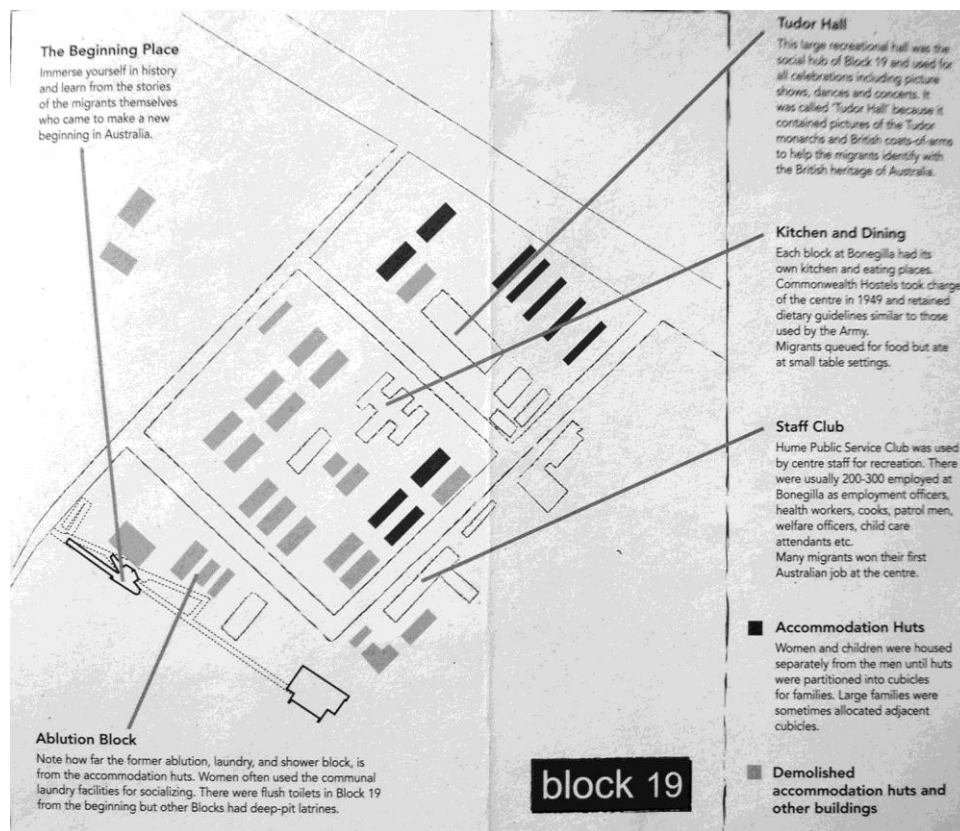


# READING BLOCK 19

## BONEGILLA

A guide for teachers planning and conducting secondary school visits to the  
Bonegilla Migrant Experience Heritage Park



**Albury & District Historical Society Papers**  
**No 10**  
**2008**

**ISSN 1835-5455**

*Bruce Pennay 2008*

Funding support from Art & Cultural Grants Program  
Wodonga City Council.

The Albury & District Historical Society Papers are published in order to disseminate the research and work of members of the Society.

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**BONEGILLA MIGRANT EXPERIENCE HERITAGE PARK**  
**is located on Bonegilla Road C541, just off Murray Valley Highway**  
**B400, approximately 15 km east of Wodonga.**

**Visiting the site** – The Park is open 9.30am- 4.30pm each day.

Groups seeking access to the interiors of buildings need apply to

[Bonegilla@parklands-alburywodonga.org.au](mailto:Bonegilla@parklands-alburywodonga.org.au) or to [admin@bonegilla.org.au](mailto:admin@bonegilla.org.au)

Volunteers attend these email addresses once a week.

## READING BLOCK 19 BONEGILLA

With National Heritage listing, Block 19 Bonegilla has become part of the narrative of nation; a must-visit place on any grand tour of historic Australia. A two-metre plinth declares the place to be ‘a symbol of post-war migration which transformed Australia’s economy, society and culture’.

Bonegilla was the largest and longest operating migrant reception centre in the post-war era. It is of national significance as a place associated with and demonstrating a defining change in Australia’s immigration policy. Most of the migrants and refugees that passed through Bonegilla, while it operated as a reception centre between 1947 and 1971, were drawn from non-English speaking European countries. This post-war shift from prioritising Anglo-Celtic sources transformed political and social expectations of the cultural diversity of Australia.

Block 19 Bonegilla is being developed as a public memory place. The site and its associated oral, written and pictorial records in the Bonegilla Collection at Albury LibraryMuseum and in other places illuminate post-war immigration policies and procedures that changed the composition and size of the Australian population. They provide evidence and insights into post-war migration and refugee experiences. For the migrants who spent time at the centre and their descendants, the site and its records are resources for personal, family and group histories. For the broader Australian community, they help represent the role of Australia as the ‘host’ nation. Both the site and its records have powerful connections for many people.

**Using this guide** - This guide is to help teachers prepare for, conduct and review middle secondary school visits to Block 19 Bonegilla.

