

## 2.0 THEMATIC HISTORY OF WILCANNIA

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### 2.1 Brief Background History

The Wilcannia area was first settled by pastoralists in the 1840s. The township of Wilcannia (the name reputedly meant 'a gap in the bank where the flood waters escape' in the language of the local Barkindji Aborigines) was proclaimed in June 1866 and it was incorporated as a municipality in February 1883.

River steamers reached Mount Murchison, the pastoral station which is now the site of Wilcannia in 1859. By 1868 the population was 150 and a number of buildings had been erected (probably in timber). These included a Commercial Bank, a court house and lock-up, three public houses, three or four stores, a brewery, bakery, two butchers, two blacksmiths, a wool scour and a cordial factory. With the expansion of the township, new stone buildings appeared, built of local stone obtained from quarries nearby. Necessary supplies were brought in by paddle steamer (river heights permitting), bullock dray or camel trains. As the town grew, services were expanded, and Wilcannia was an important regional centre. By 1870 there was one doctor residing in the town and *'The Wilcannia Times'* newspaper commenced publication in 1873.

From the 1870s to the 1890s, Wilcannia became Australia's third largest inland port and the leading port on the Darling River. It was also especially important as a crossing point for stock moving south to the Melbourne market. A punt for carrying livestock operated at the end of Cleaton Street and it was not unusual for several thousand sheep to cross in a day. In 1879 the Red Lion brewery (no longer standing) was built at the northern end of Reid Street. Its great claim to fame was that it was the first brewery which the famous beer baron Edmund Resch built in Australia. In 1887 alone, 26,550 tonnes of wool and other goods were loaded onto 222 steamers at the Wilcannia wharf. Known as 'Queen City of the West' in the 1880s, it boasted 13 hotels and the population quickly grew as Wilcannia became a service centre for prospectors exploiting the region's gold, copper, silver and opal resources. The town became a transport hub with several mail coach companies providing links to Melbourne, Adelaide and Sydney via intermediate towns such as Booligal, Hay, Silverton, Burra and Cobar. Wilcannia was an essential link in the movement of livestock from the north to the southern markets. Several Stock and Station Agents operated, including that of E L B Dickens and his brother Alfred, sons of Charles Dickens. Edmund Dickens went on to represent the region in the NSW Parliament during the years 1889-94.

Wilcannia's peak was in the 1880-90s when the pastoral industry was booming and with the discovery of gold near Milparinka. When the opal fields of White Cliffs were discovered in the 1890s, trade increased again as Wilcannia became the central supply depot for the opal miners and the major recipient of their revenue. In 1896, a lift bridge was constructed that extended Myers Street (also known as the Barrier Highway) over the Darling River.

The prosperity of this time soon declined with a number of dry years from 1900 and depression hit the pastoral industry. The river level dropped considerably, thereby reducing access to the wharf and the river boat trade fell away. With the expansion of railway networks across the state, the town was bypassed by rail services between Bourke and Broken Hill despite Dickens' efforts in Parliament, and Wilcannia lost its status as a regional commercial centre. Road and rail replaced river as reliable transportation methods. The town continued to decline in the early twentieth century, although it did retain some regional government administrative functions. Wilcannia today reflects a vanished way of life on the western rivers of New South Wales.

[Note: further detailed history is included in the assessment of individual heritage places in Section 5 below.]

## 2.2 Historic Themes

### 2.2.1 Background to Historic Themes

The relationship between a building or a place and its historical context underlies the assessment of its heritage significance. Historical themes, or story lines, provide a context within which a place or item can be better understood and appreciated. Historical themes for NSW have been prepared by the Heritage Council of NSW, based on the Australian Historic Themes prepared by the previous Australian Heritage Commission. Local themes may also be extrapolated within the appropriate State theme. This reflects the three levels of recognition of heritage significance: local, state and national.

The main historic themes relating to the settlement and growth of Wilcannia evolve out of the spread of remote rural pastoral and mining activities in NSW during the 1860s-1890s, leading to the rise of the river steamer transportation system as an essential part of the economic growth of the region and the creation of a government administration centre as the population of the region increased.

