

Stories

of the Bremer River  
and Wellstead Estuary

*“Without any river we would not have Bremer Bay as we know it”*



Natural Heritage Trust

*Compiled by  
Johanna Cappelluti on behalf of the  
Jerramungup Landcare Centre*



WATER AND RIVERS  
COMMISSION

## Contents

<i>Early settlers</i> .....	<i>iii</i>
<i>First impressions</i> .....	<i>vi</i>
<i>Farming in early days</i> .....	<i>vii</i>
<i>Using the river</i> .....	<i>viii</i>
<i>Natural events</i> .....	<i>ix</i>
<i>Importance of the river and estuary</i> .....	<i>x</i>
<i>Changes</i> .....	<i>xi</i>
<i>Looking after the river and estuary</i> .....	<i>xii</i>
<i>Reference</i> .....	<i>xii</i>

***To form an accurate picture of the uniqueness of the Bremer River, the Wellstead Estuary, the catchment and the community, it is important to take a step back and look at how Bremer Bay has grown. In particular, to look at the early farming practices of the area and understand the values that the community held then and now for the river and its estuary.***

***This oral history has been developed according to the accounts of six people: Max Wellstead, Athol and Jess Jury, Mick Aggiss, Alice Thomas and John Fregon.***

### **Max Wellstead**

*Perhaps one of the greatest historical stories of the Bremer River is of how the area was first settled. John Wellstead (Snr), originally of Sussex, England, came to Western Australia as a private in the 51<sup>st</sup> Regiment via Hobart and disembarked in Fremantle. He was taken to York and was finally stationed at Kojonup where he went looking for land and ending up in Albany. He ran the first mail run from Albany to Perth and on one trip met his wife Mary Ann (nee Crawford). They were the first to be married at the newly consecrated St John's Church in Albany, which John helped build (Thomas, 1972).*

*In 1848, after looking for grazing country, John Wellstead (Snr) heard of an area with good, open-grazing country and adequate water. He made a track to the Bremer Bay area and was so impressed that he went back with stock in 1849. The first cottage was built at Peppermint Grove in October 1850 and John's wife and children came to live there some time in the 1860's (Thomas, 1972). John Wellstead (Snr) had to take freehold purchase and further leases on his properties due to the Lands Act in 1875. The Wellstead family were almost self-sufficient but traded with the locally-owned schooners that frequented the coastal bays.*

*Born in 1854, John Wellstead (Jnr) was the eldest son of John and Mary Ann Wellstead's thirteen children. John (Jnr) married Bridget Muir and lived at Wattle Grove, Bremer Bay where they also had thirteen children - eleven sons and two daughters. Over the years, the Wellstead's have moved further from Bremer Bay through marriage and employment, however, it remains the home-ground for many of the descendants of John Wellstead (Snr). William, son of John (Jnr) and Bridget Wellstead, lived and worked on the Wellstead's Bremer Bay property, Peppermint Grove. He and his wife Grace (nee Garnet) had three children, James, William Max and Valerie (Thomas, 1972).*

*Mr Max Wellstead (William Max) lives in the original large stone house built by his great grandfather, John Wellstead (Snr). William and Grace's children were born in Gnowangerup where the Garnet family farmed. The children were brought to live at the Wellstead's Bremer Bay property, Peppermint Grove as infants. Max's farm is the land purchased in the 1870's. Max has lived and farmed the land purchased by the Wellstead's in the 1870's all his life, with the exception of his schooling years at Gnowangerup, Langhall (at Broomehill) and Katanning.*