- It provides information and suggests ways for helping student visitors to read the site imaginatively and critically, to understand the significance of the site and to ponder post-war refugee and migrant experiences of arrival and settlement and host society experiences of taking in strangers.
  - It is a companion piece to *So Much Sky: Bonegilla Reception and Training Centre*, Migration Heritage Centre, Sydney 2008 (available from Albury LibraryMuseum).
  - It suggests seven posts of reflection, but there need be no one tight tour sequence.
  - It uses the voices of the refugees, migrants and members of the host society to explain how the site was used and perceived.
- 
- **Key questions** - What caused this place? Where and what time is it? What do the buildings tell us about the people who built them, lived and worked in them? Did the buildings or the living and the working change over time? How have and do people feel about the place? How does this place add to our understanding of the community, the nation or ourselves? This visit may help students to read other heritage sites similarly.
  - **Visitor challenges** - Student visitors might be challenged to venture how they would have read the Bonegilla Reception Centre, then, and how they read the Heritage Park now. They might advance hypotheses. Why did people have favourable or unfavourable responses to Bonegilla? What differences might be expected if the newcomer was - a refugee or an assisted migrant; young or old; male or female; came in a family or alone; spoke or did not speak English on arrival; stayed a short time or a long

time at Bonegilla; arrived before or after the centre was 'improved'? What could have been on a list of new country surprises for someone of secondary school age anticipating coming to Australia from a non-English speaking European country? Which parts of the migrant experience would a teenager and their family have found most challenging at Bonegilla - as short-term or as long-term residents? What could they have done to meet those challenges?

- Student visitors should be encouraged to make an appraisal of the modern day heritage park. How would students like to see the refugee and migrant experience commemorated on site if they or their family had a Bonegilla connection? Which memory triggers work best at helping young people understand refugee and migrant experiences? What more can be done to present the site to former resident pilgrims and their families? What more can be done to present the site to visitors with no connection with the site?
- *Inspecting fabric – A site visit gives opportunity not only to see buildings, but also to consider how the built fabric and the natural surrounds framed arrival experiences. Block 19 Bonegilla is set out as part of a typical Second World War military war camp. It has survived principally because it was a better appointed than other blocks. It was used, first, as army headquarters and, then, as the migrant centre staff block. The Army continued to use and maintain Block 19 into the 1990s, well after the migrant centre closed. Block 19's survival to the present day makes it a rare but representative example of post-war migrant accommodation camps. There are few buildings, if any, still extant at other post-war migrant accommodation places.*
- **Pondering camp cunning** – Many in the first contingents of Displaced Persons had learned to survive refugee camps in Europe by using their wits to make shrewd appraisals of people and systems of control. They used similar strategies to cope with reception centre life. The staff and later groups of refugees and assisted migrants also found ruses for making communal life easier and getting around centre procedures.
- **Other Suggestions** - Teachers might use the guide as base from which to devise questions that call on students to observe, imagine, predict, suggest why, explain and ponder. They might suggest that students use their sensory imagination (look about you, listen, feel the place on hot, cold, dry, rainy, windy days and nights, move about the centre at busy and quiet times, taste the food, listen to the voices coming from the English language classes). They might invite empathy ('envisage your family here: So this is Australia! Should we have come? Will we stay?'). They can ask students to ponder migration as a bitter-sweet experience. They might ask not only about the refugee and migrant experience of arrival and settlement, but also about the nation's role in reception and training. Those questions morph into modern day equivalents. What is the current refugee and migrant experience of arrival and settlement? How are new arrivals received and trained?

**1 - The 'Beginning Place' Interpretation Centre.** The interpretation centre provides a preliminary explanation of the where, when, what, who, why, how of the site.

**Time** - The Bonegilla Army Camp was built in 1940. From 1947 until 1971 the former camp was used for migrant accommodation. The site reflects mid-twentieth century Australian values. To visit Bonegilla is to visit the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s.

**Purpose of the migrant centre** - In the immediate post-war years Australia launched a bold immigration program to increase the size of its population: a large workforce would boost economic development; more people could better defend the country. Initially Australia encouraged people from the United Kingdom and Displaced Persons from war-torn Europe to come. Through the 1950s Australia negotiated assisted migration agreements with several European nations. As there was a severe housing shortage, Government found it necessary to provide the migrants it had assisted with temporary accommodation until they found jobs and their own places to live.

> **Reception Centres**, like Bonegilla, were to give assisted foreign migrants who did not have private accommodation a place to stay temporarily, usually up to about six weeks after their arrival, while they awaited placement in employment. The prime function of a reception centre was to allocate new arrivals to employment places.

> **Holding Centres** housed non-working dependants when reception centres could not cope with the large numbers arriving between 1948 and 1951. Many women and children were sent from Bonegilla to holding centres at Benalla, Uranquinty, Cowra and Scheyville. From about 1951 to 1953, however, Block 15 in Bonegilla was used as a holding centre when workers found jobs elsewhere. Family separation was unpopular. Only non-British immigrants were expected to endure such disruption of family life.

> **Hostels** specially built by the government and private companies housed workers close to their places of employment in places like Wollongong and Newcastle. These hostels were for British families and for non-British single men or married men unaccompanied by their dependants. During the 1960s at least one block at Bonegilla also served as a hostel to house 'outside' migrant workers employed locally. Bonegilla was also hostel-like for the centre staff and their families if they chose to live there. They were usually in Block 19 or Block 16.

Bonegilla, then, was primarily a 'reception centre' where new arrivals had a place to live while they were 'processed' and allocated jobs. It was a 'training centre' where non-English speakers could begin to learn the language and about Australian ways. It was intended to help people make the transition to a new life in a new country. At different times some blocks were used as a holding centre and an 'outside' workers hostel. Many reception centre staff and their families were accommodated on-site.

**How did the reception centre function?** - On arrival newcomers were allocated a hut with an issue of eating utensils, crockery, blankets etc. Within an hour they were given a meal. Next day, they were welcomed to Australia and Bonegilla. They were tested for language competence and allocated to language classes. They had opportunity to check all their heavy unaccompanied luggage had arrived and was stored. Within a few days they registered at the Commonwealth Employment Service and had a job interview. Separately they registered for social services (unemployment and child endowment payments) and an Alien Registration Certificate, which permitted them to live in Australia. They had to attend a medical examination and be X-rayed. It was usual to segregate nationalities into separate blocks so that the kitchens could cater for specific national tastes.

