



MEDIA RELEASE

The Hon Peter Garrett MP

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts

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AUSTRALIA'S MIGRANT STORY HONOURED

A place where hundreds of thousands of migrants began their Australian journey has today been included in the National Heritage List.

The Bonegilla Migrant Camp – Block 19 near Albury-Wodonga, was part of the Bonegilla Reception and Training Centre which operated between 1947 and 1971. The largest and longest running migrant centre of the post war era, over 300,000 people passed through its gates.

Australian Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts, Peter Garrett, said the site symbolised a defining change in the nation's immigration policy.

“Post World War II immigration transformed the size and make-up of the Australian population and is responsible for one of the largest demographic changes in our history,” Mr Garrett said.

“Bonegilla played a major role in this as the place where more than half the ‘displaced persons’ from war-torn European countries were sent, after changes made to the White Australia policy – leading to the nation's growth as a diverse, multicultural society.

“For many the former army camp was their first Australian home. Block 19's 23 buildings remain remarkably intact, from migrant and staff housing to the purpose-built recreation and mess halls.

“Living conditions were basic and newcomers were confronted with a bewildering array of languages and customs. They were given instruction in English language, civics, hygiene and the Australian way of life.

“Bonegilla holds powerful memories for those who lived there and their estimated 1.5 million migrant descendents. Its oral and written records provide an insight into refugee experiences.

“Some were uneasy about life in a strange and vast new land, while others were excited at the promise held by their arrival. The sights, sounds and views of the area stayed with people, with one refugee reflecting on ‘the huge sun...the space...the sound of a magpie...’

“The post-war migrant community went on to have a major impact on our economy, contributing half of the national workforce increase between 1947 and 1973. The growth of industries such as steel, motor vehicles and construction has depended largely on the skills and energy of migrant workers.

“Bonegilla is a legacy of people who helped shape our nation economically, socially and culturally, and the Australian story – past, present and future - is so much richer for their journey here.”

The Greek and Dutch communities are hosting a special event on site tomorrow - Saturday 8 December - to mark Bonegilla's 60th anniversary, and the Dutch Ambassador will attend.

Bonegilla Migrant Camp – Block 19 is the 75th site to be included in the National Heritage List, joining places like Tasmania's Port Arthur, the Melbourne Cricket Ground, Western Australia's Stirling Ranges and Aboriginal fish traps at Brewarrina, northwest NSW. For more information visit www.environment.gov.au/heritage



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Bonegilla Migrant Camp – Block 19

“We never regretted it even for a second. We got away from the displaced persons camp. We were pleased that the Australian Government brought us here and gave us a chance for life.”
Hilja Opik (National Archives 2003¹)

The arrival of hundreds of thousands of European migrants displaced by World War II changed forever Australian society and our way of life. Bonegilla Migrant Camp, located on the banks of the Murray River near Albury-Wodonga represents post war immigration and symbolises a defining change in our nation's immigration policy.

Post War Migration

Australia was experiencing a desperate shortage of labour at the end of World War II. Substantial population growth was considered essential to the nation's future — it was required for economic development and to defend the country against possible invasion. In 1947 Arthur Calwell, Australia's first Minister for Immigration signed an agreement with the International Refugee Organisation (IRO) to allow Displaced Persons from war torn Europe to come to Australia. This marked the beginning of the mass emigration of non-English speaking Europeans and represents one of the largest demographic changes in our history.

Between 1947 and 1953, over 170 000 Displaced Persons came to Australia, mainly dispossessed or homeless Poles, Yugoslavs, Latvians, Ukrainians, Hungarians, Lithuanians, Czechoslovaks, Estonians, Russians, Germans and Romanians. They were culturally diverse, and Minister Calwell called the arrivals 'New Australians'. The press dubbed them 'Calwell's Beautiful Balts,' irrespective of their nationality.

The largest migrant reception and training centre, Bonegilla Migrant Camp received and processed more than half of the 170 000 Displaced Persons. Established on the site of a former army camp, Bonegilla's major functions were to process and house migrants, find work for new arrivals and most importantly, provide language and civics training. The focus of the camp was to train migrants in Australian values so that they could become model citizens.

Bonegilla was the longest operating migrant centre in Australia, finally closing its doors in 1971 - by which time over 300,000 people had passed through. It is estimated that today there are over 1.5 million descendants of Bonegilla migrants.

Block 19, Bonegilla

Many Australian migrant reception centres have been demolished, dismantled or redeveloped. Block 19, Bonegilla, survives as a rare example of post war migration centre and provides a strong sense of the migrant experience. It contains timber framed corrugated iron World War II army huts - used as migrant and staff housing - office accommodation, recreation and dining halls, kitchens, washing and toilet blocks.

¹National Archives 2003, 'Passage to Freedom', *Memento: News from the National Archives*, September.



Wash day (National Archives of Australia: NAA 49/22/17)



Children on deck chairs (National Archives of Australia: NAA 49/22/20)

There was separate accommodation for men and women and children, communal dining and washing facilities and plantings of native and exotic trees in an attempt to ‘civilise’ the place. However for the newly arrived migrants everything was strange - the open space, the unfamiliar food and language, the basic living conditions and their introduction to English and civics training.

“We disembarked in Melbourne on 17 November 1948 and went by train to Bonegilla. We arrived at night. The air was crisp, the grass was tall and all the mosquitoes were out singing; we all had mosquito bites the next day. The Bonegilla huts were just open huts. When we heard the kookaburra we did not know what it was, then one man said, “Look, even the birds cry here!” Dragoslava Williams (www.belongings.com.au²)

“They travelled alone or with their families, and arrived by air and sea to what seemed a strange but promised land. In the conservative and closed society of the 1940s many Australians were suspicious of the ‘New Australians,’ The new arrivals had to endure not only the hardships of a new land and language but also names like ‘Dago’, ‘Reff’ or ‘Balt.’ (Mason 1992³)

A special place

Bonegilla represents for many migrants their first home in Australia. It reflects the achievements, joys, trials and sorrows of a large number of people who emigrated to Australia following the devastation of World War II. As a result this site holds powerful cultural connections for many people.

For the broader community Bonegilla represents the arrival of the post war migration which has ultimately transformed our nation economically, socially and culturally. This site demonstrates a defining change in immigration – one which led to Australia becoming a multicultural society.

I have come to understand, as have so many others, that it is truly an iconic place in the land where the ‘journey’ takes on so much significance for the new Australians as well as the original ones.’ (Skowronska 2004:11⁴).

Bonegilla today

Block 19 is located 10 kilometres northeast of Wodonga at Bonegilla. An interpretation centre, *The Beginning Place*, is open to the public daily from 9.30am to 4.30pm. The Bonegilla Collection is located in the Albury City Library Museum.

Further information is available at <http://www.bonegilla.org.au/block19.html>.

² Interview by Bridget Guthrie, Albury City Library Museum for the NSW Migration Heritage Centre, *Belongings – Post-Second World War Migration Memories and Journeys* online exhibition, www.belongings.com.au

³ Mason, K, J, 1992, *Experience of Nationhood Australia and the World since 1900*, McGraw-Hill Book Company, Sydney.

⁴ Skowronska, W, 2004, ‘Journey to Bonegilla,’ *Annals Australasia*, August, 11-14.