 – 1870s – the official number of Chinese in South Australia increased from 40 to 100.⁵

1872 – Chinese shepherd lived near Pillie (south of Port Lincoln).⁶

1875 – A. Hang, Chinese gardener lived in Port Lincoln.⁷

1876 – Lee Song, Chinese builder and carpenter active in Port Augusta.⁸

1878 – Chinese Woon Chum and Kong Fat travelled through Port Augusta.⁹

1881 – the first census of Chinese people in South Australia recorded 4 151 people born in China.¹⁰

1891 – 5 Chinese importers lived in Adelaide dealing in Chinese food, tea, silk, sandalwood and handicrafts.¹¹

1891 – the second census of Chinese people in SA listed 3 997 persons.¹²

³ Paul Mazourek, *Early Maritime Heritage of Northern Spencer Gulf*, 2005

⁴ Erik Berrevoets, *Notes on the graves at Murninnie*, 2019

⁵ Sahistoryhub.com.au, 2019

⁶ Erik Berrevoets, *Notes on the graves at Murninnie*, 2019

⁷ As above

⁸ As above

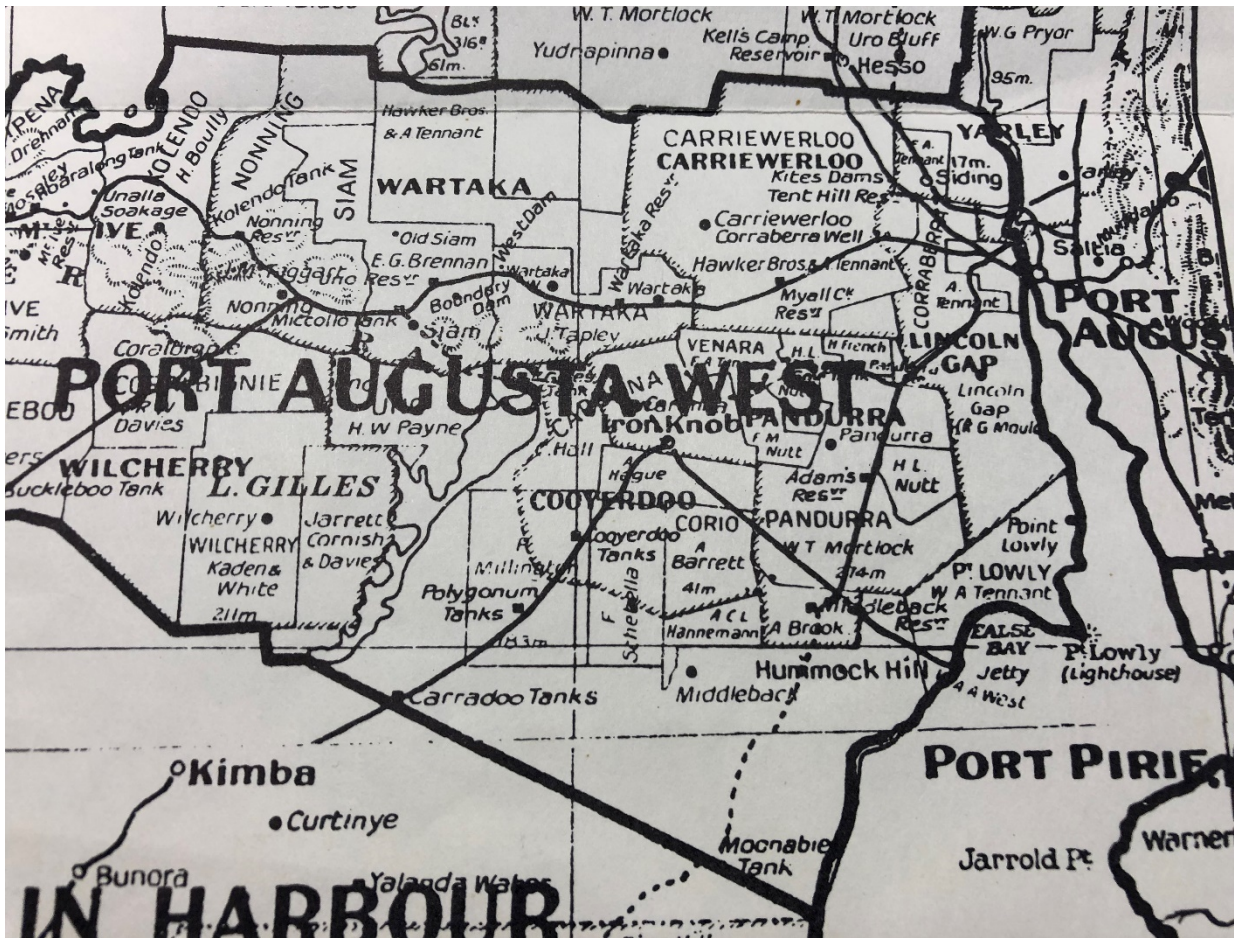
⁹ As above

¹⁰ As above

¹¹ *Wakefield Companion to South Australian History*, Kent Town, 2001

¹² Erik Berrevoets, *Notes on the graves at Murninnie*, 2019

4. Pastoral and other history of the area



Pre 6,000 years ago – Murninnie is a mythological site important to Barngarla people.

1857 – Point Lowly Station owned by James Chambers.¹³

1858 – Lease for sale: County Flinders, Murninnie about 9 miles south east of Middle Back Mount and 15 miles south west of Mount Young. Hundred not named.¹⁴

