



# Planting a Garden in Arid Lands

by Leona Coleman

During the SA History Festival in May, John Zwar OAM gave a talk on a significant part of his work life – his project developing the Australian Arid Lands Botanic Garden at Port Augusta from 1981.

John has Wendish heritage on both sides of his family. His father's ancestors came from Drehse, a tiny village about ten kilometres east of Bautzen. Great grandfather Johann Zwar led 92 Wends, the largest group of Wends to arrive in South Australia, on the barque *Helene* in 1851. After a short stay in Klemzig he then led a group to Ebenezer in the Barossa where they soon cleared land, built homes and by 1859 had built St John's Church.

Johann's eldest son Johannes, born in 1861, had 13 surviving children and was John's grandfather. Both of John's parents were keen gardeners with a strong interest in plants, and he also developed this interest, working in the large garden at home, at Urrbrae High School for four years, and at Adelaide Botanic Gardens in the ornamental horticulture course. This was one of only two such courses in Australia at that time; six trainees were accepted each year and undertook much work in the Botanic Garden, for \$12 per week, then the lowest paid work in the State! Trainees received a good horticultural background as in the late 1960s and early 70s, Wittunga and Mount Lofty Botanic Gardens were being planted and trainees did much of that planting. Thirty-four years later John worked there again.

John's first job was at Old Leigh Creek, a mining town owned by the Electricity Trust of South Australia, which was rather like a suburb in the desert. His job was tree planting, organising a garden group, and running a small nursery. It was an experimental site for dryland plants in an area with a 7-inch (178 mm) rainfall. In 1972 the town was more isolated than now; people grew their own vegetables, and the garden club held an annual rose show. Water came from Aroona Dam and was paid for by ETSA. People often overwatered so salt built up in the soil and trees started to die.

From Leigh Creek John went to the National Botanic Gardens of Papua New Guinea (PNG) in Lae with a rainfall of 200 inches (5080 mm). Here he had a staff of 60, two of whom could speak English. The

gardens had a huge orchid collection. Some native rhododendrons were considered weeds in some areas of PNG, being poisonous to cattle.



John Zwar OAM

Before independence, it was unclear whether many jobs would continue under the new government, so John returned to Australia in 1974 and was offered a position in Port Augusta as the Superintendent of Parks and Gardens by the City Council. At this time there was a push to make the city more attractive to potential employees of a proposed petrochemical works near the top of Spencer Gulf. (This never eventuated.) He soon formed a garden club and encouraged tree planting, and club members undertook various landscaping projects under his direction. John became noted for his success in tree planting in streets and parks, and over 15 years changed the face of Port Augusta with 250,000 trees and shrubs.

In 1978 John was awarded a Churchill Fellowship and had an amazing experience travelling to Chile, Peru, USA, South Africa, Israel and Namibia to study arid zone plants and landscaping in arid areas. This experience contributed to his idea of establishing an Arid Lands Botanic Garden at Port Augusta, which he proposed in 1981. In 1984 a Friends Group was formed to promote the idea and lobby council and the government for funds to develop the garden site of 200 hectares between the Stuart Highway and Spencer Gulf just outside Port Augusta.

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*Planting A Garden in Arid Lands (cont.)*

In 1990 while John was at Roxby Downs repeating the process of greening a township, the Western Mining Corporation (WMC), which at the time had a policy of supporting environmental projects in areas where it mined around the world, made an offer of funds to the council. Eventually, the council and the government added to those funds and employed Grant Henderson, a landscape architect from Canberra, to prepare a masterplan for the Arid Land Botanic Garden at Port Augusta. The impetus provided by Western Mining's financial assistance was crucial to the establishment of the Garden, and the building of the Visitor Centre which won environmental awards.

Much early work was done by the Friends: collection of plant specimens and seed from a wide area of the southern arid lands that the garden represents, running a nursery to grow the selected plants, planting, building infrastructure, and raising over \$1million. Others also helped: TAFE students erected fencing, a disability group cleared rubbish from the site, and the army built the entrance road from the Stuart Highway.



The Australian Arid Lands Botanic Garden (AALBG) was officially opened in 1996. Development of the garden continued with training of garden guides, offering areas for scientists to carry out research, building hides for bird watching, and construction of a play area and a vermin-proof fence. WMC also paid for a meeting room, herbarium and library.



Now 27 years later, the government has committed \$3 million over four years, the garden boasts a large collection of eremophilas - over 200 species - as well as areas planted to arid land species from different geographic regions. It was voted Best Regional Botanic Garden by *Australian National Geographic* and one of the ten best botanic gardens in the world by *The Guardian* newspaper. In 2022, 123,000 people visited. It plays a big role in local tourism and is operated by the council. John continues to lead the Friends group.