*Fabric - Fred Chaney of Cox Sanderson and Ness established the design principles for the commemorative centre in 2003. He insisted that any new buildings be of a similar domestic scale, simple and austere. He wanted the place to be 'silent and still': 'a place to remember and learn'. Chaney designed the pavilion and the wall of faces. The long open pavilion is meant to suggest the journeys people had to and through Bonegilla. The wall of faces suggests something of the huge number and variety of people who came to Australia via Bonegilla. Thylacine fitted the interpretative materials and the wall of voices. The wall of voices focuses attention on the experience of the refugees and the migrants.*

**2 – Look around you** - Location and fabric framed arrival experiences. Over 300 000 newcomers asked where and what is this place?

**Size** - Bonegilla was big. The bleakly named Block 19 points to what became 23 similarly sized and constituted other blocks. At one time, the reception and training centre could cope with up to 7 700 people and an additional 1 000 in tents, if need be. Generally there were between 2 000 and 5 000 residents. About 320 people lived in Block 19. Bonegilla had its own churches, banks, sporting fields, cinema, hospital, police station and railway platform. For several years there were more people in Bonegilla than Wodonga.

**Geographical location** – Bonegilla was distant from the cities. Like the huge Bandiana Ordnance Base and the munitions reserves at Wirlinga and Ettamogah, Bonegilla was close to the break of railway gauge. Strategically it was important during the war to locate soldiers and their supplies where they could be moved quickly north or south in case of invasion. This location on the border between the two most populous states, proved convenient in peace time for dispatching migrants to jobs all over Australia.

**Local situation** - Bonegilla was isolated. Like other military camps, Bonegilla was set well away from the civilian population. That gave the Army open training areas where they could use weapons. It also helped impose military discipline. The way the centre was set apart from Albury and Wodonga added to the impression that newcomers were not quite part of the community.

**Setting - So this is Australia!** -This unpeopled location of open paddocks and the river were to provide opportunity for migrants to familiarise themselves with their new country. They came to understandings of a physical setting in which non-metropolitan, inland Australians lived on long walks about Bonegilla. This was Australia - a hot summer sun in a huge sky or cold winter nights in unlined and unheated huts. The physical and social isolation of Bonegilla and the nature of the accommodation may have strengthened the pressure on migrants to take up employment offers.

**Military character** - Bonegilla's army beginnings meant that accommodation was austere. Eating, washing and recreation facilities were communal. Further, there was for many years an Army presence. The Army jointly used the site and provided cooking and other services for the reception centre until it withdrew in 1949. In the early years the reception centre was run by former services personnel along military lines. The Army returned to occupy some blocks in 1966, but attempts were made then to separate the immigration and army training functions of the place.

**Host society perceptions** – From the beginning, taxpayers were reassured about the thrift of the reception and training operations. Immigration authorities wanted sparse migrant accommodation places 'so that the urge of the occupants will be to vacate as soon as full family life can be established elsewhere', Immigration Advisory Council, 1950. The accommodation was 'only reasonably comfortable'; the food plain, though nutritious and plentiful; there was neither luxury nor squalor; all expenditure was carefully monitored, *Border Morning Mail (BMM)*, 1949.

‘Army principles for the handling of a large number of people were used to organise the migrants ... but without the regimentation’, R Dawson, Director, 1954.

**Newcomer perceptions** – ‘The Bonegilla Centre meant different things to different people - a curate’s egg sort of place. To some it was a place of peace and plenty after years as conscripts in German factories on starvation rations, a place where one could roam at will, where one was close to the sky and Nature. To others it was an isolated place in the middle of nowhere from which they couldn’t get away fast enough’, Marie Ashley, language instructor 1949.

‘Bonegilla was just a paddock and a lagoon ... It didn’t look nice – no town or anything’, Alexandria, Ukraine 1951.

‘No railway station, nothing, just open space, only knee deep in dry yellow grass’, - Zigrid S, Latvia nd.

‘There was nothing there to uplift the spirit or claim to be civilized ... just lots of people put into the vastness of Australia’, Marita B, Ukraine 1949.

‘The gray colourless land, the vastness, the isolation were very depressing in the first few days’, August S Lithuania 1949.

‘Bonegilla was really a military camp not suited for families’, A Klabbers, The Netherlands, 1952.

‘After the hard times many of us had during the War in communist prisons, gulags, interrogation institutions and various other prisons and or prison camps, Bonegilla was a paradise. Three full-size meals a day ... morning and afternoon tea, sporting facilities, social workers, a well-equipped hospital, a free cinema and various other amenities made the stay in the camp a lovely beginning of a new life in the country of our choice’, Rad Leovic, c. 1949.

‘The first morning/ I remember getting up in the morning/ It was February/ This huge sun-/ We have sun in Italy, but this was huge/ The space – not desolation but space/ There was one gum tree/ And a magpie/ The sound of that magpie!? I felt “that’s the end”’, Enzo Barone, Italy nd.

‘ ... it is not the physical environment that is hard to adapt to – it is the social environment, unlearning the social codes of earlier years, jettisoning lifelong assumptions and learning a new social language that is the real task of emigration,’ Wanda Skowronska, born Bonegilla 1952, father Poland 1951, mother Latvia 1951.<sup>1</sup>

*Fabric –The camp was expanded in 1949 so that there were eventually 832 huts on the 240ha site. The buildings were mostly standard army-type huts, usually unlined, timber-framed huts with corrugated iron cladding and low-pitched, gabled roofs. Like the other blocks, Block 19 was fairly self-contained. It had about 24 buildings including its own kitchen and eating place (called messes) and ablutions. Buildings were moved from one Block to another as needed.*

**3 - The former employment office and staff club building.** The reception centre functioned as a labour exchange, a workplace and a training centre.