The specific NSW historic themes which relate to Wilcannia, and to the region more broadly, are:

**Theme 3. – Developing local and regional economies:** the growth of river and other transport in Wilcannia and the region, based on the expansion of pastoralism and mining

**Theme 4. – Building settlements, towns and cities:** Building the township of Wilcannia – public and commercial buildings, housing and accommodation

**Theme 7. – Governing:** Law and order, state and local government administration in Wilcannia with associated buildings and complexes

**Theme 8. – Developing cultural life:** Developing Wilcannia's cultural life, leisure and social institutions for the local community and notable residents

Note: Relevant themes have been applied to each proposed heritage place in the assessments in Section 5 below.



**View of Reid Street, Wilcannia (c 1870s)**

*(Source: Picture Australia, rt76350)*

## **2.2.2 Theme 3. – Developing local and regional economies**

### **Pastoralism**

Pastoral stations were established along the Darling River from the 1840s, after exploration and the influx of squatters taking up land. The success of pastoralism in the region depended on favourable climatic conditions, and overstocking and lack of reliable labour in such remote areas made success problematic. The series of droughts and the financial depression of 1890s - 1900 were devastating for pastoralists.

Small settlements were soon established along the rivers, particularly along the Darling and Murray, to supply the teams which were overlanding stock through the region. Initially, Wilcannia was important as a crossing point for stock associated with the pastoral industry, particularly for stock moving south to the Melbourne market. The original crossing point for the punt/ferry was at the low bank at the bottom of Cleaton Street.

### **Transport - Water**

The water transportation system began with the construction of steam driven paddle steamers on the Murray in the mid-1850s. The river trade was beneficial for supplying both the goldfields and pastoralists and moving products such as wool to markets. River steamers were reaching as far up the Darling as Mount Murchison (later the site of the Wilcannia) by 1859, to supply the outback country opened up on either side of the Darling. Regular trade was affected by river levels, but Wilcannia was navigable for longer than other more northern ports, such as Bourke.

The Wilcannia wharf was built by around 1870 and from the 1870s to the 1890s, Wilcannia became Australia's third largest inland port and the leading port on the Darling River. In 1887 alone, 26,550 tonnes of wool and other goods were loaded onto 222 steamers and barges at the Wilcannia wharf. From 1870 onwards, there was the additional cargo of copper from Cobar and other mining activity in the region. White Cliffs opal mining began in the early 1890s – and miners were supplied from Wilcannia.

The success of the river trade was of course dependent on high rivers and good rainfall – drought years were disastrous in all ways. Wilcannia's importance as an inland trading port and its prosperity came to an end with a succession of dry years from the 1890s - 1900 causing depression hit the pastoral industry. The river level dropped considerably and access to the wharf was reduced: the river boat trade fell away.

In 1896, a lift bridge was constructed that extended Myers Street (also known as the Barrier Highway) over the Darling River. Previously the ferry had been at the river crossing at the end of Cleaton Street.

### **Transport - Roads**

Overland transport was also important to Wilcannia with horse, mule and bullock wagons providing transportation services from the river port. During the 1870s and 1880s Wilcannia became a coaching centre for prospectors exploiting the region's gold, copper silver and opal resources.

Camel trains were also an important method of moving goods from the river port of Wilcannia to the more inhospitable areas further inland.

