

The Historic Fish Cannery at American River

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Fishing boats at American River, 1925. Photo from State Library of South Australia.

The Historic Fish Cannery site was used by several groups from about the 1860s to the 1890s. The first of these, quite poorly documented, were Chinese fishermen. Chinese fish curers were active in South Australia from at least 28 May 1864, as evidenced in a column in *The Argus*:

Fish Curing - Somewhat a novel exportation from South Australia to Victoria has taken place during the past few weeks ... By the Coorong, from Melbourne, there arrived some two months back four Chinamen, who brought a boat and a remarkably long seine, with which they located close to the Semaphore Jetty ... very many tons [of fish] have already been forwarded to the neighbouring colony, to be used as food by the Mongols on the various diggings ... In addition, however, to this branch, that of schnapper curing is carried on by the same men, who received fresh accession to their forces by three more arriving by last week's steamers.

The first fish curers in South Australia worked off the beach at Semaphore. Members of this group may have been encouraged to work further afield at Kangaroo Island, where bountiful shoals of fish were known to exist. The fish were gutted and split along the spine, cured in brine and then laid out to dry on mats or on wooden racks. It's unlikely the wooden racks would have survived, but some of the stone foundations at the site may relate to Chinese activity. The Chinese fish curers at American River were active until the late 1870s. By the 1880s the last remaining Chinese man, Old Folkson or Fok Sin was living on John Buick's land and helping him with gardening as well as wallaby and possum trapping for skins. There is one relevant photo of a Chinese fishing camp at Metung on the Gippsland Lakes.



*Fish drying racks and Chinese camp at Metung, Victoria.
Photo by N J Caire, 1886, from the La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria.*



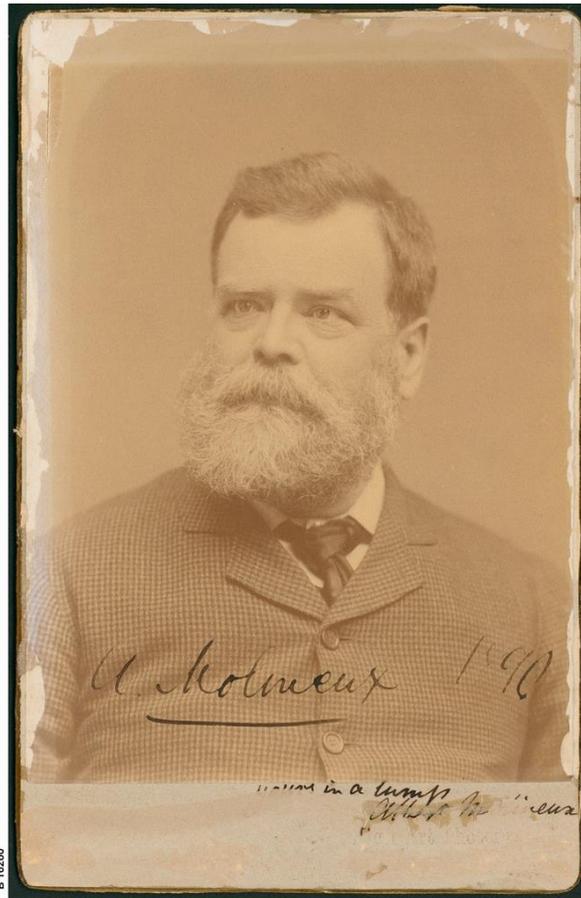
*Chinese seine net fishermen operating off the beach at Sandridge to St Kilda.
From the Illustrated Australian News 4th December 1873, La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria*

During the 1850s and 1860s, Chinese immigrants played a major role in the development of the fishing industries in Australia. Prior to their involvement, the industry was hampered by the problems posed by the transportation of fish to market. It was common for whole catches of fish to putrefy before they could reach their destination. The influx of Chinese gold miners, who relied on fish as a dietary staple, increased the demand that prompted the creation of many Chinese fish-curing establishments. Chinese fish curers in colonial Australia fished but also purchased large quantities of fish, creating a new and reliable market for European fishermen. Fish-curing businesses supplied their compatriots on the goldfields with fresh and cured fish. These establishments, which made sums of money far greater than any European fishing operation, provided hundreds of jobs for both European and Chinese Australians in the fishing industry.



Fishing off the beach at American River, 1925. Photo from State Library of South Australia.

In June 1880 Albert Molineux formed the Cowry Fishing Company, which sold fresh and cured fish at the Adelaide City Market and also sent bags of fish to the Melbourne markets. Molineux's company ran one fishing steamer and three cutters, as well as several fishing dinghies. Molineux enthused that fish were to be got in myriads off the coast of Kangaroo Island, and he had known nearly a ton of snook being taken in one night.



Albert Molineux in 1890. Photo from State Library of South Australia.

Albert Molineux, farmer, editor and promoter of agriculture, was born in 1832 in Brighton, England. With free passages the family sailed for South Australia in the *Resource* and arrived early in 1839. Albert finished school and then worked on a farm at Klemzig but left to become a printer's apprentice. In 1875 Molineux and a colleague decided to produce an agricultural journal and on 10 August produced the first edition of the *Garden and Field*. In this Molineux advocated the establishment of experimental farms, the appointment of a Professor of Agriculture at Adelaide University and the creation of a Department of Agriculture. In private enterprise Molineux was managing director of the South Australian Fishing Company, and as a committee member of the Field Naturalists Society he was indefatigable in seeking specimens, made the first trawling nets and obtained many specimens of fish hitherto unknown. He died in Adelaide in 1909.

Canned fish was very popular due to the lack of refrigeration and ease of transportation, particularly on the goldfields in WA and Victoria. Without refrigeration it was reported that Australians were only consuming 9½ pounds of fish per person per year, whereas in Great Britain the quantity was 47½ pounds per head, and Australia was spending over £300,000 annually on importing canned fish. Despite significant investments and some early innovation with refrigeration, the Cowry Fishing Company failed commercially and had ceased operations by August 1884.

The next and final operation on this site was a cannery set up by Charles Shand in April 1887. He was born in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1848 and died in Adelaide in 1896. This entrepreneur came from a family with long experience in the production of kippered herrings. These were in high demand for breakfasts in colonial homes and hotels. An oven and at least two stone buildings were erected, and by Spring 1887 the company had sent 6 tonnes of canned fish to Adelaide. A similar operation was set up at Kingscote. Fish were scaled and gutted by hand and the cans were crimped by hand using a hand operated crimping machine and then soldered. The fish were canned in one pound (454g) and five pound (2.2kg) tins. The plant could deal with 20 tonnes of fish each week. However supplies of fish became unreliable, along with labour shortages, and by April 1889 the company was liquidated.



Charles Shand in 1881. Photo from State Library of South Australia.



Fish preserving factory at Kingscote, founded by Charles Shand. Pencil drawing from National Library of Australia.

The precise function of the many stone ruins on the site awaits investigation and excavations by archaeologists. The identifications below are tentative and at this stage it's difficult to say which buildings belonged to a particular phase of the site's history.



Historic fish cannery site with preliminary interpretation of buildings. Drone photography by ARPA members.