## Early Settlers

## ***Athol and Jess Jury***

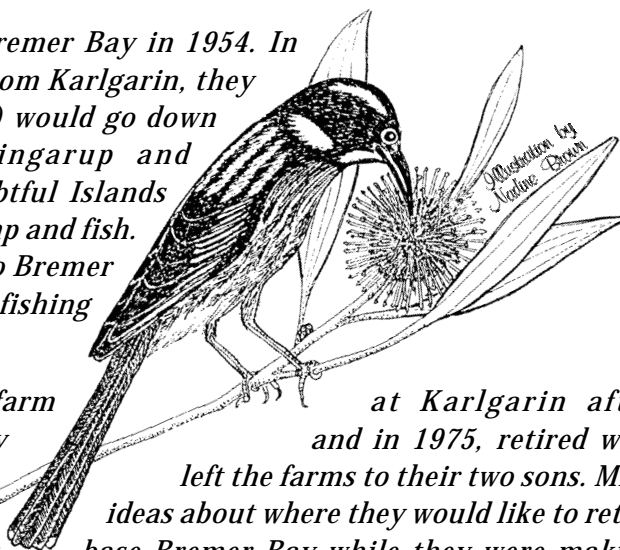
*Athol and Jess Jury, who are in their eighties, live in Bremer Bay where they have some of the most breath taking views of the Bremer River and the Wellstead Estuary from their backyard. Athol is originally from Katanning and first came to visit the Bremer Bay area at the age of ten which is when he first saw the ocean. Athol and Jess farmed in Nyabing and came to Bremer Bay for a 12 month's break in 1958 and later retired there in 1964.*

## ***Mick Aggiss***

*Mick Aggiss was born in England in 1924 and was three years old when his family decided to migrate to Australia. His father was involved in the group settlement scheme which operated throughout the South West forest. When this finished Mick worked for a farmer in Kondinin and later moved to farm a 1700-acre block in Karlgarin which is still in the family today.*

*Mick first came to Bremer Bay in 1954. In those days, coming from Karlgarin, they (families and friends) would go down a track past Maringarup and Quaalup out to Doubtful Islands where they would camp and fish. They would come into Bremer for supplies and to go fishing off of the beach.*

*Mick took on his own farm at Karlgarin after four years in the Army and in 1975, retired with his wife Valerie and left the farms to their two sons. Mick and Val had different ideas about where they would like to retire so they made their base Bremer Bay while they were making up their minds. They travelled throughout the state and were tossing up between Albany, Esperance, Hopetoun and, of course, Bremer Bay. After seeing all of the options and experiencing the extremes of weather in Western Australia, they decided to settle in Bremer Bay and bought a block in Bennett Street.*



## **John Fregon**

*John Fregon is originally from Mildura, Victoria, and was born and raised on the Murray River. John arrived in Western Australia in 1954 and worked on stations until 1957 when, as part of the group settlement scheme, he purchased a condemned, war service dairy farm in Northcliffe. He later moved to the Bremer Bay area in 1967 to a 'conditional purchase' block on Devils Creek Road. John now lives and works on the property with his son Rodney and his family. The property borders the Bremer River on the eastern side but it does not flow through the property.*

## **Alice Thomas**

*Alice Thomas, who came to Australia in 1923 when she was very young, grew up in Borden. She first went to Bremer Bay when she was six years old and from then it became a frequent holiday destination for her family. Alice's father was a blacksmith who also carted wool and wheat. Alice can recall family trips to Bremer and how they would sleep in tents and on the back of her father's truck.*

*In the early thirties Alice's mother bought two blocks of land on Bennett Street and Alice and her husband were given one in the 1940's. They built a shack in 1956 to accommodate the family during holidays and later built onto it to create the home it is today. Alice worked in Gnowangerup as a nurse up until 1950 and then again from 1970 to 1975 when there was a shortage. Bremer was the number one holiday spot in their family for summer holidays and other breaks throughout the year. In 1961, Alice was allocated a block approximately 20 kilometres out of town, where she later went to live permanently in 1975/6.*