1862 – F.G.Morgan leased property south west from Point Lowly. The southern boundary of the lease was Hummock Hill covering parts of later Nonowie and Mount Laura.¹⁵

1862 – The official SA Government survey of the waters north of Point Lowly.¹⁶

1862 – SS *Lubra* sailed from Port Adelaide to Port Augusta every Saturday.¹⁷

1864 – Murninnie block lease held by Henry Holroyd (1829-1911), lawyer.¹⁸

¹³ Whyalla News, 2 May 1952

¹⁴ South Australian Register, 8 September 1858

¹⁵ Whyalla News, 2 May 1952

¹⁶ Paul Mazourek, Early Maritime Heritage of Northern Spencer Gulf, 2005

¹⁷ As above

¹⁸ Whyalla News, 2 May 1952

- 1867** – A swag was found south of Wallaroo, belonging to George Ball, a Welshman, who worked about 18 months at Murninnie Mine. Possibly perished in the bush after attempting to walk to Adelaide (body never found).¹⁹
- 1887** – A.J.Bryant secured the contract for excavating a 9,000 cubic yards reservoir on the Franklin Harbor track about 70 miles south of Port Augusta and about 5 miles distant from the Murninnie Mine.²⁰
- 1888** – Pastoral lease sale: Murninnie, Block 181,31 square miles, improvements £224 13a 7d, R.Myer&Son £1 0s.²¹
- 1896** – ‘Insane’ white man, George Griesley who got lost from a camp in Port Augusta, was found by Mounted Constable McEwen and a tracker near Murninnie about 30 miles north of Cowell in the scrub.²²
- 1897** – Cowled family leased Nonowie (sold in 1915).²³