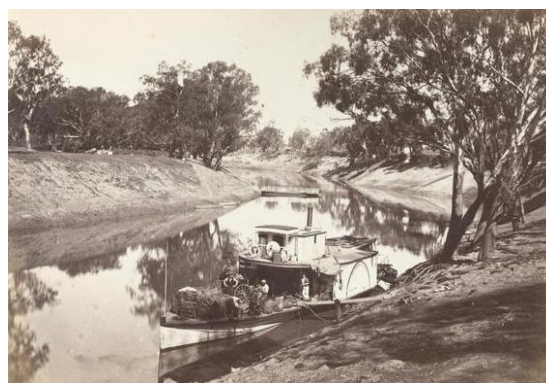
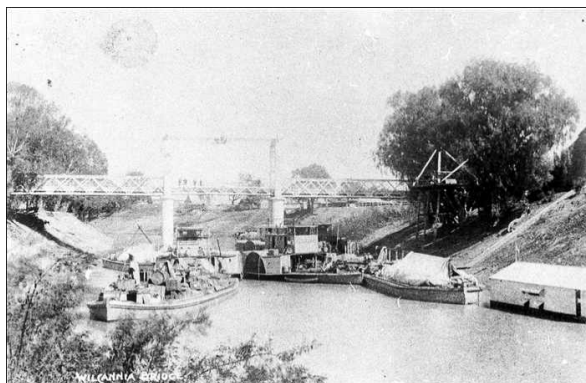
The town had established road links with Broken Hill and Silverton to the west - through mining and other commercial activities – including Edmund and Emil Resch's brewing enterprises and Alfred and Edward Dickens' stock and station agency. And a road followed the river to Bourke.

As road traffic increased with motorised transportation, the river trade became less and less important, and had ceased by 1935.

### Transport - Railway

As the railway networks across the state expanded, despite local member Edward Dickens' efforts in Parliament, Wilcannia was bypassed by rail services. In 1919 the line between Bourke and Broken Hill was opened and the link to Sydney completed in 1927, and Wilcannia lost its status as a regional commercial centre. Road and rail replaced river as reliable transportation methods from the 1930s.

Places which demonstrate Theme 3 include the wharf remains, the lifting bridge, as well as the road pattern in and out of Wilcannia



**Paddle Steamers at Wilcannia - "Princess Royal" moored to river bank (rhs)**

*(Source: National Library of Australia, Record No. 24475115)*



**Wilcannia centre-lift bridge (built in 1896) & a paddle steamer on darling river, 1935**

*(Source: National Library of Australia, Record No. 3506822)*



**Afghan cameleers loading camels in Wilcannia, 1889**

*(Source: National Library of Australia nla.pic-vn3357480-v – also appears in a presentation folder given to Earl Beauchamp Governor on the occasion of his visit to Wilcannia 29<sup>th</sup> September 1899)*

### 2.2.3 Theme 4. – Building settlements, towns and cities

The township of Wilcannia (the name reputedly meant 'a gap in the bank where the flood waters escape' in the language of the local Barkindji Aborigines) was proclaimed in June 1866, and the first land sales in Wilcannia were scheduled for August and September, 1866. The basic town plan for Wilcannia is a grid with streets either parallel to or at right angles to the Darling River. The town was laid out on the high northern bank of the river, above the flood line.

In common with other towns along the Darling, Wilcannia was a service centre for the country being opened up as pastoral land on either side of the river during the 1860s. Mining activities in the region, such as gold near Milparinka and copper at Cobar, also boosted the growth of Wilcannia.

#### Public and commercial buildings

Two years after proclamation, in 1868 the population of Wilcannia was 150 and a number of buildings had been erected. Early buildings served the settlements immediate needs - including a Commercial Bank, a court house and lock-up, three public houses, three or four stores, a brewery, a bakery, two butchers, two blacksmiths, a wool scour and a cordial factory. Supplies were brought in by paddle steamer, bullock dray or camel trains. It is assumed that most of these early buildings were in timber and have disappeared over time. Stone for later, more substantial, structures was obtained from quarries nearby. Brick kilns also operated, although the major brick structures, the pumping station and its tall brick chimney stack have gone.

As the town grew, services were expanded, and Wilcannia was an important regional centre. By 1870 there was one doctor residing in the town and *'The Wilcannia Times'* newspaper commenced publication in 1873. In 1879 the Red Lion brewery (no longer standing) was built at the northern end of Reid Street.

Wilcannia was incorporated as a municipality in 1883, and services and activities developed to serve the more sophisticated needs of the bigger township. Known as 'Queen City of the West' in the 1880s, it boasted 13 hotels and the population quickly grew. By the early 1880s there were three large wholesale and bonded warehouses, three grain and produce stores, six or more smaller retail stores, four blacksmiths, three saddlers, two newspapers, two lawyers, two doctors, four banks and two breweries in Wilcannia. When the opal fields of White Cliffs were discovered in the 1890s, trade increased as Wilcannia became the central supply depot for the opal miners and the major recipient of their revenue.