*The success of the AALBG is a tribute to the long-term commitment and visionary thinking of (John) Zwar, the dedication of the Friends group, and the skills of Grant Henderson, who gave form to a community-driven vision that has continued to evolve and grow over time. (Scott Hawken 2022).*



And surely John's love of trees and gardens has something to do with his upbringing in a family with Wendish ancestry.

# Coming Events

## Sun 20<sup>th</sup> August, 2 pm Annual General Meeting

Followed by a film about life in Lusatia - the land of the Wends.

At the Glynde Lutheran Homes hall (22 Avenue Rd, Glynde). All welcome.

## Shipping records located

Thanks to all those who responded to my call for help to locate the ships that these Wendish families came on to Australia. I appreciate your willingness to share your research.



Here are the answers:

Borrack – 1854 on *Malvina Vidal* to Melbourne

Bramke – 1854 on *Malvina Vidal* to Melbourne

Britza – 1859 on *Carlota* to Melbourne

Buder – 1858 on *Johannes* to Melbourne

Dahlitz – (same as Dalitz) – 1854-55 on *Australia* to Port Adelaide

– 1858 on *Victoria* to Port Adelaide

Domsch – 1857-58 on *Bielefeld* to Melbourne

Fladrich – 1854 on *Malvina Vidal* to Melbourne

Jarick – 1854 on *Malvina Vidal* to Melbourne

Kamenka – 1857 on *Caesar & Helene* to Port Adelaide

Kies – 1857 on *Caesar & Helene* to Port Adelaide

Kihlo – (also Kilo, and Kielow) – 1854 on *Malvina Vidal* to Melbourne

Konzag – 1853-54 on *Cesar Godeffroy* to Port Adelaide

Sapiatzer – 1855 on *Asa Sawyer* to Melbourne

Schautschick – 1849? (ship?)

Schuppan (Schippan) – 1854-55 on *Australia* to Port Adelaide

Schuppan – 1857-58 on *Bielefeld* to Melbourne

Schurgott – 1877 on *Peter Godeffroy* to Port Adelaide

Tilka – 1876 on *City of Adelaide* to Port Adelaide

– 1877 on *Peter Godeffroy* to Port Adelaide

Wotzko – 1853-54 on *Cesar Godeffroy* to Port Adelaide (spelt as Hotzko on shipping list)

## Sympathy

We express our sympathy to the family and friends of these members who died recently:

Max Dutschke (in 2022)



# Trip to Bethel and Kapunda

What a day we had on Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> April! Despite the threatening weather forecast, 34 people bravely ventured forth to explore the history of the settlement of Bethel.

First some historical background:

Bethel began as a Moravian settlement under the leadership of the Moravian Brethren Pastor CSD Schondorf. He bought 3 square miles of land in 1856 and built a settlement there.

**Moravian Brethren families** in the early years include: Schondorf, Arnold, Geue, Goedecke, Gruhl, Hasting, Hilbig, Hombsch, Kirsch, Kornetzky, Krüger, Linke, Peltz, Schmidt, Thomas, Vogt, Wagner, Wenke, Winter.

They started out living in a central village, with a church and school. But when the land was divided into 80-acre blocks and shared around, they soon realised it was impractical to live centrally and travel out every day to work on their distant blocks. And so they began to build homes on their blocks and thus the idea of a community village of Moravians eventually came to an end.



*Bethel church today*

At the same time the surrounding land was being bought by other settlers, and many of these were Germans and Wends.

Some **Germans** were: Fiegert (Fickert), Gräfe, Gregor, Hübner, Just, Klenner, Menz, Pfeiler, Rohde, Scheer, Ullrich, Wehr, Weichert, Weiss.

Some **Wends** were: Albinus, Altus, Doecke, Kubasch, Wenke.

These Germans and Wends were Lutherans, but because they didn't have the regular services of a Lutheran pastor, they were happy to attend the services of the Moravian Pastor Schondorf in the Bethel church. He baptised their children, and conducted their marriages and burials.

However, one of the Wends, Peter Doecke, built a school on his own land and it was known as the **Steinthal** school (Steinthal means Stone valley). When Lutheran pastors visited occasionally, they preached to a Lutheran congregation there.



*Steinthal school & cemetery*

In 1895 a new church was built at Bethel by the Moravian Brethren congregation. This is the present building.

In the years 1856-1907 the Moravian Brethren congregation was served by 3 pastors in turn: Schondorf, Jacobi and Buck. When in 1907 Pastor Buck returned to Germany, the Moravian Brethren church in Germany refused to send out another pastor.