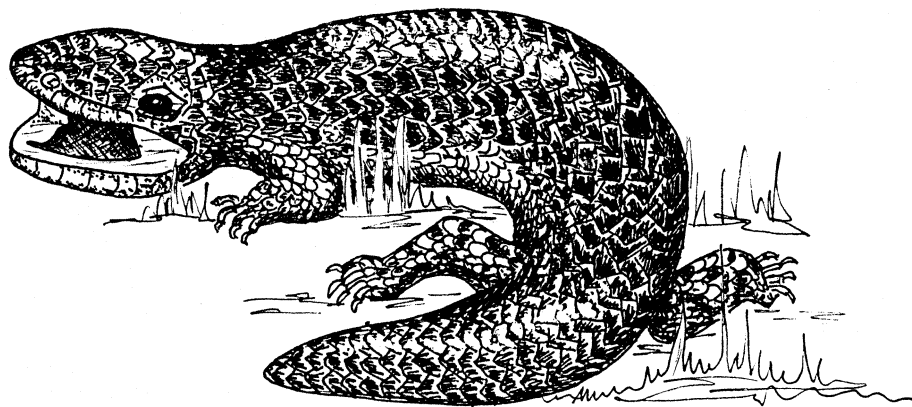


Illustration by Nadine Brown

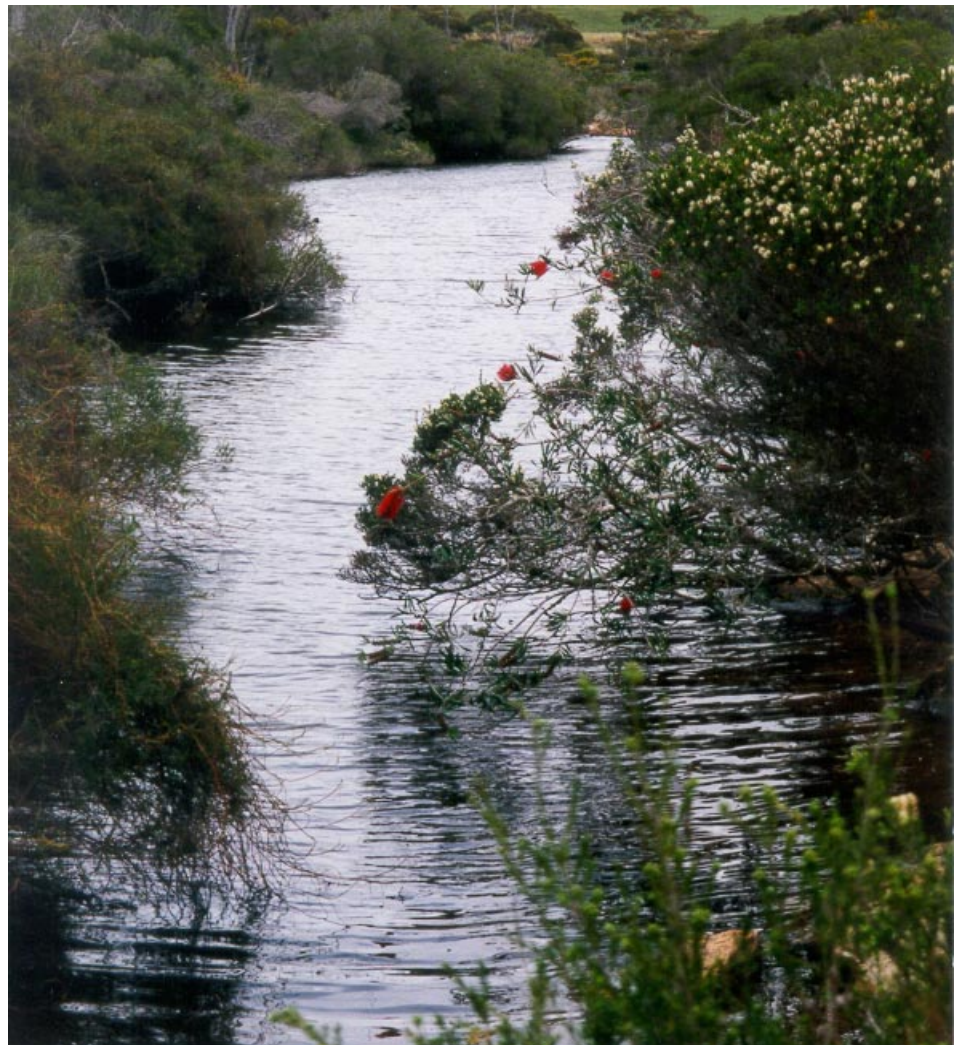


## First Impressions

***“It was a way of living”***

*The first Wellstead’s were said to have liked the Bremer Bay area because it “reminded them of Kent, England”. Growing up near the river and the estuary Max recalls that “It was a way of living”.*