*Fabric and fittings - The building was originally a quartermaster’s store in the Army Camp. After 1947 it was partitioned and the northern section used as an employment office. Toilets and electricity were added. In the late 1950s the whole building was used as a staff club. In 1958 another building was added to the northern end to form a large dance floor. Opposite the large fire place was a bar. The main entry was on the lake side of the building where there was an outdoor beer garden. The Club was proud of the way*

*it improved the building with fluorescent lights, Venetian blinds and curtains. The committee room and the small TV room (after 1963) at the northern end were carpeted. The dance hall had side lighting to create ambience. After 1971 the Army used the building as an Other Ranks Canteen. The building currently has no fittings.*

### **3 (a) Bonegilla was primarily an employment office.**

In the agreement with the International Refugee Organisation and in similar agreements with donor countries, the Commonwealth accepted 'full responsibility for the receiving, forwarding and settling or placing of immigrants in employment in Australia'. The host society welcomed the immigrants as a 'directable and controllable pool of labour' that would be crucial in post-war reconstruction.

At selection, migrants over 16 years of age signed a contract agreeing to work as directed for two years in return for their passage and permission to live Australia. As employment often depended on language fluency they also agreed to 'use every endeavour to learn the English language'. They were paid the award wages that prevailed in Australia. Attempts were made 'to fit [them] into the type of job for which they are best suited', but overseas qualifications were not recognised. Initially all men were allocated jobs as labourers and women as domestics. They were expected to take up work anywhere in Australia.

Migrants might decide not to take a job offer, but if they refused more than three times they might lose their unemployment benefit. If they found they did not like the job they had accepted they had to get permission to change it from the District Employment Officer where they worked. Women who were caring for children could be released from their directed work obligation, as childcare was considered an approved employment.

#### ***Perceptions***

>For migrants the most important event in their life at Bonegilla was the job interview. '[The central question was] Do you know what kind of job are you going to get?' Ingrid S, Latvia 1948. 'Mostly they talked about their jobs, who was being sent where to work – how much one had to work to buy a block of land and build a shack on it', Dmytro Chub, Ukraine, 1949. 'Since work plays such a large part in the daily thinking of the male immigrant, his occupational happiness has a profound effect on his general outlook', Hans Mol, chaplain 1952-54.

> Family separation caused migrant families great distress. 'But [Bonegilla] also became a place of one of the most cruel things whichever happened in Australian immigration. Husband might have been sent to work on a farm, wife and children were sent to Benalla. Or you had a married couple without children, so wife was sent somewhere and husband was sent somewhere else. So imagine? In a new country where you need the support of each other you are suddenly dislodged as a family unit', Michael Cigler, Czechoslovakia 1951.

'My parents came here in 1954. They could not speak English. They were very frightened. They did not know what would happen to them. My father left after a few days then came back to get my mother and me', Sophia T, visitor 4 January 2007. '[I still remember] my father going away by bus with all the other men to work on farms', Eloisa C, Spain 1963.

> Many were upset that their overseas qualifications were not recognised. 'I was told my trade qualifications were not recognised in this country, Giuseppe P, Italy 1962. Migrants who were qualified medical practitioners were hired as hospital orderlies, but allowed to

do some medical duties. They 'were ordered around by the nursing sisters who insisted that they should wash implements and clean floors', E Kunz, Hungary 1949.

'It is true that there were only two occupation stamps in the camp: "labourer" for male immigrants and "domestic" for the females. But this did not matter at all. Everyone knew that this was a free country, a land of opportunities and that sooner or later everyone would find right place according to skills and abilities ... It was better to be medical doctor or lawyer officially called "labourer" or "domestic" but alive in Australia than a doctor or lawyer in a communist prison or gulag or German concentration camp', Rad Leovic, c.1949.

> Jobs were not always readily available, particularly in the economic downturns. There were demonstrations at Bonegilla in 1952 and 1961 by migrants unhappy with the long-time they had to spend at the reception centre without work.

'I did not come to stay in Bonegilla for the rest of my life and admire gum trees', Marcel Chapiron, migrant, France, 1959.

'[My husband] was so disappointed that in [eight weeks] he still had not managed to get a job and could not look after his family, A Klabbers, The Netherlands, 1952.

'I had the feeling that I had a great responsibility to make a success of our move to this country', Riek van der Velden, The Netherlands, 1960.

> As many as 40 Commonwealth Employment Service officers had responsibilities for job allocation. They were under pressure to meet the demands from employers for workers. In 1949 and 1950 in particular the Department of Immigration made it plain that it needed to make room at the reception centre for a big surge in intake.

'The quicker we could get people whether workers or dependants out of Bonegilla the better we liked because only we and Canberra and the offices in Melbourne and Sydney knew of the number of ships carrying thousand of migrants appearing on the horizon', Pat Smith Administration Officer c.1949-50.

'Once employment officers would ask migrants where they preferred to work. Now they don't seem to care. They just send the people where they have vacancies, without asking them if they have any preferences', Masing Juno, Estonia, c.1948.

'The Commonwealth Employment Service had never let us down yet by failing to empty the camp before the arrival of the next transport,' Dept of Immigration, 1950.

> The contractual system had mixed success.