Many of these early buildings have been demolished, and those that remain, mainly in Reid Street, are integral to Wilcannia's history. The Rich and Company Bond Store at 71 Reid Street, Wilcannia is the only known surviving riverside warehouse associated with the former Darling River paddle steamer trade in Central Darling. The substantial size of the building reflects the volume of wool and other goods handled on the Wilcannia wharf. Some small retail stores still stand, and the three (former) hotels are all that remain of the thirteen that once traded in Wilcannia.

The Athenaeum building is the most significant of the non-secular non-government community buildings which is still standing in Wilcannia. Church and associated buildings and the school also reflect the provision of other community services which were essential to the development of the township.



**View of Reid Street c 1920s** - Note: Wilcannia Council Chambers (formerly a bank) to left of centre  
(Source: Central Darling Shire Council Ref:PA002323 - date c1920s)

### **Housing and accommodation**

Any community requires shelter, and Wilcannia retains a number of discernible housing types from the nineteenth century. These are constructed from stone, brick or timber framed clad in corrugated iron. There may have been early timber board houses but none have been identified. The early housing types have been analysed in more detail in Section 2.4 following.

Government attempts to provide permanent housing for the Aboriginal population of Wilcannia has left some remnant examples (particularly in the area known as the Mallee), but none of these housing programs were successful in the long run.

## **2.2.4 Theme 7. – Governing**

### **Law and order**

With the wide spread settlement of the western region of NSW, a need quickly developed for Government involvement in the area. Apparently lawlessness was a constant issue and one of the first government buildings in any of the settlements was court house, with an associated police station and lock-up.

### **State Government**

As Wilcannia became established as the regional centre for the Central Darling/Western Rivers district, a series of Government services were housed in more substantial institutional buildings. The buildings were designed in Sydney by Government Architect James Burnett and the stone for these structures was quarried close by. The Wilcannia Courts, Police Station and Gaol complex was complete by the end of 1881. The Post Office and attached residence was located at the corner of Reid and Myers Streets, and also housed the telegraph link with Menindee (first functioning in 1877). These buildings remain and are an essential indicator of Wilcannia's former significance as a centre of State government administration during the late nineteenth century. They also demonstrate the state government's intention to maintain control of the remote areas of NSW.

In 1888, Wilcannia was the centre of a newly established electoral district [550,000 sq km in extent, covering pastoral stations and mining settlements] for the Legislative Assembly of NSW parliament. Edward Dickens was elected by a two-to-one majority as the first parliamentarian for this electorate and went on to represent the region during the years 1889-94.

A customs house was established in Wilcannia – next to the Post Office residence in Reid Street - as duties were payable on goods trading between states prior to Federation. - It burned down in 1972.

### **Local Government**

Wilcannia Town Council was proclaimed in 1866, and after it was incorporated as a municipality in 1883, held its meetings in the Athenaeum building. The Wilcannia Council moved to its current location in the former bank in 1972. Interestingly, no dedicated council chambers were constructed in Wilcannia.

Wilcannia has been the administrative centre for the Central Darling Shire 1959.



### 2.2.5 Theme 8. – Developing cultural life:

The main period of growth of Wilcannia was during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century – from 1870 to 1900. It was during this time that organisations and institutions, such as the Wilcannia Progress Association, were established and flourished.

Some buildings remain which reflect the existence of these important social services and networks within the established settlement and beyond. The Athenaeum building served a number of functions – as a social centre (which was not a pub!), a library, a newspaper office and council meeting place. The Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches have structures which indicate their presence in the township. The school building is evidence of government provision of education facilities. Other institutions include the Masonic and other Lodges, and sporting clubs such as the Jockey Club and Rowing Club. Wilcannia was the meeting point for members of these groups. Some of these have continued, despite Wilcannia's decline in importance and population. The main social focus today is the Golf Club, which was established on the site of the former brewery.



