Confinement in Bonegilla Migrant Camp, Victoria

When we came and when we saw all those cows and sheep eating completely dry grass, the trees were all dead. I thought, God, what country I got in.

Post-war migration

The army camp which would later become the Bonegilla Migrant Camp was formerly part of a large pastoral holding of approximately 25,000 acres which had been taken up in 1836. Following Australia's declaration of war on 3 September 1939, the Bonegilla area was requisitioned for an army camp to accommodate troops from the Second AIJ. On completion, the camp comprised 24 separate and basically self-contained 'blocks' of huts totalling over 800 buildings.

In 1945 the ALP Government pursued an active policy of post-War immigration:

The days of our isolation are over...The call to all Australians is to realise that, without adequate numbers, this wide brown land may not be held in another clash of arms, and to give their maximum assistance to every effort to expand its economy and assimilate more and more people who will come from overseas to link their fate with our destiny.

The Government's objective was an increase in population of two per cent per annum with one per cent to be by natural population growth and one per cent (70,000 persons) through immigration. The Government felt it had the infrastructure to deal with large numbers of government sponsored immigrants in the form of the many empty military-camps specially developed for quartering a large and essentially transient population, and personnel trained to run them. By 1951 there were three reception centres and 20 holding centres in operation and many of these were former army camps.

In 1946 the Government had introduced the Assisted Passage Scheme to provide free passage for British ex-servicemen and their dependants, as well as for other selected British migrants. The scheme was extended to the Netherlands later that year. However, only 6500 British migrants were available in 1947 and Calwell tried, unsuccessfully, to attract migrants from other parts of western Europe and Scandinavia by extending the

Figure 1 An English class for migrants. (The Border Mail, Saturday 17 May 1997)

Peter Freeman

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assisted passage scheme to Norway, France, Belgium and Denmark. He then turned in frustration to the 1.6 million war refugees, or displaced persons (DPs), who were held in camps in Germany, Austria and France awaiting repatriation.

In return for their passage, migrants were subject to a two year directed-labour contract. There were only two classes of worker under this contract: men were ‘labourers’ and women were ‘domestics’. They were to be housed initially in a ‘Reception and Training Centre’ where they would be given courses in the English language and the Australian way of life.

Bonegilla

Bonegilla was the first camp to be utilised as a migrant reception centre. It was ideal for some of the same reasons that had made it suitable as an army camp site, but it was also ideal because of its location far from two major metropolitan centres, Sydney and Melbourne. It was feared that if the migrants were near metropolitan areas, they would compete with Australians for the limited accommodation and would form racial groups which would prejudice the immigration program.

During the height of overseas arrivals by ship, there was a typical pattern of procedure. The ship would dock at Port Melbourne and migrants would get on a special train.

The journey was long [four hours] but for the already exhausted people, especially for those who had never left the borders of their village, the journey seemed endless.

The train would arrive at Bonegilla Siding, where the migrants were met by camp officials and taken to a hot meal and their accommodation. Eventually they would be reunited with their baggage and effects after customs clearance.

...they were issued with two blankets each and ushered to huts equipped with canvas stretchers and a pot-belly stove in the centre. The men collected straw and spread it on the canvas as a mattress, and through the...winter [sic] nights took it in turns to crouch over the stove to warm themselves.

The diet was sparse, and the Lithuanians developed skills at catching rabbits...by hitting them with thick branches. A pot borrowed from the kitchen, and rabbit stew cooked over an open fire, eked out the one mutton chop that served for most meals.

Figure 2 Mrs Elizabeth Wrobel who arrived at Bonegilla in 1957 with her husband and three small children. (The Border Mail, 14 July 1995)
Different national groups were housed in separate blocks and within these blocks men and women were segregated, even if they were married. The huts contained no internal facilities, nor any furniture except for camp beds. The migrants set up crude blanket partitioning and placed their luggage between the beds to provide a sense of privacy and personal space.12

Recreation consisted of swimming in nearby Lake Hume and there was a library and recreational dance classes. The cinema showed films twice a week, and dancing was held at the Tudor Hall in Block 19. A bus service connected with Wodonga and Albury. The Australian Services Canteens Organisation administered a shop. In the mid-1950s a privately owned general store, known as either Matthew's Store or the Kangaroo Store, opened near the main gates.13

A December 1947 memo refers to the installation of a public address system:

...whereby someone in the Administrative system can speak either to Camp 17, 18, 19 (or). . . the three together.