¹⁹ South Australian Advertiser, 10 September 1867

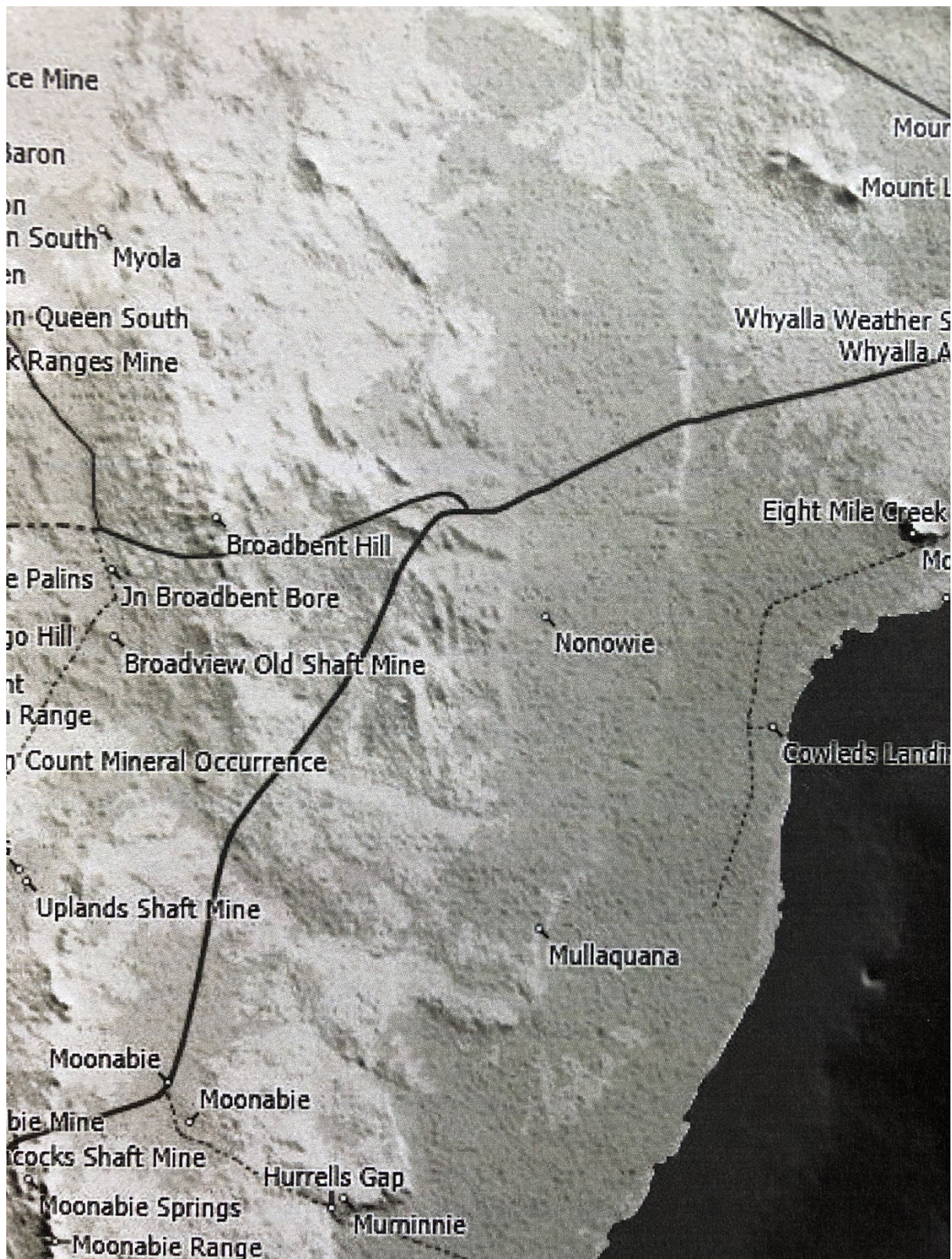
²⁰ Port Augusta Dispatch, Newcastle and Flinders Chronicle, November 1887

²¹ Port Augusta Dispatch, Newcastle and Flinders Chronicle, 3 July 1888

²² Chronicle, Adelaide, 22 February 1896

²³ National Trust SA, Whyalla Branch, Mount Laura Homestead Museum

5. Discussion



On 24 May 1977, Department of Lands sent a letter to the National Trust of South Australia, Adelaide that read: *“Dear Sir, It is proposed to reserve an area adjacent to Murninnie Beach, Hundred of Poynton containing old graves as a ‘Grave Reserve’. The graves are four mounds, two with old wooden crosses lying on them. Surveyors from this Department*

discussed the graves with local residents who claim that they belong to four Chinese copper miners who died in the 1890s. Your comments are sought as to whether the Trust would be prepared to accept responsibility for control of the area when the graves are reserved."

Signed by W.R.Marchant, Principal Drafting Officer.