**Rowing Regatta at Wilcannia**  
(Source: *nla.pc-vn3968416-v*)

## 2.3 Building Time Line

The following provides a summary chronology of main remaining historic buildings and places in Wilcannia [for easy referral and reference]:

### 1860s

1866c – Former Bank, 25 Reid Street

1866+ - Queens Head Hotel, 64 Reid Street

### 1870s

1870c - Rich & Company Bond Store, 71 Reid Street

1874 - Wilcannia Central School, 93 Hood Street

1875-6 - Former Court House Hotel, 65 - 67 Reid St

1875 - St James Anglican Church' 80 – 82 Woore Street,

1879 - Wilcannia Club Hotel 46 Reid Street, cnr Myers Street,

1879 - Wilcannia Hospital, 1 – 7 Ross Street

1879 - Golf Club, former Brewery, Ross Street

House, 'Riverview', behind 73 Reid Street,

Sandstone Houses, 97 - 99 Reid Street

Wilcannia Wharf

Former Garage (rear), 29 Reid Street,

House, former Brewery Residence, 19 – 23 Ross Street

### 1870s-1880s

Sandstone Shops 30 Reid Street,

Shop, 48 Reid Street,

Old Fuel Store, 73 Reid Street

Sandstone Houses, 81 - 33 Reid Street

House, 24 Byrnes Street

House, 26 - 30 Byrnes Street

Stone houses, 24 – 26 Myers Street

### 1880s

1880 - Wilcannia Court House, 66 - 68 Reid Street

1880 - Wilcannia Post Office & Residence, 45 Reid Street, cnr Myers

1881 - Wilcannia Police Station and Gaol, 70 - 72 Reid Street

1881 - Police Residence (adjacent to Police Station), 74 – 76 Reid Street

1883 - Wilcannia Athenaeum, Reid Street,

1887 - Wilcannia Council Chambers, 21 Reid Street,

House, 'Hillside', 19 – 21 Hood Street,

### 1890s

1894 - Wilcannia Bridge

1894 - Former Convent, 48 – 50 Woore Street,

1899 - Knox & Downs Store, 44 Reid Street, cnr Myers St

Row of Shops, 40 Reid Street

Cottage, 75 Reid Street

Attached Cottages, 77 Reid Street,

Cottage, 26 Cleaton Street



**1900s**

1901 - Steam Engine, 43 Reid Street,  
1914+ - War Memorial and Baker Park

House, 38 Reid Street  
Butcher Shop, 50 Reid Street  
Shop, 52A Reid Street  
Shop & House, 54 Reid Street

**1940s-50s**

39 Reid Street, Wilcannia CDEP Building (fmr West Darling Transport)  
56 Reid Street, Shop  
60 Reid Street, Wilcannia Auto Repairs  
St Theresa's Mission School

**Others (dates to be determined)**

6 – 8 Ross Street, Steam engines and water tower  
Wilcannia Cemetery (1860s+?)

## 2.4 Housing Types in Wilcannia

### 2.4.1 Approach

As is typical of the growth of rural townships, economic conditions and availability of materials and labour determine the built environment. A visual analysis of the remaining early housing stock in Wilcannia has identified groups which are based on building materials. Leases for stone quarrying and brickmaking were current through the 1880s and may have been issued earlier. Much material for building, such as corrugated iron, was brought by river or bullock wagon. Timber structures have been particularly vulnerable to termite attack over time so few remain. Earlier reports mentions timber cottages but none have been identified in this survey. Interestingly, the customs house, which was destroyed by fire in 1972, appears to have been a pre-fabricated timber and corrugated iron structure.

### 2.4.2 Housing Types

#### STONE HOUSES WITH SIMPLE VERANDAHS

Examples of this type of house date from the early settlement of Wilcannia from the 1860s onwards. It is the most significant house type in the township. The built form is as either single or multiple dwellings.



Reid Street



Off Reid Street





**Reid Street – police residence**



**Reid Street**



**Byrnes Street (verandah altered)**





**Byrnes Street**



**Hood Street**



**Myers Street**



**Reid Street (rear section of former hotel – originally residential)**