

THE VERMIN PROOF FENCE

(Commonly known as 'The Dog Fence')

The erection of the fence commenced in 1885, along the route indicated on the map.

The fence was constructed by the Victorian Government, as a measure to control wild dogs (dingoes) and foxes from the north and rabbits from the south, (wrote J.R. Ashworth—Secretary for Lands, March 8th, 1983.) Most of the southern boundary followed the 36th parallel (surveyed in 1880 by A.C. Allen.) It extended for 204 miles (326 kms) from Tyntynder, north of Swan Hill on the Murray River in a southerly direction to the 36th Parallel, then in a westerly direction towards the South Australian border to a point sixteen miles (25 kms) north of Serviceton, then south and west to the border. The South Australian Government then erected a fence from this point, following the border to the south.

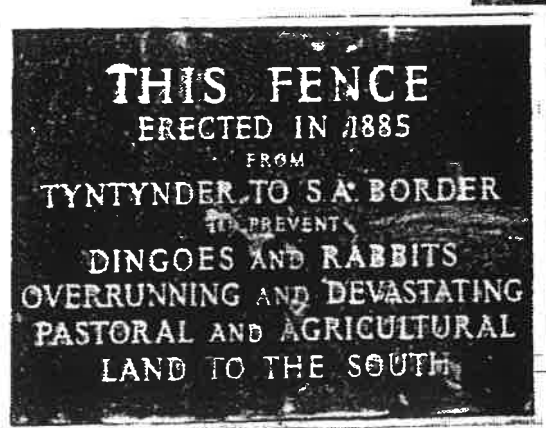
An Act amending the Mallee Pastoral Leases Act of 1883 defines the type of fence which was to be erected as:-

"A wire net fence four feet ten inches (approximately 1.5m) in height, such fence shall consist of wire netting, the lower portion of which shall not be less than three feet (0.91m) in width, and a mesh not exceeding one inch and five eighths (4 cms), and shall be six inches (15 cms) in the ground, or shall have six inches (15 cms) thereof properly secured to the surface of the ground, and above such wire netting other wire netting not less than two feet (61 cms) in width and of a mesh not exceeding four inches (10 cms). The whole of such wire netting shall be attached by wire or staples to substantial post stakes or iron standards, a single strand of barbed wire then ran along the top of the posts." Some of this wire was manufactured at the Penal Department of Pentridge Gaol Melbourne.

The cost of erection was £70 (\$140) per mile (1.6 km). A rate of £5 (\$10) per mile was struck and Lessees on either side of the fence paid £2.10.0 (\$5) per mile. Shires were subsidised by the Government for the remainder. Many letters were received by the Secretary for Lands, from the Shires and landholders abutting the fence, requesting assistance in maintaining it. Most of this correspondence came from the boundaries of the Big Desert.

The section of approximately fifty miles (80 km) between Lake Hindmarsh and the South Australian border was maintained by the Kaniva and Lowan Shires with the Victorian Government bearing two thirds of the cost.

The Government granted £200 (\$400) in 1926 for repairs to the fence and another grant of £270 (\$540) in 1952. No further grants were made thereafter.



Plaque on monument at Galaquil.



Monument on Henty Highway Galaquil, marking vermin-proof fence line

The fence was generally known as the Wimmera Wild Dog Fence and was under the control of the Western Vermin Board. Later, management was handed over to the Wimmera Shires Association. —

All assistance by the Government towards this maintenance was stopped in 1959 because it was considered that to a large degree the fence had outlasted its purposes. Poisoning and trapping the wild dogs had kept them in check, and the landholders themselves should make a bigger contribution towards the protection of their properties.

What happened when the railway line came through in 1893? Did they put a gate over the line or were the vermin free to traverse either side of the fence until they came to the railway line—or the roads?

