

Ebenezer Mission

For the first time in its history the National Trust in Victoria has handed back one of its places to the Traditional Owners.

Handback to Traditional Owners

After 45 years of custodianship we have passed over our remaining interest in the Ebenezer Mission Station, to the Traditional Owners, the Barengi Gadjin Land Council Aboriginal Corporation.

The handover by Trust Chairman Dr Graeme L. Blackman OAM to Barengi Gadjin Chair Janine Coombs was performed in the presence of The Hon. Jeanette Powell MP, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, and The Hon. Hugh Delahunty MP, local Member for Lowan. Elders Kevin Coombs OAM, Jennifer Beer, Gloria Clarke, Joanne Harrison and Brendan Marks, representing their families, welcomed us to their country. Traditional dancing, smoking ceremony and a tree planting were all part of the celebratory events.

The Ebenezer Mission Station, situated by the Wimmera River 360km north-west of Melbourne, was established in 1859 by Moravian missionaries as the Lake Hindmarsh Aboriginal Reserve. At its peak more than a hundred people lived and worked in more than 20 buildings at the Mission, which operated to convert Aboriginal people to Christianity and to provide education in the setting of a self-sustainable and utopian rural community.

The Mission closed in 1900 and part of the site containing the 1870s church and cemetery (with hundreds of unmarked burials and just a dozen marked graves) was returned to the Lands Department in 1904. Other Mission land containing buildings became freehold property and was used for farming and most of the buildings demolished.

The Barengi Gadjin Land Council Aboriginal Corporation are the Traditional Owners, Registered Aboriginal Party and Native Title holders of the area. The Cameron, Coombs, Harrison, Kennedy, Marks, Pepper and Robinson descendant families have a strong connection to the site inhabited by their ancestors, not just whilst residents at the Mission but before, when the site was a meeting place. The families connected by the Mission also includes descendants of the Moravian Revd. Paul Bogisch, who is buried at Ebenezer together with his wife Amalie.

What is the National Trust's relationship to the Ebenezer Mission?

The Mission was gazetted in 1861 as the "Lake Hindmarsh Aboriginal Reserve" and was closed in 1904. It is located close to the Wimmera River approximately 70km north-west of Horsham.

The National Trust's involvement with Ebenezer Mission began in 1961 when a letter was received from the Horsham District Historical Society expressing concern for the future of the ruinous surviving Mission buildings. National Trust then President, Mr Rodney Davidson, first inspected the site in 1966 with the Trust's honorary architect Mr John Murphy, and Councillors and staff from the Shire of Dimboola. The church and cemetery was at that stage managed by a local committee of management.

In 1971 the Trust was gifted freehold to part of the former Mission site by landowner Robert Bond. The Trust land is 0.4Ha and contains several 19th century Mission

buildings, being the kitchen, dormitory and toilet block, and footings of the Mission House.

In 1980, another part of the former Mission area, being Crown allotment 16, section A, Parish of Katyl was Crown land and was reserved for "Conservation of an Area of Historical Interest". That land contains the church and cemetery.

The site was fenced, was provided power and a sealed access road, the church was restored including a new roof and landscape planting was undertaken. Funds were partly raised from the auction of the contents of Dame Mabel Brookes' home. The National Trust managed the entire site until 21 August 1991, when the church was sold as freehold land to the Goolum Goolum Aboriginal Co-operative, an Aboriginal health and welfare cooperative.

The Trust continued to manage the remaining freehold.

In 2011 the National Trust launched the Wimmera and Region Branch and started a significant relationship with

the Barengi Gadjin Land Council Aboriginal Corporation. The development of a Memorandum of Understanding in 2012, the Trust's first in Victoria with an Aboriginal group, helped trigger our formal commitment to reconciliation and eventual adoption of a Reconciliation Action Plan by the Board, which included entering discussions with that group towards a return to traditional ownership of the remaining land held by the Trust at the Ebenezer Mission, Antwerp.

The Trust undertook extensive conservation and repair works to a dozen headstones and burial plots of both Aboriginal persons and Moravian missionaries in preparation for the handover to the Barengi Gadjin Land Council Aboriginal Corporation on 5 December 2013.

