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Willunga, Changing Times, by Martin Dunstan

The Colony's First Expedition set out from Glenelg in June, 1837, with the object of reaching the whaling station at Encounter Bay. However, when it reached the foothills where Willunga now stands, insurmountable problems confronted it and the expedition returned to Glenelg. "Willa-unga" the natives called the area, meaning "place of green trees". (Their last corroboree is recorded as being held in 1904.)

From the visit of the Expedition a town slowly sprang up and in 1840, Mr. Edward Loud a pioneer of the district, discovered an outcrop of slate whilst out quail shooting. By 1846 there were four such quarries operating with thousands of roofing slates being shipped out from Aldinga Bay. Throughout the Colonies of Australia, Willunga became as well known for its slate as Ballarat was known for its gold. The most historic quarry would be the Delabole named after a slate quarry in Cornwall. The word 'slate' is derived from the French verb "escalater" meaning 'to split', which yielded the word 'slate' in old English.

From the Delabole Hill the slate laden bullock wagons could be seen winding their way down the hill and across the plains to Aldinga Bay where sailing ships could be seen lying at anchor. When standing at the Delabole "look-out" one can appreciate a commanding view of the Aldinga Plains, the Coastline and the Gulf of St. Vincent to the distant horizon. This would arguably be the best panoramic view from any vantage point in South Australia. Willunga was the principal supplier of roofing slate for the whole of Australia. Many slate roofs in the nearby district have provided in excess of 100 years service. The Willunga Bassett Boy's School and the McLaren Vale Congregational Church buildings were erected in 1862 and are protected by their slate roofs which show little, if any, signs of repair. The most unique building of slate in Australia is in the town. It was built in 1921, is brick veneer with all internal partitions, ceilings, wash troughs, cellar, shelving, garage etc. being of slate. A drive around the streets of Willunga is like a journey of discovery, for not many buildings would be without some form of slate including roofs, footpaths, walls, water tables, tanks, tombstones, etc.

Due to the depression of the 1890's and the subsequent fall in demand for slate products, the town lost its importance as a slate centre. At the turn of the century, almond trees were being planted and it

wasn't long before Willunga's importance due to slate was replaced by that of almonds. In the 1950's, Willunga produced 90% of Australia's almond requirements. In 1970 the first Almond Blossom Festival was held. For many years this provided a popular attraction for visitors to the area.

Nowadays we find the almond trees being removed and replaced by vines and the town becoming part of the Southern Vales and in doing so, losing its historic identity. To replace the loss of its almond industry, tours are being arranged of its once important slate quarries. In the 1800's, Willunga was described as the most attractive town in the State and one can hopefully believe that this fact remains unchanged. Today we can reflect on that early slate industry and take heart that because slate is still being extracted from the hills, it is possibly the oldest functioning industry in South Australia.