On 1 June 1977, the National Trust of South Australia, Adelaide forwarded the above letter to the Whyalla Branch, stating: *"Dear Mr. Nicholson, Attached is a copy of a letter just received from the Department of Lands, which is self-explanatory. Would you be good enough to let us know whether your Branch would be prepared to take on the responsibility of looking after this Grave Reserve. We also wish to know if any of your members know of the whereabouts of this Reserve which we understand is somewhere between Whyalla and McGregor."* Signed by G.W.Toogood, Director.

On 11 July 1977, at the meeting of the National Trust of South Australia, Whyalla Branch, "Chairman advised that he had received letters 1. *Re Chinese graves at Murninnie*, 2. NTSA Convention, 3. Ins Receipt".

On 8 August 1977, at the meeting of the National Trust of South Australia, Whyalla Branch, *"Mr. D. A. Nicolson presented correspondence referred to at the previous meeting. E. Reid and Chairman are to visit grave sites at Murninnie and make decision concerning low galvanised rail fence positioning. Meeting decided a sign and fence would be adequate. Secretary to write to NTSA re our decision."*

On 14 November 1977, at the meeting of the National Trust of South Australia, Whyalla Branch, *"The Chairman, E. Reid and A. Reid visited the Murninnie grave site on 13-08-77 and decided a low galvanised rail around the 4 graves would be best and a sign. L. Penglase to arrange fittings D. Nicolson railing. Mrs. Sutcliffe to contact Mr. Les Oborn re information for the sign."*

On 13 February 1978, at the meeting of the National Trust of South Australia, Whyalla Branch, *"Mrs Sutcliffe spoke with Mr. Oborn who informed her that the Murninnie Copper Mine closed when the Chinese workers died of fever and presumably this was the cause of death of the Chinese buried in the 4 graves. The Chairman Mr D. A. Nicolson suggests a picnic working bee be held to erect the railing around the graves. Mrs Sutcliffe moved Mr Willson seconded that L. Penglase purchase 4 x 1" 3 way elbow joints and present the account to the Branch. Carried"*.

On 13 February 1978, at the annual general meeting of the National Trust of South Australia, Whyalla Branch, in the Chairman's report: *"The Chairman hoped the 4 Chinese graves site will be fenced."*

In August 1979, at the meeting of the National Trust of South Australia, Whyalla Branch, *"The Chairman also advised the meeting that the current owner of the Murninnie Mine area Mr. E. L. Leiblich, 18 Caldwell Drive, Kimba had expressed some doubt as to whether the graves of Chinese miners at Murninnie were in fact the graves of Chinese at all or perhaps of Europeans – one perhaps being that of a Captain Teesdale who was Harbour Master at Cowell. Another research through the 'Chronicle', 'Whyalla News' & 'Scope' will be done."*

On 15 October 1979, at the meeting of the National Trust of South Australia, Whyalla Branch, *"Letter re Preservation of Engineering Relics: The Chairman explained to Mr. Toogood that with regard to the Chinese graves, reserve at Murninnie, the Whyalla Branch*

was asked and decided to put a 1" pipe railing around the graves. The Branch did not apply for any area in the grave locality to be made a reserve. Evidently the Department of Lands had decided to create Section 28, Hundred of Poynton as a Graves Reserve under the care, control and management of the National Trust of SA."

In 1985, Danvers Architects conducted heritage survey of the City of Whyalla region. This report was part of Heritage Survey of the Eyre Peninsula and West Coast, prepared for the State Heritage Branch of the Department of Environment and Planning. The Murninnie graves are mentioned as Item No.: WHY 018, Item Name: Chinamen's Graves. Their Heritage Significance description includes: *'Four stones marking graves with galvanised iron rail surrounding site. It is not known when these Chinese miners died, or how they died, but the history of the mine goes back to 1866. It reflects an interest in South Australian mining shown by Chinese miners in South Australia.'*

The references for this statement are listed as:

Written: H.Y.L Brown, Record of the Mines of South Australia, 4th ed., p.96

E. L. Cowled, Nonowie – Life of Ernest Leslie Cowled (unpub.), p.7

Verbal: Don Nicolson, Tape 34A

The publication, H.Y.L Brown, Record of the Mines of South Australia, 4th edition, p.96, does not contain any information about the workforce at the mine or Chinese miners. The description is of technical and geological content only.