'Some succeeded in finding their niche during the contract years, working overtime to earn enough to put down a deposit for a house, a motorbike or a car. Others, particularly the better educated who felt trapped in menial jobs, learned English as quickly as they could and studied to "get an Australian paper" on which they pinned their hopes for a better future. There were some who just waited for the contract to expire, trusting that freedom to change jobs would solve all their problems', E Kunz, Hungary 1949.<sup>2</sup>

### **3 (b) Bonegilla was as a workplace**

Many migrants got their first job helping the centre to operate. At any one time up to 400 migrants were employed at Bonegilla in a variety of occupations, for example, kitchen, garden, hospital, transport, recreation or office staff. Employment at the reception centre was always a good option. Public Service conditions ensured reasonable security, pay, working conditions, prospects of overtime and promotion. Staff had privileged accommodation and rations. Many stayed at Bonegilla for years.

All staff, whether they were migrants or not, could become members of the Hume Public Service Club that managed this building. There were two billiard tables and facilities for indoor bowls, quoits and darts competitions. On Friday nights there was a live dance

orchestra, often composed of migrants. The staff club organised bowling, cricket, bowls, basketball and tennis teams that joined in district competitions. Its soccer team was undefeated in the district competition in 1954. It had an angling club. It arranged family picnics, an annual staff ball and celebratory events for Christmas, New Year, Mother's Day, the Melbourne Cup and Empire Day.

**Perceptions** - 'I spoke five languages and that was very helpful. My job was typist but I also did a lot interpreting, timesheets and wages. My work was very varied ... One of the benefits of working at Bonegilla was that the staff had their own room ... You had just enough space to put your bed in from wall to wall, a small wardrobe and I was able to get hold of a chair. Two people [would have] trouble fitting in the room together, but it was my own room, my own little kingdom. We also had our own dining hall for the Bonegilla staff with table cloths. What a luxury!', Eleonora Conolly, Yugoslavia now Serbia 1949  
'I found this incredible mixture of Europeans, many highly educated from places I scarcely knew existed. I recall the wonderful conversations, the lively dances in the Club, the lovely days swimming in the lake and rivers, the walks through the very Australian countryside. Despite mess food and tiny rooms, I loved my time at Bonegilla ...', Joan Mitchie, language instructor, 1955.<sup>3</sup>

**Camp cunning** – Michael Cigler recalls how he got a job at Bonegilla hospital by saying he was a university student and letting the interviewer assume that he was a medical student. It seemed that it was not what you know but who you know that could get you a job at the reception centre. Current staff had some influence on who was selected. Poles tried to appoint fellow Poles. Latvians had control of the transport office at one stage. Staff club members tried to ensure that anyone who was a good tennis player could join the staff (and, then, the Bonegilla tennis club team).<sup>4</sup>

### **3 (c) Bonegilla was a training centre.**

At Bonegilla the non-British were to learn English and receive instruction on the Australian way of life. They could become familiar with coinage, imperial measures, Australian geography, history and standards of hygiene. They would be encouraged to engage with local Australians and 'to take their place in the community'. Bonegilla was to provide the very first steps in turning New Australians into true Australians.

> German was the common language used by most of the early immigrant groups. As a result German was used in announcements and on signs.

'I remember German being spoken on the public speakers', Irene, Poland 1949. 'We didn't feel we were living in Australia at all. You had all sorts of people from everywhere and you did not have to speak English, that was the main thing. You could live there and work and not speak one word of English', Gordana, Yugoslavia, 1952.  
'Bonegilla looked like a concentration camp. This impression was strengthened by the fact that we were greeted in German', Julius Visser, The Netherlands, 1963.<sup>5</sup>

> 'No English No Job' - Language teachers focused on oral work and simple sentence patterns. They tried to overcome the migrants' problems of 'too many words' by using repetitive songs such as 'She'll be coming round the mountain when she comes'. They used the present continuous, but that led to a 'migrant speak' – 'I working at Tallangatta'; 'Please shutting the door'.

**Camp cunning** – Some parents grew fearful of extended family divisions and problems when their children became more able with English than they were. Julius Visser often served as interpreter at the official welcome when the Director or a senior officer urged newcomers to learning English and to use it all the time. When he was comfortable that the welcoming officer could not follow his translation, Visser would add a sentence or two suggesting that they teach their children their own language so that the children would not lose contact with them, their relatives and their culture.<sup>6</sup>

**Host society perceptions** - ‘If there is one language migrants do understand, it is the language of money. They want ‘instant jobs, ‘instant wages, ‘instant’ card and ‘instant television sets. Many expect to acquire these things without accepting their duty to learn English, the language of the host county in return’, June Sherbrook, language instructor. ‘Anxieties about language, and about migrants keeping connection with their places of origin in other ways, are reiterated ... They should speak only English and not pretend they can’t do so, like the women who must know English because her children go to school and speak fluently ...’, letters to the Women’s Weekly.<sup>7</sup>

Several publications helped people learn about Australia before they arrived. *Land of Surprises*, Department of Immigration, Canberra c.1969 seems to have been intended for British migrants. Some of the surprises migrants might expect were ...

1. Most Australians live in big cities.
3. You don’t go up to bed in most Australian houses.
6. Hardly anyone owns a kangaroo or has one for a pet.
13. You will have a golden Christmas instead of a white one.
16. The long school holiday is not in July-August but in December-January.
22. Aborigines paint on bark instead of paper.
24. You will rarely see an Aboriginal in the city or suburbs.

#### **4 - Recreation Hall – ‘Tudor Hall’**

*Fabric.* This building was originally a large open-plan recreation hall about 40m x 15m. It was used as a cinema and meeting place for large gatherings by the Army as well as the reception centre. After the migrant centre closed the Army reoccupied the place and divided the hall into work and class rooms.