*When John first moved to the area he was surprised to find that the Bremer River was salty. Alice recalls that she did not enjoy the trip down to Bremer much and that it was a relief to get there. She also recalls that the channel was either open or not, and that it was a good place to fish. When they got the shack established on the Bennett Street block the family used to “live on the river more or less. The fishing was incredible then”.*



## Farming in early days

*The farming practices of the original Wellstead's relied heavily on the regeneration capabilities of the natural bush. The bush was grazed and then burnt to promote natural regeneration for stock to feed on. The Wellstead's had homesteads at Quallup, Fitzgerald and Quallinup and grazed the stock between the three locations.*

*In 1872 a shearing shed was built at Peppermint Grove and sheep were shawn using blades. Later when the small, sea-bearing vessels were permitted to off-load products 10 000 sheep were shawn in 1882 for 33 bales of wool. Blades were used until the shearing shed was upgraded in 1915.*

*During the earlier years of Max's farming career he recalls that the sheep had to be drenched for cobalt and copper deficiencies every three months. In between this there was fencing construction and maintenance to be done. The first rye and clover pastures were grown in 1948 and by 1955 there was 600 acres of pasture to fatten grazing stock. Burning was restricted in the 1950's and it became necessary to grow pasture.*

*Cropping yielded only coarse grains and was generally done as a means to re-clear and tidy-up the land. Max recalls that because the barley crops were planted too early they became stained so it was used as feed for the stock. Like many landholders, Max feels that "it is a great achievement to develop a farm of 2500 acres from mallee into a fully-fenced, working farm".*

*Athol recalls the early years of farming in the catchment and says that the war service settlement land had some good years and the landholders could run four to five sheep an acre. When the dry years hit, however, Athol recalls that "they battled to sell their stock". Wind erosion also occurred, but it was worse towards Gairdner.*

*John says that farming has changed a lot from the early days. "The margins have tightened right up to what it was". They started off putting in 400 acres of crop and now like most landholders, up to two thirds of the arable land is put into crop to chase the commodity. John also recalls that in the upper reaches of the catchment, the war service land was cleared up to and sometimes over the river, the landholders "had to clear so much of it all the time".*

*The area was a "closely settled farming community from the sixties on" Alice recalls and there were many big families. Farming was very rewarding and people expected more rainfall with frequent flooding in February and Spring.*

***"It is a great achievement to develop a farm of 2500 acres from mallee into a fully-fenced working farm"***

## Using the river

***“It was no problem to go net a few mullets and go catch a few bream”***

***Fishing -  
“It’s a good pastime”***

*The most talked about activity that took place on the Bremer River and in the Wellstead Estuary was fishing. Mick is a very keen fisherman and shared quite a few of his favourite fishing spots. The “Bog Arm” was mentioned as one of the more famous fishing spots of the river. Sometimes Mick fishes from the banks but he enjoys tying the boat to the paperbarks and just floating. Other places further up the river that, according to Mick, have proved to be good fishing spots are at “Pelican Point”, the “Narrows” and “Harry’s Rocks”.*

*Max says The “Bog Arm” was named after an eccentric guy who lived out near Lizzie’s Creek in a spongelite cave. He would guard his fish and smoke and export them . He once tried to get across the now named “Bog Arm” when it looked to be dry and ended up getting bogged. John enjoys fishing on the north landing at Peter’s Creek and netting mullet in the estuary.*

*Max recalls that during settlement duck shooting and fishing were every day tasks that were necessary to maintain fresh food supplies. “It was no problem to go net a few mullets and go catch a few big bream” Max comments on the fishing in the area while he was growing up.*

*The Bremer River and Wellstead Estuary have been used in various ways and remain a major focus of the area, particularly for the town of Bremer Bay. Well attended community events and fetes, picnics and barbecues have been held many times on the bar at the mouth and at the “Paperbarks” to raise funds for organisations such as the Progress Association and Lions. In some years swimming lessons have also been held in the channel of the estuary.*

*The Wellstead’s established a quarry on the other side of the river and used the spongelite stone that was extracted in the construction of the overland telegraph. Some of the stone was also used around the tops of the walls in the Wellstead homestead in Peppermint Grove.*

