

Landmarks: People and Places across Australia, a gallery bringing together over 1500 objects, explores the history of Australia since European settlement.

OBJECT BIOGRAPHY

Robe Primary School Bell

Robe is a town, fishing port and popular holiday destination in Guichen Bay on the 'Limestone Coast' of South Australia, with a district population of about 1,400. Robe is the main town of the District Council of Robe local government area, located within the state electorate of MacKillop. The County of Robe was proclaimed in 1846. Robe, as it appears today, developed as several distinct townships, sometimes known as suburbs. The government town of Robe comprised of 126 allotments, with the town beach of Guichen Bay as its northern border, and Lake Butler to the west. The suburbs were Lordston, Honeyton or Honey Town, Syleham, East Robe and Newtown.



Robe Primary School Bell salvaged by the Dutch vessel *Koning Willem II* is believed to have been used at the Robe Primary School from the late 1800s. Photo: Jason McCarthy, National Museum of Australia.

Robe was South Australia's third port, and by the mid-1850s had become the colony's second largest export port. The port, harbour and jetties quickly became dominated by local business, with imports and exports managed by the South Australian Government. During the 1850s and 1860s, as a thriving port, Robe was home a population of 400 to 500, and boasted businesses and amenities not found in most regional centres: churches of several different denominations, a government resident, a court house, a customs house, telegraph station, police station, barracks, goal, and several hotels.

A colourful period in Robe's history occurred during the late 1850s and early 1860s, when Robe experienced an increase in population with more than sixteen and a half thousand Chinese migrants passing through the port and town on their way to the Victorian goldfields.

While attractive for many reasons, this coastline did prove dangerous to shipping, with 14 shipwrecks recorded during Robe's first fifteen years.

One shipwreck of interest to the Landmarks gallery is that of the *Koning Willem II*. The 800 tonne Dutch vessel had completed unloading 397 Chinese passengers and cargo on 25 June 1857. Because of bad weather, *Koning Willem II* remained anchored in Guichen Bay until 30 June when it was ripped from its mooring lines by strong winds. The captain set sail in an effort to safely beach the vessel, but after a successful grounding just off Long Beach, large seas continued to sweep over the ship, making it a total wreck. Only nine crewmen made it safely to shore, thanks largely to the efforts of locals. The other 15 crewmen either died on the vessel or drowned while trying to swim to the beach.

A record of the wreck was made by Customs Officer and Receiver of Wrecks, Henry Melville:

'She was not many hours on the beach before she became a complete wreck. Directly the vessel stranded, the townspeople flocked to the scene to render assistance in landing the crew through the surf, the break being very heavy. At my request Lieutenant Saunders of the 12th Regiment took a detachment of his men went to the beach to secure and guard everything washed ashore. At this time there was no lifeboat at Robe, but a smart boat crew in the employ of Messrs Omerod & Co were on the spot and carried out a warp into the surf as far as possible hoping to catch a line from the wreck and thus establishing connection with the shore and by this means land the men into the surf. Before this could be done the wrecked sailors had their launch alongside and crowded into it, the Captain being the last man, was ready to leave the wreck when one of his sailors cut the painter to save the launch from swamping. The boat being free drifted from the lee of the ship and before the men could ship their oars and put her stern on to the seas the boat being broadside on capsized and those who could not swim were clinging to and drowning those who could. Some were carried out to sea by the draw back and lost, and but for the warp we had tailed on to, all would have been lost.'

The remains of *Koning Willem II* were sold for £225 to Mr Jacob Chambers of Robe, who dismantled the wreck and in turn sold it for various purposes in town. Known remains of the wreck are two cannons, one which sits as a monument on Flagstaff Hill, in Royal Circus; and some of the ship's doors and its timbers were used in the Caledonian Inn, which was then being constructed under the ownership of Scotsman Peter McQueen.

The ship's bell was probably also salvaged, and is believed to have been used at the Robe Primary School from the late 1800s until recently when cracks appeared in the metal and the bell was retired.

That bell is now at the National Museum on loan from Robe Primary School for the display in the Landmarks gallery.

While there is no evidence that this is definitely the bell from *Koning Willem II*, the suggested origin seems likely. As Peter McQueen, owner of the Caledonian Inn, acquired much of the salvaged wreck for building material, it is possible that the bell also made its way to the McQueens and was used by his daughter Elizabeth, one of the earliest teachers in Robe. During the 1870s, Elizabeth McQueen established a small private school for girls and was also employed as an assistant teacher at the government school in Robe.

Bells were then, and are still today an important part of regulating the school day according to a set timetable. This bell is the only one remembered by the older residents and former pupils of Robe Primary School, and its shipwreck origins are generally accepted by the community.

A government funded public school was opened in Robe in the former Bible Christian Chapel in 1875. The Robe community soon petitioned the Education Department for better facilities, and in 1886 a new purpose-built school, with two large rooms, a playground and teacher's residence, was opened. For over a century, Robe Primary School has hosted about 100 students every year.

Curator's notes:

Now painted yellow, in an effort to protect its metal from the unavoidable corrosion of a seaside life, the bell is without its tongue, missing part of its arm and cracking from continued use and age. Another bell, which is understood to be a replica of the old bell, is now in use to announce assemblies, lunch breaks, and class times throughout each school day.



Current Robe Primary School Bell, understood to be a replica of the old bell, is now in use to announce assemblies, lunch breaks and class times throughout each school day. Photo: George Serras, National Museum of Australia.

It was a pleasure to visit Robe and find a primary school that has been a central focus in that community for more than a century. I met several Robe families who had attended, supported and even taught at Robe Primary School over many generations. Their generous supply of stories and mementos has ensured that the Robe exhibit in *Landmarks* is full of colour.

A few of the items on display will be familiar to many visitors. Although computers have now replaced slates, inkwells and chalk, the school experience remains essentially the same for students today as those in the nineteenth century and all the decades between.

Object biography and curator's notes prepared by Jennifer Wilson, Curator, National Museum of Australia.

Landmarks: People and Places across Australia is the National Museum's newest and most ambitious gallery to date, bringing together over 1500 objects to create a history of Australia since European settlement.

For more information about the exhibition visit
<http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/landmarks>