For many people the reception centre was ‘Boring Bone-bloody-gilla’. In summer people enjoyed relaxing beside Lake Hume. Many people walked the countryside. Transient school children did not have to attend school, although some attended the 3 hour language lessons with their parents. In 1952 Bonegilla State School was established but only had three teachers so it catered first for the children of reception centre staff. Dutch immigrants organised their own volunteer teacher school to keep the children occupied. Migrant volunteers also organised a hobby hut for boys to do woodwork and metalwork and girls to do knitting and handcrafts. From about 1953 specially employed YWCA and YMCA staff organised recreational activities for all age groups. Small prizes were given for boxing tournaments, soccer, basketball, volleyball and table tennis competitions. Supper was provided for visiting teams from outside the Centre. Card parties, dance evenings, family picnics and sports afternoons for the children were arranged. A well equipped and staffed Creative Leisure Centre operated for children during the 1960s.

**Perceptions** - Young Italians whiled away the time betting a penny for the first to walk to and then from Albury, Giovanni Sgro, Italy 1952.

‘There was nothing to do but bludge around’, Luigi S, Italy 1952.  
‘I went to the movies five times each week, often seeing the same movie five times, so I could learn the language’, Ferdie Boers (in Orange). ‘There was an entertainment room [the YWCA] as big as a hut which had a wood fire with chairs, a ping pong table and a dart board. People would take their kids there’, Albert v Z, 1952. ‘[Colonel Guinn the Director] calls himself the camp’s chief urger. [He] is always stopping people to convince them to go to functions such as Saturday night dances. The camp must be desolate in winter, when there is no opportunity for swimming and life becomes a dreary waste. Even in the best of weather it is no fun getting up each morning with nothing to do, to be an able-bodied man without work and see your wife sitting idly on the step of your hut and your young child scrabbling in the dust outside it’, Desmond O’Grady, Sydney-based journalist 1961.<sup>8</sup>

**Assimilation** - Non-British migrants were expected to become acquainted with the history and heritage of a British-Australia. There were framed photographs of the Queen in most of the public spaces. Union Jacks were as common as the Australian Ensign. Both the Coronation (1953) and the Royal Tour (1954) were major celebratory events at Bonegilla. In 1953 all the recreation halls were suitably decorated. Coloured lights were hung in Civic Centre. A full orchestra played for a Coronation Ball in the Theatre. There was a big fireworks display. Children were issued with medals and flags. They planted trees to mark the occasion. In 1954 five buses took children from Bonegilla and Mitta Mitta schools to Benalla to see the Queen. Migrant artists prepared elaborate oil portraits of early British monarchs for a display at Benalla Railway Station. After the Royal Visit, the portraits and heraldry banners and shields were displayed in a mock Tudor setting in the recreation hall that was from then on called ‘Tudor Hall’.

**Camp cunning** – Letter writing was a popular pastime. Long-term unemployed Italians c.1952 found it difficult to pay for stamps. They would coat a stamp with soap so that the franking machine would not spoil it and ask the recipient to return the ‘unused’ stamp with their response.

## 5 – Kitchen and messes

*Fabric - Originally the kitchen and mess halls were well equipped to serve officers and sergeants. They catered for about 300-400 people, principally reception staff, between 1947 and 1971. The kitchen was altered to serve the Army as a basic cooking school during the 1970s. Some of the large cooking utensils are still there. There is a servery that indicates how people queued to get their meals. There are three separate messes. Cool rooms, storage and preparation spaces are nearest to Tudor Hall. The western mess now houses the Dutch Exhibition which is built on Dirk and Marijke Eysbertse, Where Waters Meet exhibition in Melbourne, 1997.*

**Perceptions** - ‘Bonegilla was like a real heaven for us and we stayed about nine months there ... I didn’t have to cook, that was good. The food was always the same, but that didn’t matter to us and it was plentiful. After the refugee camp in Italy we really like it’, Gordana, Yugoslavia c.1951.

‘We never went short of food at Bonegilla, but I got sick of continuously eating mutton and lamb, Aima, Estonia in 1949.

‘There was always plenty to eat, but every now and then it got boring. You only had to look at your plate to know what day of the week it was’, Gerda, Germany in 1955. ‘The five of us cried – we couldn’t speak the language and we were homesick and we had to rough it. The food was shocking. We weren’t used to eating lamb and it was stinking hot. Ferdie Boers, The Netherlands 1954.

‘When I arrived there were more than 600 angry men each holding a plate of spaghetti, demanding that Dawson [the Director] come out. “Is this the kind of food you expect us to eat?” they chanted. Amid the ensuing uproar, Dawson yelled back “I don’t eat spaghetti – I never eat it and I will never eat it”. With that the angry 600 hurled their spaghetti to the ground in front of the director’s house. There was always trouble because of food and finally Dawson agreed they should employ Italians as cooks as other cooks resigned’, Albino Papagno, Italy 1952.

‘We had to queue up for our meals at the dining room. And the food was awful – overcooked pasta with a grey coloured sauce. We had no money, we had no way to cook food – some people bought a small furnello – a gas or kero burner - and could cook a bit but we couldn’t afford that’, Elis Pizzuti, Italy 1959.

Children were impressed with the unlimited supplies of milk, fruit, bread, butter and jam and their introduction to whole peaches and pineapples and to cocoa and Milo.<sup>9</sup>

**Camp cunning** - Bosnian Muslims found there was no provision for halal meat. They found an Albanian farmer locally and got a supply from him for secret cooking.

**6 - Sleeping quarters** - The sleeping quarters show how Bonegilla was meant to provide accommodation up to four to six weeks for transients.