*John Fregon used the Bremer River as a source of stock water and for bathing. He put a windmill on the river to pump it to troughs and used the same hole that the Hassell’s (first settlers in Jerramungup) used as a stock watering point. The posts where the Hassel’s would fence the stock in at night to keep them off the poison (*Gastrolobium* sp.) remains - the ground also remains bare. In 1972 John pumped the hole dry and had to dig in the sand.*

*In an article for the Bremer Bulletin, Alice wrote that when Bremer Bay “was part of the Gnowangerup shire and more holiday dwellings were built in the 1950’s and 60’s, the river became an important focus for fishing with good stocks of whiting, mullet and bream most years. With more boat owners on the river there was a need for a centralised spot from which to launch. The shire agreed to build a jetty on the river”. Alice recalls that “in the late 60’s during the holiday times it was nothing to see eight or nine boats moored there”.*



*In 1955 there was a major flood which greatly altered the mouth of the river. Max recalls that "it cut trees out and the whole area was flooded". On this event 10 inches (250 mm) fell in two days and Athol and Jess recall that the major road was broken and that the only way in and out was by flying. Alice was staying at "Muir's Cottage" at this time and recalls that they were flood bound.*

*Mick recalls a flood that occurred in the 1980's when the estuary was low and 12 inches fell up in 'Jerry'. "You could see the water rising in the river and estuary" and he and his wife Val said that they would go down to the mouth and watch it bream in the morning - but it broke at 8.00pm that night. Mick said "it was amazing for it to break that quickly and get that much water in it" and that this happened the same year that the Culum Inlet (Hopetoun) broke for the first time since the last century.*

*Athol and Jess have been recording the opening and closing of the Bremer and Hunter rivers since 1946 and said that the Bremer River "rarely broke out to sea before the war service settlement" and that now it opens up every couple of years. Alice said that "since 1984 they have lost the dunes around the mouth". John and Max recall that in the early days, fish would die because the water level would get so low. Alice recalls 1982 as a very dry year and that you "could walk from the jetty to the beach on sand". Mick, Alice, Athol and Jess, all commented that for the last two years the river has opened from the sea due to a combination of high tides and large swells.*

*In the history of the town of Bremer Bay there have been few fires but one major fire in the early fifties threatened the town of Bremer Bay. The fire came out of a swamp, according to Max, and burnt into Bremer Bay. "It went right around the top ridge (north side of town) and went along to the top of Bennett Street" recalls Alice. Some stock piles were lost and an elderly man died of a heart attack relating to the fire.*

*As he was in the fire brigade, Mick was on watch as a communications officer in 1982 and 1987 when there were large fires in the Fitzgerald National Park. Through this work, Mick has been involved in all of the fires in the Bremer Bay area and was the captain of the bushfire brigade from 1980 to 1994. He has recently assumed the responsibility of reporting to the Shire on weather conditions during the fire season.*



# Importance of the river and estuary

**Bremer Bay  
is  
“geographically  
unique”**

**“It just  
makes  
Bremer  
different”**

*Max feels that if there wasn't an overland telegraph it would be different. Bremer Bay was one of the five telegraph stations between Albany and Eucla in the trans-Australian telegraph link which was completed in 1877. Max says that the overland was first placed in Bremer Bay because of “the availability of water and other people”. John Wellstead's (Snr) eldest daughter was one of the first operators. Max feels that the “geographically unique” structure of Bremer Bay is what brings and keeps people in the town. It also provides a diverse range of tourist activities that are focused around the unique estuarine and river life.*

*Mick and his fishing mates “get a lot of enjoyment” out of the river and the estuary. Alice says “It just makes Bremer different and its part of what I've grown up with”. It is clear from comments such as these that the Bremer River and the Wellstead Estuary have always been, and will continue to be, an important part of the Bremer Bay community.*

*Both Max and Mick enjoy sitting and fishing at the “Smoke House”. It was originally constructed by two Wellstead brothers and the idea was to catch, smoke and export mullet. The smoking and exporting did not eventuate but this place remains a good spot to fish with a rocky ledge that drops into the river. Vehicle access to the “Smoke House” is restricted and you have to take a boat to get up there now.*