Leslie Cowled, in the publication E. L. Cowled, Nonowie – The Life of Ernest Leslie Cowled, written in his 85th year at Victor Harbour, 1965, provided these comments: *"Another unexplained mystery was the three graves, with a small wooden cross at the head of each grave. These graves were besides the road leading to the landing place on the beach, about 2 miles from the mine and about the same from the beach. They looked like children's graves, but we were never able to find out who they were."*²⁴

Jack Casanova, in his book Fading Footprints: Pioneers, Runs & Settlement of the Lower Eyre Peninsula, 1992, stated: *"Miners at Murninnie chronically lacking water, saw their friends and families, thought to be typhoid victims, buried in graves between the mines, and the landing where ships called to move ore or bring supplies"*.²⁵

The area around Murninnie had also been known for its sandalwood vegetation.²⁶

Santalum spicatum is a very high quality sandalwood species which also occurs naturally in South Australia, despite its common name of 'Western Australian Sandalwood'. It was once, but is no longer, plentiful in the Flinders Ranges, around Whyalla, and north and west of Port Augusta. South Australia's sandalwood export industry was much smaller than that of Western Australia and has been accorded little significance in the historic records. It was nevertheless of considerable importance to some South Australians, particularly during the 1920s and 1930s, and during that time the industry produced a useful return to the South Australian government in licence fees and royalties.²⁷

²⁴ Erik Berrevoets, Notes on the graves at Murninnie, 2019

²⁵ As above

²⁶ Larry Bebbington

²⁷ Judith Jeffery, Geese and Golden Eggs: South Australia's Sandalwood Industry, 1925-1940.

6. Conclusion

The first confirmed proof of any activity that raised the issue of the 'Chinese graves site at Murninnie' was a letter from the Department of Lands to the National Trust, Adelaide in May/June 1977. It, however based on an unconfirmed oral statement reported by the surveyors, started the project of the grave site protection. This process included some limited research done by the Whyalla NT Branch members. No proper evidence, only two contradicting (and unconfirmed) oral claims (Les Oborn²⁸ and E. L. Lieblich – see above), were recorded and presented at the time of this activity.

In 1979, the State Government proclaimed the site as the official Grave reserve dedicated to the National Trust of South Australia. No proper evidence that the graves were of Chinese people or miners was cited.

In 1985, the official historians for the Danver Architects' heritage survey of Eyre Peninsula quoted one printed source, one unpublished source and one oral source in support for the claim that graves were those of 'Chinese miners'. The printed source did not mention the working force at the Murninnie mine at all, only the technical aspects of the mine, the unpublished source (later printed out) used a quote by Ernest Leslie Cowled who did not mention a 'Chinese' either, claiming that there were three graves of mystery origin that looked like children's graves. Please note, that the Cowled family settled at the property bordering with the Murninnie block only in 1897, thirty (30) years after the Murninnie Mine officially closed. The oral source was recording of Mr. Nicolson, who served as former Chairman of the National Trust, Whyalla Branch and was involved in the initial process that started in 1977 (see notes above). Once again, no proper evidence supported the 'Chinese miners' claims.

In 1992, the Port Lincoln local historian Jack Casanova mentioned the graves in general terms, without any reference to 'Chinese', in his book. I contacted Jack's brother Ron who helped him with the research (Jack was wheelchair bound), and the Port Lincoln History Society but none had any archived evidence about the Murninnie graves. There is no evidence to Jack's claim that the bodies buried at Murninnie were of the "typhoid victims" and/or "miners".