A gramophone record of 'Advance Australia Fair' had already been requested for relaying through the public address system.14

By 1949 there were reception and training centres in most states, with 20 holding centres to accommodate the wives and children of contracted workers. Forty-seven thousand beds were made available for the almost exclusive use of non-British DP migrants. Bonegilla's capacity increased from less than 2000 in 1947 to 7700 in 1950. In emergency conditions, 1600 more could be accommodated.15

An account by Rachel McLaren, a social worker who visited Bonegilla in March 1950, reveals that living conditions were not much changed from the army camp accommodation:

The appearance presented by scores of huts is not prepossessing...the absence of partitions in the huts (I understand these are to be constructed as soon as possible) and long distances from huts to ablution blocks and lavatories must be aspects of camp life which become very tedious.

Prior to 1951 all migrants at Bonegilla were from southern and eastern Europe; however, an increase in the number of British migrants, a new assisted passage scheme concluded with the Netherlands in February 1951, and a similar agreement with Italy in March 1951, heralded a change in the role of the centre. The prospect of the arrival of British and Dutch migrants speeded up the program of improvements.

It is intended that British and Dutch migrants should be housed in Blocks 17, 18, 19, 20, 21 and 22 at Bonegilla Centre, as soon as certain alterations are made...With the exception of Block 19, this area has only deep pit latrines and it is intended that it should be sewered at the earliest possible moment.16

...In my way of thinking, [Bonegilla is] one of the worst Canteens we operate in any Immigration Centre in Australia. It should be one of the best. Bonegilla Camp is visited by all the VIP's and I am certainly not proud of the canteen we operate there for your New Australians.17

This prompted upgrading works which were considered urgent as the existing standard of accommodation was not thought appropriate for the British and Dutch immigrants. From 1955 the plumbing and sewerage was upgraded to replace the deep pit latrines,
and trees, mainly pines, were planted to provide shade and windbreaks. There was a constant process of demolition, relocation and modification of buildings for new uses. During the period 1952–64 Blocks 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 23, 24 and 26 were demolished or disposed of and about 60 huts were converted to self-contained flats. 18

Riot

In July 1952 a number of Italian migrants damaged some buildings in a work riot. 19 They had been in the camp for several months without being allocated to jobs and were demanding either immediate employment or repatriation. Despite the contracting job market the Italians felt that they had priority for work because their particular agreement with the Commonwealth required them to pay back the cost of their passage after arrival in Australia. 20

The events surrounding the riot are not entirely clear and accounts of the amount of damage inflicted differ in substance. A former Italian migrant, later a Victorian Member of Parliament, is quoted as having said: ‘We burned two or three huts and set fire to the church’. 21

There was a second work riot in 1961, in similar circumstances to that of the 1952 riot. Another recession had caused a slacking in the demand for labour and once again migrants were staying longer than expected in Bonegilla without employment. As in 1952, there was a march on the employment office, this time by Italian and German

![Image](image.png)
migrants, and some windows were broken. However, unlike the situation in 1952, the police were immediately called in and charges were eventually laid against five Italians and six Germans. The incident received wide publicity in Europe, and in particular in Italy, and was a major factor in the non-renewal of the Italo-Australian immigration agreement.\textsuperscript{22}

By 1964, at the height of the ‘routinisation’ of Bonegilla, blocks 17 and 19 had become the quarters of the administrative staff, the primary school and the transport section. Blocks 13, 14, 15, 18 and 21 were accommodation blocks comprising mainly standard cubículed huts with their own kitchens and messes. Block 25 had retained its wartime stores function. Block 22 contained the patrol office, orthodox church, Red Cross stores and three flats. Block 16 contained the creche and 18 flats. Block 9 was the film and study centre. The hospital was still functioning but with fewer wards than in wartime. Block 20 contained both standard accommodation huts and flats as well as the police station and scout hall. An enlarged civic centre included the cinema, churches, recreation hall, leisure centre, employment office, three banks, post office, canteen, YMCA, administration offices, library, bootmaker and hairdresser. The theatre, complete with a series of murals painted in 1952 by one of the migrants, is the only building from the former civic centre of the camp which remains extant.