The fence is now falling into disrepair due to age and bushfires and in many areas is non-existent. A very good example of the one hundred and two year old fence can be found by travelling along the Henty Highway to Galaquil, then about one mile (1.6 km) along the Galaquil East Road where one and a half miles (2.5 km) of the fence still in use can be found. In other places new fences (cyclone and steel posts) have been constructed inside the original fence to make it stockproof, but some of the old fence still stands, as a reminder of the past.

WARRACKNABEAL VERMIN BOARD

Extract from "Warracknabeal Herald". Thursday, June 21st 1888.

Present Messrs Phillips (chairman), McIntyre, Craig, Griffiths and Thomas.

The State of Warracknabeal Government Reserves. The Reserves are not well looked after — take as for instance, the Norwegian (Galaquil) reserves as another case in point — It was moved that they write to the Government again informing them up to the present time there were no signs of rabbit suppression having been performed on the reserves the last few months — that the mallee allotments adjoining them were well looked after and that it would be impossible for the farmers to keep their holdings clear if the Government did not act and their reserves were not well looked after.

Extracts from "Beulah Record" 1894-97

In late 1894 a large portion of the County of Karkaroc was transferred from the Swan Hill Vermin Board to that of Warracknabeal.

A petition was presented to the Minister of Lands by the lessees north of the netting fence protesting against such annexation.

As they had hitherto paid a vermin rate not exceeding two shillings (20 cents) per square mile, the prospect of being joined to a district in which the annual rate amounted to nine or ten shillings (90 cents or \$1) per square mile, or a fraction thereof, did not seem very inviting.

It was felt that the wishes of the lessees north of the 36th parallel had not been taken into consideration.

The "Beulah Record and Mallee Advocate," very vocal in condemnation of this move forcefully implored readers to vote for candidates of the Beulah district — namely Messrs. Ferguson and Molyneaux. Without any hesitation, Mr Lascelles' candidature was applauded stating that he had been Chairman of the Swan Hill Board for years — a Board which had shown the Warracknabeal Committee both how to keep down the rates to two shillings and how to rid the country of wild dogs so that sheep could be run at large.

The article goes on to state that 'the portion north of the 36th parallel is more than twice as large as the old district, however, owing to the denser settlement in the Boring portion (360 out of a total of 670 enrolled in respect to land south of the netting fence), all lessees in this neighbourhood would have to leave no stone unturned to get the right men elected, men who were pledged to make the Board as efficient as possible and as soon as could be, to do away with it altogether.' (Beulah Record January 9th 1895).

The first meeting of the newly elected Warracknabeal Vermin Board was held at the Shire Hall, Warracknabeal on February 22nd 1895 when Mr E.H. Lascelles (Lake Jarrong) was unanimously elected chairman for the ensuing year. Secretary and Inspector was Mr J.W. Thomas and the Committee were Messrs. Ryan (Lah), Molyneaux (Beulah), Ferguson (Beulah) and Cumming (Hopetoun) (Mr Cumming died late 1895).

Beulah was to become the centre for future meetings of the Board which was to meet every month. (Beulah Record February 6th 1895).

Many letters of complaint from lessees from northwards and as far south as Horsham were dealt with over the years.

One such letter received, was from G.B. Matthews, Rabbit Farm, Beulah West, repeating his complaint of rabbits on Margaret D'Alton's allotment — Received — a wire

having since been received by the Board that the work was proceeding to the satisfaction of the complainant.

Rabbits and wild dogs were the main vermin in the district. The rabbits were prolific breeders in the mallee scrub and were controlled by rolling and burning. It seems that those farmers who were lagging behind with the clearing of their land were the main offenders.

The Inspector reported at each meeting on the state of various blocks of land and the lessees who were causing the board much concern.

Several farmers were ordered to roll down and burn the mallee in a strip twenty chains (.2 kms) wide along their neighbours boundaries within seven days, otherwise a summons would be issued against them.