The second half of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century South Australian newspapers of the time did not report any information about graves, loss of human life through mine accidents, illnesses, violence, people lost without a trace in the bush, Chinese people, encounters or dealings with aboriginal people, stranded sailors or serious pastoral issues at Murninnie. The reports about Murninnie mine at the time consisted only about financial and technical issues. Even some selected recollections of a former Murninnie mine employee published in 1887²⁹ described the simple stories about loaded barge getting loose at the high tide and about a man who was so desperate for tobacco that he smoked gumtree leaves. There is no evidence of Chinese people or any burial in general in and/or near Murninnie with regard to this source.

In the 1860s, there were no official records of Chinese miners at copper mines in South Australia. The workforce generally consisted mainly of miners of Cornish and to a lesser

²⁸ Les Oborn was son of Samuel Oborn and Mabel Edith Cowled. He was four years old when his family returned to Nonowie in 1903. (B. Johnstone, Hummock Hill, Early Years and Pioneers)

²⁹ Mount Barker Courier and Onkaparinga and Gumeracha Advertiser, February 1887

extent of German origin.³⁰ The people of Chinese origin were reported landing at Port Pirie well before the establishment of the Murninnie mine, proceeding to the Victorian goldfields but there is no evidence of Chinese people staying in Port Pirie or crossing the Gulf to Murninnie.

However, the Chinese settlers in the wider area of the Spencer Gulf were only mentioned near Port Lincoln in 1872 and in Port Augusta in 1876. Those regional centres were already well connected to Adelaide by shipping (Port Lincoln and Port Augusta) and by road (Port Augusta). Murninnie area remained remote and isolated (and to an extent it still is isolated today). There is no evidence that those Chinese people mentioned in Port Lincoln and Port Augusta were in any way connected to Murninnie.

A local resident and a coastal flora consultant mentioned a possibility of sandalwood harvesting in Murninnie by 'Chinese'. However, even on a very small scale, this activity was not reported by pastoralists, mining company, shipping, newspapers and/or government in the 1860s or later. No evidence supports this claim.

In conclusion, there is no historical evidence that the Murninnie graves are those of Chinese miners, European miners, European settlers or Aboriginal people. The State Government's decision on the reserve establishment and its dedication was based on hearsay.

There is also a pending question whether the graves contain human or animal remains. The only way to resolve this issue is to conduct proper archaeological exhumation and DNA testing.

³⁰ Erik Berrevoets, Notes on the graves at Murninnie, 2019

7. Research methodology

The research of the subject included search for contacts, consultants, experts in different fields, primary and secondary resources related to the subject, oral history and field trips. The work was done both electronically, through telephone conversations and in person. There are limitations in doing research outside the metropolitan Adelaide: for example, some rare books cannot be lent out from the State Library and the State Records do not employ their own researchers anymore. However, through the ever-growing digitisation of the archived documents, and physical search, I was able to examine over 2,000 documents related to the subject. I have also interviewed a number of people over telephone and in person.

List of organisations and individuals consulted:

National Trust of South Australia, Whyalla Branch (Mt Laura Homestead Museum)
National Trust of South Australia, Adelaide, head office
National Trust of South Australia, Port Pirie Branch
Mr Greg Drew, retired PIRSA geologist/historian
History Trust of South Australia
State Records of South Australia
State Library of South Australia
Mr David Knox, Whyalla City councillor and former CEO
Danvers Architects Adelaide
Ms Patricia Summerling, SA historian
Mr Hamish Angas, Heritage SA officer
Whyalla News
ABC News
Trove National Library Australia
Mr Erik Berrevoets, Deakin University lecturer, researcher
Mr Leon Crowhurst, Murninnie resident
Whyalla Library, local history collection
Natural Resources Eyre Peninsula, Mr Anthony Kennedy and Mr Tim Breuer
Flinders University, Archaeology Department, Ms Heather Burke
Mr Larry Bebbington, retired EP vegetation consultant
Mr Ron Casanova, brother of author and EP historian Jack Casanova(deceased)
Port Lincoln Historical Society
Franklin Harbour History Museum, Cowell
Max and Pat Jones, Mulaquana Station
Whyalla Family History Group, Ms June Phillips-Smith
Mr Joe Bohlin, Whyalla resident
General internet search
Field trips