So the Bethel congregation joined the Lutheran church (Immanuel aaG Synod). The Steinthal congregation then closed their church and school and joined the Bethel church.



*Bethel cemetery – Moravian headstones in foreground*

Not everyone was happy with joining the Lutheran Church. In 1910 a number of families (Geue, Matz, Doecke, Schmidt, Linke, Vogt) broke away and joined a church with no name.

The Lutheran congregation at Bethel continues to worship each week in the church.

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*Trip to Bethel and Kapunda (cont.)*

At the Bethel church we were welcomed by Gary Schmidt and Neil Weichert, who are descendants of the original settlers. They outlined the history of the settlement for us and answered numerous questions.

We then walked through the cemetery, particularly noticing the simple headstones laid horizontally by the Moravian Brethren members. This contrasted with the later more elaborate headstones standing upright on the Lutheran graves.



*Moravian-style headstone at Bethel*

A sudden shower of rain caused us to seek shelter in the hall, which was converted from the former Lutheran manse. Here the congregation has a history room with a lot of information about the settlement and its families.

When the rain stopped we followed Gary in our cars along a track to the Steinthal site. Here we were able to inspect the ruins of the school building and the graves in the cemetery. After having a good look around, we started to drive out just as it began to rain again. The last cars to leave were unable to climb the wet slippery track through the gate, so Gary had to push over the fence at another spot to let them get out. Thanks Gary!

After an enjoyable lunch at the Sir John Franklin Hotel in Kapunda, some of us spent time in the afternoon at the Kapunda Historical Society Museum. This is filled with a very large collection of items exhibiting many aspects of life at Kapunda over the years. The items are well-labelled and are neatly presented. It is a very good country museum.



*Ian & Paul Doecke at their ancestor's grave at Steinthal*

For a more detailed account of Bethel's history, you can listen to the talk that Lyall Kupke gave to the Friends of Lutheran Archives on 23 March 2023. You can access the Livestream at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/@friendsoflutheranarchives9644/live>



*WWI memorial church window in Kapunda Museum*



*Funeral bier from Bethel church at Kapunda Museum – used for carrying coffins to cemetery*



# The Lowke family

At our June meeting John Lowke gave an interesting talk about his Lowke family in Australia.

His great grandparents, Peter and Magdalena Lowke, came to South Australia on the *Helene*, arriving in December 1851. They came from Kotitz, near Hochkirch, in Upper Lusatia. They were part of the large Wendish contingent led by Johann Zwar, which founded the settlement of Ebenezer in the Barossa Valley.

Peter built his original clay and straw home himself, by candlelight at night, after farming during the day.

His Reise-Pass (passport) has the spelling of his name as Locke, but it seems that he changed it to Lowke, which is the spelling he used in Australia.

They had four children: Johann, Maria, Andreas, Christiane (Anna). Maria was born deaf. Andreas married Johanna Kockrick, but he died aged 25 years in an accident when his horses bolted while he was carrying produce from Ebenezer to Kapunda. His son Andreas later moved to Narrogin, WA, and many descendants still live there in WA. The youngest child Anna tragically died aged 18 years when they were burning stubble.

They lived at Ebenezer for the remainder of their lives; Peter dying in 1895 and Magdalena in 1904. They are buried in the Ebenezer cemetery.



The eldest child Johann (1843-1929) was John's grandfather. He became the teacher at the Immanuel

Light Pass school. At nights he studied with the Light Pass Pastor Staudenmeyer. He taught for 2 years at Hope Valley before returning to teach at Light Pass. He taught there for 43 years and was



also the church organist for 65 years. The marble baptismal font in the Immanuel church is dedicated to their valued teacher and organist Johann Lowke. The organ was one built by Daniel Lemke, another Lutheran teacher. Johann had five children, and most of his descendants live in the Barossa Valley.



*Baptismal font in Immanuel Light Pass Lutheran church  
Note Johann Lowke's name at the base.*

John's father, Charles Lowke, was the manager of the Eudunda Farmers store in Tanunda for 23 years. He was a member of the Nuriootpa Brass Band. Earlier he had worked at Broken Hill, and then on the construction of the trans-Australian railway from Port Augusta to Kalgoorlie, for which he was in charge of the government store. As the railway construction proceeded, the store had to be shifted progressively along the line.

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### *The Lowke family (cont.)*

John Lowke started his working life as a mathematics and physics teacher at Unley High School and at Riverton High School. He was also a lecturer at Adelaide Teachers College.

