

Coupled with this was the development of the Rock Lobster (Crayfish) industry in the 1950's in response to demand from America. Initially Cray Fishermen moored their boats in Guichen Bay during summer, and to escape winter storms, they used a slipway to pull the boats over the sand dunes to safe harbour in Lake Butler. In 1964 a channel was created connecting Lake Butler to the sea and creating the Lake Butler Boat Haven.

Robe's streetscapes have been retained from its seafaring past. Special care has been taken to restore most of Robe's original buildings and these are being used as visitor accommodation, hotels, restaurants, businesses and private residences. By walking the streets and visiting these buildings one can relive Robe's pioneering history.

The Robe Historical Interpretation Centre is found in the Robe Library/Visitor Information Centre, Mundy Tce Robe where you can see Robe's history in pictures.

The Customs House on Royal Circus, Robe showcases our maritime history.

There are a number of selected publications for sale on Robe such as Kathleen Bermingham's "Gateway to the South East" and the chinese story in "Guichen Bay to Canton Lead.

Goto www.council.robe.sa.gov.au for more history.

Robe's History

The township of Robe is situated on Guichen Bay, about 350km south-east of Adelaide. The fluctuating fortunes of Robe through wool export, the Chinese gold route and later the Port's demise has resulted in the preservation of over 60 buildings and sites dating back to the mid 1800's.

The French explorer Nicholas Baudin first viewed the bay in 1802 on which Robe was later settled in 1802, and he named it Guichen Bay in honour of Admiral de Guichen. The Boandik aboriginal tribe lived relatively undisturbed around the Robe region, with "Black Maggie" being the first to meet white men in Guichen Bay in the 1830's, who were probably whalers, sealers or sailors visiting the area long before South Australian settlement.

In 1844, Governor Grey led an exploration trip that stopped briefly in Robe, and the following year Captain Underwood surveyed the coast resulting in enthusiastic settlement and a minor land rush. In January 1846, Lieutenant Governor Robe accompanied Captain Lipson on the "Lapwing" and surveyed the site for a proposed South Eastern port at Robe. Governor Robe completed the survey of Robetown in April 1846 comprising 126 quarter acre allotments. That year the county of Robe was proclaimed so the pastoral pioneers legalised their claims and the first sale of building allotments took place in Adelaide. At this time, Captain Butler became the Government Resident in Robe, with duties comprising the administration and judicial responsibility for the 2,300 square miles around Robe, and looking after the welfare of both the aborigines and the settlers.

In February 1847, Robe was declared as a port, and wool began to arrive for shipment within a few months. A pioneer grazier, George Ormerod established himself as Robe's shipping agent and by 1856, Robe was the second major colonial out-port. By the 1860's, Robe was ranked amongst the top three out-ports in South Australia, both in terms of value and volume of wool exported. Bullockies with their loads of wool travelled overland from Victoria and other

areas of South Australia to Robe for weeks on end averaging only 40kms per day. At times more than 50 wagons would be lined up at the Royal Circus roundabout to offload their wool for shipment to Europe. Initially there was a private jetty, with successive government jetties being built in 1854 and 1868. Prior to this the wagons were unloaded by driving them into the sea to transfer their load on to small boats which were then rowed to ships further out.

Hearing of Robe's prosperity, the town attracted many settlers and the population grew rapidly. Many Irish female migrants and Scottish families arrived in 1855.

Early settlers and merchants arrived in Robe by sailing vessel, bullock wagon or on horseback. After eight months at sea from London, the Obelisk must have been a welcome sight to ships passengers although there was also the risk of shipwreck in treacherous Guichen Bay. For this reason, Sir Henry Melville was both the Harbour Master and Receiver of Wrecks. With the bullockies and the South East settlers passing through, Robe's eight inns would have seen some of the great horseman of the day including the poet Adam Lindsay Gordon, and as well as squatters, sailors and merchants exchanging exciting stories. Sister Mary MacKillop as visited her sisters of the Josephite Order in Robe, staying at St. Mary's Star of the Sea Church in Hagen Street, which was formerly a school and convent. The Governor of South Australia, Sir James Ferguson used Karatta House being his summer residence.

On January 17, 1857, a tall ship named the *Lake of Cakes* sailed into Robe's Guichen Bay flying a British Flag and carrying 264 Chinese passengers. This took the 100-200 inhabitants of Robe completely by surprise. Not only was this number greater than the population of Robe, it was the first time that most of Robe's inhabitants had ever seen a Chinese person. At first observers thought that the Chinese were women due to their long pigtailed. The Chinese were bound for the Victorian goldfields but were forced to

land in the free port of Robe so that the ship's Captains could avoid the Victorian Government's poll tax of \$20 per Chinese passenger. Soon there were up to 3,000 Chinese camped in Robe, smoking opium, gambling and preparing for their journey. Nearly 17,000 The Chinese stayed in Robe for a short time before paying local guides to take them over 150 kms to the unguarded Victorian border and then another 400kms or more to the goldfields. Many of these Robe guides had earlier been paid to row them ashore and it is estimated that over \$30,000 entered the Robe economy during this time which financed many of Robe's heritage buildings.

Robe's industries have been colourful. As well as exporting wool, tallow and sheepskins to Europe, Robe supplied the Indian Army with horses. Robe's canning factory was adventurous and imaginative with its products, canning swans which were marketed as Robe Geese, parrots which were marketed as Robe Snipe and rabbits.

A number of factors led to the decline of Robe in the 1870's and this is mostly responsible for the preservation of buildings that may have been redeveloped in the early 20th century if progress had continued prior to heritage preservation. Pastoralists who had taken out 14 year leases in the early 1850's were concerned that their leases may not be renewed and trade declined. Adding to this lack of confidence was a poor agricultural season, falling wool prices and the construction of a railway to Port Caroline (Kingston) in 1878 leading to competition from this and other ports. "Closed as a port, Robe became a quiet little country village with a surplus of old-fashioned pre Victorian style houses, a deserted jetty with its cluster of early shipping buildings, winding roads and tree-bordered lakes." wrote A H Barrowman in "Old Days and Old Ways".

Robe remained relatively unchanged until the 1940's when the extension of roads and the increasing use of motor transport made it easier for summer visitors and increased its popularity as a tourism destination.