Migrant intake numbers subsided after the peak of the early years (1947–52), and early in 1952 the Displaced Persons Scheme was terminated. Later that year the migrant intake, originally planned as 150,000, was curtailed and the 1953 intake reduced to 80,000.\textsuperscript{23} During the 1950s Bonegilla was the only major reception and training centre still in operation. Seven holding centres closed and three others stayed open.

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{block19plan1988.png}
\caption{Block 19 Building Plan 1988. (Australian Heritage Commission)}
\end{figure}

\textbf{endnotes}

\begin{itemize}
\item Parts of this article have been reproduced from a history of the site prepared by Patrick Miller in 1988. The (draft) Historical Summary was part of an unfinished conservation management plan for the Bonegilla site commenced by Australian Construction Services, Melbourne, in 1988.
\item From a plaque on the wall of the Greek Orthodox Church Hall, Canberra.
\item Minister for Immigration Arthur Calwell’s speech to the House of Representatives in November 1946, quoted in \textit{Australia and Immigration 1788·1988}, Department of Immigration, Local Government and Ethnic Affairs, AGPS, Canberra, 1988, p. 27.
\item Miller 1988, op. cit.
\item \textit{Australia and Immigration 1788·1988}, op. cit., p. 31.
\item Ibid.
\item Collins, op. cit., p. 22.
\item Miller 1988, op. cit.
\item Glenda Sluga, \textit{Bonegilla ’A Place of No Hope’}, University of Melbourne 1988, p. 4.
\item From a plaque on the wall of the Greek Orthodox Church Hall, Canberra.
\item Ibid.
\item Miller 1988, op. cit.
\item Sluga 1988, op. cit., p. 23.
\item Memorandum from J.D. Schroeder, Controller Migrant Accommodation Centres to Works Director, Dept of Works and Housing, Vic. 7 May 1951 A445/1 Item 220/1412.
\item Letter from Australian Army Canteens Service Central Canteens Control Board, 22 January 1951, reference to delay in undertaking works on the Bonegilla Camp Canteen AA A445/1.
\item Miller 1988 op. cit.
\item For further detail about the riot refer M. Hill, \textit{The Bonegilla ’Riot’}, July 1952, Honours Thesis, University of WA, 1984; and Sluga, op. cit.
\item Miller 1988 op. cit.
\item Miller 1988 op. cit.
\end{itemize}
Bonegilla was the first army camp to be utilised as a migrant reception centre, it had the largest capacity and it functioned for the longest period of time. In comparison with 13 other former army camps across Australia which were used for the same purpose (and there are almost certainly more), it is clear that the 28 buildings at Block 19 comprise the most intact remnant precinct evidencing the use of former World War II army camps for migrant accommodation.

In 1996 the Department of Defence commissioned Peter Freeman Pty Ltd to prepare a conservation management plan for the sole remnant of the Bonegilla Camp – Block 19. The following three specific strategy recommendations were proposed in recognition of the Block's significance.

- It is recommended that the Department of Defence undertakes urgent remediation and maintenance of the derelict and poorly maintained buildings within the Bonegilla, Block 19, precinct. These 'first step' works would probably be undertaken whilst a conservation/development program was being development for the precinct. The conservation/development program for the site should be guided by this conservation management plan. The program should take into consideration the existing uses of the site and may include new development.

- It is recommended that the Department of Defence set up a meeting with the Moreland Friends of Bonegilla group and the Italian Historical Society (and other interested migrant groups) to discuss potential avenues for the conservation/development of the Bonegilla, Block 19, precinct. This meeting would discuss aims and objectives; possible legal and administrative constraints and opportunities; leasehold and/or disposal potential; and funding sources and funding commitments. Any conservation/development strategy for the precinct should be informed by this conservation management plan.

- It is recommended that an interpretation plan be prepared for the Bonegilla, Block 19, precinct. This plan should have considerable input from the Moreland Friends of Bonegilla, the Italian Historical Society and other interested migrant groups.