*Fabric, fittings, furnishings - The huts were commonly meant to accommodate twenty men and had no internal partitions. From 1951 on the huts were divided into cubby-hole sized cubicles each slightly less than 4m by 3m so as to give some privacy. Adjoining cubicles were linked for two people. Families with several children were giving cubicles next to each other. Unlike the original sleeping huts, the cubicles were lined and painted. Residents personalised the cubicles with curtains, wall decorations, bookcases and shelving, often made from packing cases. The Immigration Museum, Melbourne, has a list of items that one long resident Italian family (1955-59) bought in Albury to make their hut more comfortable. A radiator and a radio would have been high on the list. Wire-based Army beds with thin kapok mattresses were replaced by the 1960s with 8 inch mattresses. By then a wall radiator was installed. After 1953 there were attempts to soften the surrounds with trees and gardens. Long-term residents were encouraged to start and to tend their own gardens.*

**Perceptions** - ‘We were allocated our two little rooms, which were as sparse as could be. Naked little light bulb, no heating of any sort and the beds were soldier’s beds, chicken wire beds, with black blankets and our luggage had not yet arrived’, Anne Hawker, The Netherlands 1952.

‘I remember my mother and other women bursting into tears’, Rudy, Netherlands, 1952; ‘[I remember] the distance between the toilets and showers and accommodation,’ Ingrid S, Latvia.

‘Conditions were pretty basic, privacy minimal’, Paul B, The Netherlands 1954.

‘The beds were like farmers’ gates,’ Hans J, Germany 1954.<sup>10</sup>

### **Attention**

(this notice, in several different languages, was posted in huts)

1. Do not remove food or eating utensils from dining rooms.
  2. Electrical appliances, other than jugs, irons and radios may not be used in cubicles.
  3. Domestic pets of any kind may not be kept by persons living in cubicles.
  4. Firearms of lethal weapons may not be kept in the Centre. Deposit them with the block supervisor who will return them when you leave.
  5. If you are ill see your block Supervisor who will arrange medical treatment.
  6. Native birds are most animals are protected by law and may not be destroyed or hut.
- SEE YOUR BLOCK SUPERVISOR IF YOU REQUIRE ANY INFORMATION.

### **Accoutrements**

All new arrivals are issued with 1 army type bed, 1 mattress; 5 blankets; 3 sheets; 2 pillowslips; 1 pillow; 2 towels; 2 cups and saucers; 2 each soup, dinner and small plates, 2 each knives, forks, soup dessert and table spoons. Each cubicle had a table, chair, teapot, jug, basin, brush, broom, bucket, shovel and rake. If lost or damaged any property consigned had to be replaced at the owner’s expense.

**Camp cunning** – Residents tried different ways to keep warm in winter. ‘I never took my clothes off all the time I was in the camp’ Anton Potocnik, Slovenia 1951. Hendrikus v W, The Netherlands 1950, remembers wheelbarrowing hot river stones from the recreation room fire to his cubicle. He also recalls raids on the centre’s wood heap to find materials that might be used for furnishings. Blanket issue records rarely matched actual

counts: after a fire incident in 1950, authorities found that some staff had accumulated ten blankets each. Teachers soon found that in each hut they could (illegally) operate up to five radiators without blowing the fuse. Cooking was forbidden but primus stoves were easily hidden.

### **7 - Ablutions block- communal facilities**

*Fabric - Little was done to prepare the facilities for accommodating migrants in 1947. Block 19, however, was connected to a sewerage system when it was established. Nearly all the other blocks had latrines.*

**Perceptions** - Migrants recall impatient early morning toilet queues, especially when toilets blocked. They recall juggling the streams of hot and cold water when two or more were showering at the same time. They recall the dangers they ran of petty theft in the washrooms, but more particularly in the laundries. Smalls left for drying could disappear. ‘The toilets and showers were in another shed about 80- 100 metres away. In these were posted written orders on how to use these facilities’, Nino P, Trieste 1959. Lois Carrington, a language instructor, remembers the laundries as places where she learned ‘so much practical German’. Frank K, The Netherlands 1958 remembers the verbal fighting of Dutch women for laundry space.

**Camp cunning** – Residents soon learned it was advisable not only to keep personal supplies of soap and toilet paper, but also to carry a plug to the washrooms and more particularly to the laundry.

### **7 - Sculptured silhouette figures**

*Fabric - Public art pieces like the wall of faces, the wall of voices and the sculptured silhouette figures help visitors understand the migrant experience and establish Bonegilla as a memory place. This group of anonymous two-dimensional steel laser figures by Ken Raff suggests the fleeting experiences most migrants had of Bonegilla.*

*Bonegilla may be Australia’s Ellis Island – the landing place for many immigrants. But unlike America’s Ellis Island, Bonegilla has no large grand statue, bearing a torch and welcoming the tired, poor huddled masses from Europe. Instead, we have a group of people-sized, laser-cut steel silhouettes that have weathered into their army camp surrounds.*

**Remembering Bonegilla** - There is more than one Bonegilla or migrant experience. People remember Bonegilla differently. They had, or have had reported to them, different arrival and settlement experiences. Each of the sculptured figures invites visitors to consider different points of view in viewing this place and migration.

It seems that the mass post-war immigration was traumatic for the host society as well as for the immigrants. Many people had difficulties in coping with the changes it brought. Some were antagonistic to the newcomers and used taunts like ‘Balts’, ‘Reffos’, ‘Dagos’ ‘Wogs’ and even ‘New Australians’ disparagingly. Common responses to migrant complaints were – ‘Well what did you expect?’ and ‘If you don’t like it, go back where you came from’. On the other hand, some went out of the way to welcome the newcomers and help them settle, especially through Good Neighbour committees and groups like the CWA, the Business and Professional Women’s Club and Apex. Most people, however, were indifferent.

