

### Chinese camps in Robetown

The inhabitants of Robe were far outnumbered by the Chinese. At one time during 1857, 3,000 *were camped in Robe, their tents stretching from South east of St Peter's Anglican Church Kirk in Sturt Street. The Chinese tents were stretched over a horizontal pole supported by two pairs of crossed bamboos. A tent of about 10ft x 6ft sufficed for 6 men*<sup>1</sup>. Robe's doctor selected the various camping sites as each new shipload of Chinese passengers were landed. These camps needed to be segregated as many boatloads came from different regions in China. The Europeans at the Victorian goldfields noted that not all the Chinese arriving from Robe looked alike. A contemporary reported *the group was of strong Mongolian cast, others from the neighbourhood of canton, differing from previous groups as their complexions were much darker and they appeared to be more powerfully built*<sup>2</sup>. The goldseekers were not all of the same education and socio-economic background either, with some being peasants from small villages and others being traders and artisans from larger towns. There was a certain level of antagonism existing between the natives of the various regions, thus each speech group had to be clustered together apart from the others.

Robe residents were unfamiliar with the foreign customs. The locals were fascinated by the sight of the Chinese in small organised groups gathering seaweed from the shores of Guichen Bay as they had recognised the broad, thin, purple ribbons of edible seaweed when they were rowed ashore. After gathering, the seaweed was dried on racks made of coastal scrub in preparation for the trek to the goldfields<sup>3</sup>. The Chinese were also observed flying kites and were generally well behaved and supportive of each other.

### Boomtimes in Robetown

Although the Chinese had bought plenty of money, including Chinese copper *holey dollars* strung around their necks, they soon found that these coins were useless and many of these discarded coins have been found scattered around Robe and along the various routes taken by the prospectors<sup>4</sup>. In spite of this, the locals provided food and services, accepting their trading goods and silver in payment. Robe experienced a period of great prosperity with an estimated £16,000 circulating amongst the locals<sup>5</sup>. Father Tension Woods commented about Robe in March 185, it was the oddest mixture of the usual peculiarities of the Australian bush and the celestial empire – Chinese men, clothes, trays, workbags, paper knives – and the townspeople seemed to be making a good thing of it<sup>6</sup>. There was also a building boom with many temporary shanties being demolished and replaced by new limestone dwellings and commercial buildings, such as a Bank House. These buildings comprise the majority of heritage buildings in Robe today. The social life of the Robe residents also blossomed with the visits of the ship's captains and crews resulting in many social occasions, including balls. The *Adelaide Observer* reported on 7 February 1857, *'During the past six weeks Robe Town has been the scene of much gaiety and social enjoyment, increased by the presence for a few days of an excellent German band'*<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Cawthorne, Ellen Mary; *The Long Journey*, 1974, Hansen Print, Naracoorte, South Australia, page 11

<sup>2</sup> Adelaide times, 4 March, 1857, page unknown

<sup>3</sup> Rolls, Eric; *Sojourners; Flowers & the Wide Sea*, 1992, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland, page 426

<sup>4</sup> Unknown publication, Local History Collection, Robe Public Library, pages not numbered

<sup>5</sup> Smeaton, Thomas Drury; *Our Invasion by Chinese*, 1865 (when he was Manager of the Robe branch of the Bank of South Australia), Local History Collection, Robe Public Library, pages not numbered

<sup>6</sup> Clifford, G & G; Lecture; *Ten Years in the Bush 1866 by Julian Tension Woods, Abridged Version*, Penola Historical Selections, Penola, South Australia, pages 40, 41

<sup>7</sup> *Adelaide Observer*, 7 February 1857, page unknown

Ellen Mary Cawthorne wrote '*beyond doubt, the China Ships of 1857-1863 brought great prosperity to the little frontier town (of Robe), changing it from a lonely settlement to a tiny metropolis*'<sup>8</sup>.

### Illness in the camp

However, the influx of such volume of people travelling by ship from far off lands for extended periods under the roughest of conditions brought other problems. Some of the Chinese who landed were suffering from unfamiliar illnesses and the spread of disease threatened<sup>9</sup>. At first the Government Surgeon, Mr. Penny, examined the Chinese passengers on arrival to ensure that they were free of disease. Unfortunately, this practice ceased after a time as the South Australian government did not want to pay for the examination of immigrants who would be crossing over into the Victorian border within a few days. It fell to the local ladies to nurse the sick Chinese. The most senior ranked lady in Robe, Mrs. Eleanor Mary Brewer, who was the wife of the Government Resident, Captain Charles Philip Brewer, led these volunteer nurses<sup>10</sup>. Mrs. Brewer succumbed to eastern dysentery and died on March 1857, aged 48 years, leaving 8 children. She was the second person to be buried in the Robe cemetery and her grave may be found in the pioneer section of the town's cemetery. The Chinese who died were buried in unmarked graves.