Several farmers appeared at the meetings mostly with complaints about their neighbours lack of commitment to the eradication of the rabbits. They had previously written to the board and had asked for the Inspector to examine these blocks and it appears that when a farmer came to a meeting, the result was often dramatic and to the detriment of his neighbours livelihood with the cancellation of their lease often being the final move. The Vermin Board had the power to recommend to the Lands Department the forfeiture of the lease of a block of land, if the lessee was not controlling the vermin to their satisfaction.

The Board also had the right to employ workers to clear blocks of land that they considered were not being dealt with in an appropriate manner — all at the lessee's expense.

At a meeting held in Hopetoun on August 2 1895 an extract from the Inspector's annual report was read, recommending that the Lands Department sell the netting fence to the lessees. Mr Ryan moved that a letter be sent to the lessees informing them that the Government was willing to sell the fence to them. By January 1897 the Minister stated that a fair price would be £25 (\$50) per mile, as the fence was 12 years old by that time. Payments to be in five equal annual instalments.

Mr James Molyneux stated that there were a number of wild dogs heard every night near Mr Hart's block and that owing to their presence, that gentleman had to yard his sheep by night. The trapper, McCarthy was to be asked to visit the place.

By the end of 1897, the inspector could report that at the present time the area was in a fairly clean condition generally. The Norwegian Reserve (Galaxquil) was still causing some concern. He also reported that the Government was still considering selling the fence on the 36th Parallel but at a much higher price than that suggested by the Vermin Board. He felt that it would be some time before this matter was dealt with.

INSPECTOR'S REPORT Beulah Record, August 7th 1895.

'Gentlemen —

In relation to the doings of the past month with respect to vermin destruction, throughout your district, I have the honour to report as follows, viz:-

That Mr Gray has made a good job of destroying the burrows on his allotment near Rosebery, lately held by Jas. Noonan, and there should now be no further trouble in that direction.

Regarding the complaint laid at last Board meeting by S. Taylor against J. O'Donnell, re the infested state of the latter allotment, I have to intimate that I have since investigated

re matter, and found that the uncleared portion of Taylor's allotment was in just as bad a condition as the uncleared portion of O'Donnell's. The last named rolling and digging it, but Taylor was doing nothing to mitigate the nuisance on his land. I have served the notices to destroy on both the lessees just indicated.

I have visited Drummond's allotment again and find that nothing is being done in any way to improve its neglected and infested condition. I have furthermore to report that the neighbour's crops are suffering in this connection, and that it is high time something was put in train whereby the land in question could be put to better use.

I have also to notify that the Messrs. Tarrant and Dawe are doing good work in the digging out line, and if they follow up the good start they have made no further complaints would emanate from that quarter.

Re Mr L. Anderson's allotment at Beulah West, I may mention that two more men were put on to cut shoots just after the last meeting, but after they had made a bit of start they threw the job up and cleared out. No burrows were dug out when I visited the place, but a man turned up just as I was leaving, with the necessary tools to carry out the work, and also furnished with a good supply of tools for poisoning.

THE LAND BOARD

The Land Board met regularly to deal with recommendations concerning the leasing of land. Many cases dealt with the forfeiture of leases — several of these were recommended because of the farmers lack of success in eradicating the rabbits from their lands.

BEULAH COURT OF PETTY SESSIONS

The Court of Petty Sessions sat regularly in the 1890's in Beulah with Messrs William Wendell (chairman) William Hutchinson, James Ferguson and John Grace, Justices of the Peace.

Many and varied were the cases heard from petty stealing of a few pence or a small article to the quite serious amounts of £10 (\$20) or more. Many guilty persons were sentenced to three months hard labour in Ararat Prison and in the more serious cases a prisoner would be sentenced to twelve months gaol.

Approximate position of proposed
Murrayville Dog proof fence. File No.
N M 488

WILD DOG FENCE

DIMBOOLA

BIRSHIP

KARKAROO
CARRACANVA

WYCHERD
ROOF

WALPEUP

SWAN HILL