**Visitor challenge** - Questions we might ask about how well the nation went about receiving and training post-war migrants might still be asked of today. Now, as then, there are debates about social inclusion and recent migrant well-being - especially with regard to the provision of initial support, housing and meaningful work. What is the current migrant and refugee experience of arrival and settlement? How are they received and trained?

### **Finding out more**

> Try Giovanni's story and Bonegilla's Beginnings in the *Age* multimedia special  
<http://www.theage.com.au/interactive/2008/national/migrants/>

> For site significance see National Heritage List and Victoria Heritage Database:  
<http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/places/national/index.html>  
<http://vhd.heritage.vic.gov.au/vhd/heritagevic>

> PictureAustralia - <http://www.pictureaustralia.org/> 927 images.

> Migration Heritage Centre, NSW -  
[www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/belongings](http://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/belongings) Go to migrant accommodation to view 22 stories from people who were Bonegilla residents.

> Immigration Museum Melbourne - Search <Bonegilla>  
<http://museumvictoria.com.au/ImmigrationMuseum>

> National Australian Archives Recordsearch - Search <Bonegilla>  
<http://www.naa.gov.au/collection/recordsearch/index.aspx> . Refine the 3556 results of that search with reference number <A12111> to find 491 reference images.

> Albury Library Museum - <http://www.alburycity.nsw.gov.au/www/html/101-librarymuseum.asp>. The Bonegilla Collection contains over 20 sustained interviews; 357 personal history data base entries; over 500 short memory pieces and 642 data based photographs.

A copy of a CD of the interpretation centre video is available for schools at reproduction cost. Supplies are limited – [Bonegilla@parklands-alburywodonga.org.au](mailto:Bonegilla@parklands-alburywodonga.org.au) or [admin@bonegilla.org.au](mailto:admin@bonegilla.org.au) .

### **Other publications**

A good introduction is via James Jupp ed. *The Australian People: An Encyclopaedia of the Nation, its People and their Origins*, CUP, New York, 2001. Basic text is Glenda Sluga, *Bonegilla 'A Place of No Hope'*, University of Melbourne, 1988. Bruce Pennay has written several pieces namely, *Albury-Wodonga's Bonegilla*, Albury Regional Museum, 2001 and interpretive pamphlets - 'Food at Bonegilla', 'The Army at Bonegilla', 'Calwell's Beautiful Balts', 'Never Enough Dutch', (2007) 'So Much Sky' (2008). Early-day stories are in Ann Tündern-Smith, *Bonegilla's Beginnings*, Triple D books, Wagga Wagga, 2007.

## References

Unless otherwise noted the host society and migrant voices quoted are drawn from the Bonegilla Collection at Albury Library Museum, particularly, but not exclusively, from the Personal History Data Base. Frequent reference was made to the *Belongings* website of the Migration Heritage Centre; L Carrington, *A real situation*, 1997; Cox, Sanderson Ness, *Bonegilla Migrant Historic Site: Masterplan and Feasibility Study*, 2003; D & M Eysbertse, *Where Waters Meet*, 1997/2006; E Kunz, *Displaced Persons*, 1988; W Lowenstein & W Loh, *The Immigrants*, 1977; Catherine Panich, *Sanctuary?*, 1988 ; *Border Morning Mail (BMM)* and the *Belongings* web site of the Migration Heritage Centre, Sydney. *Land of Surprises* is held at ALM; the hut door notice and list of accoutrements are from Glenda Sluga, *Bonegilla 'A Place of No Hope'*, 1988.

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<sup>1</sup> Ashley - Carrington, *A real situation*, p.42; *BMM* 26 March 1949; Dawson – *BMM* 10 May 1954; A Klabbers – D& M Eysbertse, *Where Waters Meet*, p.39; R Leovic – letter, *Canberra Times* 7 December 1987; Barone - M Hutchison, 'Accommodating Strangers', *Public History Review* 11, 2004; Wanda Skowronska, *Bonegilla Journey* c.2001, pp.6-7.

<sup>2</sup> Chub, *So this is Australia*, 1980, pp.18-19 ; Hans Mol, 'Churches and Immigrants', *REMP Bulletin* 1961; B York, *Michael Cigler: A Czech-Australian*, 1995, p.63 ; Sophia T, visitor book entry 4 January 2007; E Kunz, *The Intruders*, 1975, p.94; R Leovic op cit; Riek van der Velden and A Klabbers – D & M Eysbertse, *Where Waters Meet*, p.83 & p.60.; disgruntled migrant - ; Pat Smith – Sluga, *Bonegilla 'A Place of No Hope'*, p.25; Chapiron – letter, NAA A2567, 1959/100; Masing Juno – *BMM* 15 June 1950.

<sup>3</sup> Connolly – *Belongings*; Mitchie – Carrington, *A Real Situation*, p.69.

<sup>4</sup> York, *Cigler* pp.62-63.

<sup>5</sup> Gordana – Lowenstein & Loh, *The Immigrants*.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with author, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Visser – D & M Eysbertse, *Where Waters Meet*, p.28; Sherbrook – *BMM* 24 June 1968; *Women's Weekly* letters - Susan Sheridan, *Who was that Woman?* UNSW Press, Sydney 2002, p.145.

<sup>8</sup> Boers – *Belongings*; O' Grady - 'Migrant Camp Blues', *Bulletin* 11 November 1961.

<sup>9</sup> Gordana – op cit; Boers - *Belongings*; Papagno - Maria Triaca, 'Bonegilla Rebellion', *Italian Historical Society Journal*, June 1994.

<sup>10</sup> Hawker and Potocnik – *Belongings*.