In the years 1964-1975 he worked as Senior Physicist at the Westinghouse Research Laboratories in Pittsburgh, USA. He then returned to Australia to lecture in electrical engineering at Sydney University for 5 years. The next 20 years were spent working for the CSIRO, where for 8 years he was Chief of the CSIRO Division of Applied Physics.

He is now Adjunct Research Professor in plasma physics at the University of South Australia, based at Mawson Lakes. His current research projects include designing a plasma source for possible treatment of wounds, including cancer tumours, and solving the mystery of the structure of lightning. He has received a number of international awards for his work.



*Lemke organ from Immanuel Light Pass church, but now kept in their hall*

## Linden Tree planted



Our Society has arranged with the Friends of Peters Hill Church to plant a linden tree on the grounds of the Peters Hill church.

As explained in the last newsletter, the linden tree is a special tree in much of Europe, and it is an emblem of the Sorbs (Wends) of Lusatia. Its heart-shaped leaf is very recognisable.

Thanks to the members who contacted me with information about where linden trees are growing in South Australia. I received reports of them growing in the suburb of Linden Park, in the Adelaide Hills and in Mount Gambier. However, according to Geoffrey Manning's *Place Names of South Australia* the name Linden Park is adopted from a property in Scotland. But was that property named after linden trees growing there?

The Society's committee felt that it would be appropriate to plant a linden tree at the site of one of our early Wendish settlements. Last month Brian Hennig and John Zwar met with Adrian Behn, President of the Friends of Peters Hill Church, and together they planted a young linden tree (*Tilia cordata*) on the Peters Hill church block.

If the tree grows successfully, we may try to plant more at other Wendish sites.

*Photo: John Zwar and Brian Hennig planting the tree at Peters Hill*

# For Sale

## Books from Germany - in English:

- *The Sorbs of Germany* - \$10, plus \$3 postage
- *Upper Lusatia* - \$15, plus \$3 postage
- *Bautzen* - \$12, plus \$3 postage
- Korall & Schwikart, *Journey through the Spree Forest* (in English with lovely pictures) - \$35, plus \$10 postage
- *Five Centuries: The Wends and the Reformation* - \$40, plus \$10 postage

## Also the best books about the Wends in Australia:

- Burger, *The Coming of the Wends* - \$12, plus \$3 postage
- Nielsen, *In Search of a Home* (second edition, hard cover) - \$40, plus \$10 postage

**NEW book:** Trudla Malinkowa, *Wendish Keepers* - \$30, plus \$10 postage  
[The story of the four Wendish societies in Australia and America]

## CDs:

- *From Wendish to German to English (A Journey into Wendish Culture, History & Language)*
- This marvellous CD has been produced by the Texas Wendish Heritage Society. It contains English narration, German and Wendish singing by a German choir performing in Texas in 2002, talks by noted Wendish (Sorbian) historians Dr George Nielsen and Gertrud Mahling (Trudla Malinkowa). George Nielsen talks about Wendish migration to Australia. *A real treat!*  
Cost = \$30, plus \$3 postage

## New CDs:

Cost \$10 each, plus \$3 postage

- Kocor, *Naleco* (Spring). [Majestic oratorio, with memorable, joyful and folk-like themes]
- Zahraj nam rejiku (*Sorbische Folklore mit Sprjewjan*) [Lively folk music, instrumental and vocal work]

**Wendish/Sorbian Flags** (small, on a stick) \$5, plus \$3 postage

## Calendars:

I will take orders for Calendars for 2024 – with scenes from Lusatia.

These are really beautiful, and they make great Christmas presents. Please order *straight away*, so that we can get them from Germany before the end of the year.

Cost = \$20, plus \$10 postage

**Contact** Ruth Walter, 43 Clifton St, Prospect SA 5082, (tel. 08 8269 7168, mobile 0435 211 606),  
email: [ruth.walter43@gmail.com](mailto:ruth.walter43@gmail.com)

Please make cheques or money orders to Wend Sorb Society of South Australia,  
or email Ruth for Direct Debit (EFT) details.

*We welcome any contributions to this newsletter. Please send them to the Editor at the address below.*

This newsletter was published by the **Wend/Sorb Society of South Australia Inc.**

President: Lyall Kupke

Secretary: Pauline Burger

Treasurer: Leona Coleman

Editor: Lyall Kupke.

Website: [www.wendsorbsociety.org.au](http://www.wendsorbsociety.org.au)

Correspondence to the President: Lyall Kupke, at 6 Emes Court, Athelstone SA 5076

email: [kupkell@yahoo.com](mailto:kupkell@yahoo.com)

tel: (08) 8365 2572

mobile 0431 991 385