### Gambling, Opium and Fear

The Chinese had some vices that frightened the Robe inhabitants, as at times they would get loud and excitable. A local observed that *their national vice of gambling accompanies them ...but it is singular, though painful to observe, how intensely the passion for play burns in this effeminate race*<sup>11</sup>. They had also brought a spirit made from rice called *shamshoo*, which means *spirits that burn*<sup>12</sup>. This was considered by the Europeans to be more *intoxicating than refreshing*<sup>13</sup>. While the Chinese were not large consumers of alcohol, they relaxed by smoking opium from clay and bamboo pipes. This was a habit most probably learned to escape from the exhaustion and depression of a horrendous journey, and, in later years, of lonely toil. The Chinese are likely to have gathered in special areas to smoke the opium, possibly with *attendants* to care for the drug affected as they lay in the stupor caused by the opiate. This practice would have been similar to the operation of an Opium House, or Opium Den. The Chinese' obsession with opium led to some frightening behaviour. Henry Melville reports that *on one occasion, when a large parcel of opium belonging to a group was taken and locked in a store-room until such time as the duty was paid. The owners broke into the building during the night and regained possession*<sup>14</sup>. Melville comments that *this incident was one of the factors leading to the public disquiet that at that time upward of 3,000 celestials were camped near the town*<sup>15</sup>. The events at Robe were being noted far afield due to their unusual nature. On the 1 June 1857, the Robetown news correspondent reported to the *Adelaide Observer*, *we have had 3,000 Chinese camped around town. Many of the inhabitants are getting very apprehensive about their safety in case of any outbreak among the Celestials, who have lately waxed somewhat indignant at the manifold impositions practiced upon*

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<sup>8</sup> Cawthorne, Ellen Mary; *The Long Journey*, 1974, Hansen Print, Naracoorte, South Australia, page 15

<sup>9</sup> Cantrill, JL; *Captain Charles Philip Brewer*, Local History Collection, Robe Public Library, pages not numbered

<sup>10</sup> Cantrill, JL; *Captain Charles Philip Brewer*, Local History Collection, Robe Public Library, pages not numbered

<sup>11</sup> *Adelaide Observer*, July 19 1856, page unknown

<sup>12</sup> Rolls, Eric; *Sojourners; Flowers & the Wide Sea*, 1992, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland, page 438

<sup>13</sup> Smeaton, Thomas Drury; *Our Invasion by Chinese*, 1865 (when he was Manager of the Robe branch of the Bank of South Australia), Local History Collection, Robe Public Library, pages not numbered

<sup>14</sup> Unknown publication, Local History Collection, Robe Public Library, pages not numbered

<sup>15</sup> Cawthorne, Ellen Mary; *The Long Journey*, 1974, Hansen Print, Naracoorte, South Australia, page 9

*(sic) them by the "land sharks" here*<sup>16</sup>. The locals were also concerned that all carried knives or a weapon for self defense for the trip to the goldfields. Another local commentator wrote, *their apprehension on this account is, I think not without foundation, as no doubt at any moment a quarrel between individuals might bring about a general affray, in which case we should be completely at the mercy of the Chinese*<sup>17</sup>. This need for security led to 25 red coat soldiers for the Regiment under the command of Lieutenant Saunders being dispatched to Robe. However, it took some time for the detachment to arrive as its departure was delayed. The ships in which they were originally to have been sent were filled with Chinese<sup>18</sup>. Finally the regiment arrived on the steamer, *Burra Burra*. There are no reports that these soldiers ever had to carry out any protective duties.

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<sup>16</sup> *Adelaide Observer*, 19 July 1857, pages unknown

<sup>17</sup> *Notes on the History of Robe*, Document 192, Discovery and Exploration Archives Department, Public Library, Museum, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, South Australia

<sup>18</sup> *Order of Service: St Peter's Robe 1859-1959 Centenary and Thanksgiving Service on the Gift of the Holy Ghost commonly called Whitsunday*, 17 May 1959, Local History Collection, Robe Public Library, pages not numbered