*Athol and Jess also have there own little place besides the fantastic views from their home. They take the Suzuki down the original track to the estuary in town where they like to sit and occasionally throw in a line. Athol taught Jess how to fish in the estuary.*



*One of greater observed changes to the Bremer River and the Wellstead Estuary is the in the depth of the estuary over time. Max recalls that the flood in 1955 brought a lot of shags and silt into areas that were quite deep. Alice recalls that many of the deep holes, particularly on the southern side of the estuary are gone.*

*The mouth of the river has also altered a great deal over the last fifty years according to the group. Alice says that “with all of the four-wheel drives and action along the bar, it doesn’t get as much chance to scour” and that it does not get to flush out naturally as often. The bar was “broken by the Shire because of pressure from fisherman, however, it closed up within a matter of days” says Alice who agrees with Athol and Jess, Mick and Max that when it comes to nature it is best left to take its own course. Some community members are concerned however because the mouth has changed as a result of floods and the water now cuts into the south-eastern side to the “Paperbarks” picnic area. Max said that the mouth “continues to change with each flood and heavy rain”. Athol and Jess said that the bar is a lot wider than it used to be.*

*Further up in the catchment John has watched the river break Devils Creek Road more than half a dozen times and seen the water get up to the Maringarup sign (about 10 m higher than the road crossing). John says that farming has caused a lot of runoff. Max also feels that “there is more water flowing, more often”.*

*Aquatic weeds were also mentioned when the group was asked if they had noticed any changes in the river. Athol and Jess and Max have noticed that there has been an increase in the growth of weed (algae) in the river. Mick feels that the amount of weed that is present depends on the season and the salinity of the water and Alice feels that now that the estuary is shallower the weed is more obvious but she did mention that the estuary “seems to get more algae”.*

*Alice has noticed that there are not as many whiting in the river as there used to be and Max said that bream breeding is greater and there is more mullet although they are smaller because the river is more consistently open to the sea. Marine fish species are becoming more common in the river, especially near the mouth (King George Whiting).*

*Mick, the keener fisherman says that he has never seen the river and the estuary “look so healthy” and he has “never seen so many species of fish”. This summer and autumn the river has been very productive with crabs and prawns and various fish species including: bream, mullet, herring, cobbler, leather jackets, flounder and salmon trout. Over the last few years the water has been “so much cleaner” says Mick and many of the residences of Bremer attribute this to the town being connected to underground sewage. The Bremer River and Wellstead Estuary has, in Athol and Jess’s opinion, always been very productive. This amazes Athol because it is the shortest river along the South Coast and it is shallow (no more than 3ft in depth).*

**“There is  
more  
water  
flowing,  
more often”**

# Looking after the river and estuary

***“I just care  
about the  
river”***

***The Bremer  
River and  
Wellstead  
Estuary are a  
“part of  
Bremer”***

*There is a general concern for the river and the estuary, particularly by those who live in the town. Max says that the river is a “natural feature that attracts people to Bremer Bay”. The Bremer River and the Wellstead Estuary should be preserved for the future and the survival of Bremer Bay. Athol and Jess have been recording the opening and closing of the Bremer and Hunter rivers and have visually monitored the river and the estuary for many years. Alice also keeps records of natural events pertaining to the system. Max, Alice and Mick all collect rubbish when they are out around the river and when Mick has the opportunity he also picks rubbish out of the river from his boat when out fishing. Mick wants to keep the river the way it is for everyone and says that it is “something that we shouldn’t lose”.*

*Alice is concerned about the stability of the foreshore, particularly on the northern banks, and disagrees with trail bike access to high-risk areas. She says that the river and the estuary are a “part of Bremer and it is a breathing space”. Alice loves it when it is open to the sea and when you can see the tide fluctuate up the “Bog Arm”. She says that it is a “good place to do things”.*

*Max believes that the river (and the estuary) should be treated “with the due respect that it requires to survive” and that “without any river we would not have Bremer Bay as we know it”.*

*Athol and Jess would like to protect the Bremer River and the Wellstead Estuary so “that it is here for everyone”. They said that they “like to see people enjoying themselves when they come down”.*

## Reference

*Thomas, S. (1972) Wellstead’s of Bremer Bay. Unpublished biography, Jerramungup Library.*

