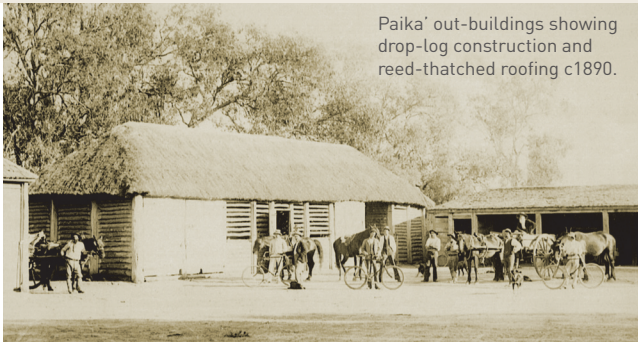


George Hobler squatted on land around Paika Lake in 1846. When it became part of the Lower Darling Squatting District in 1848, he tendered for the legal occupation of Paika, Yarrowal, Kooncoombera, and Juanbung runs that made up his ‘Lake Paika’ Station. William Charles Wentworth out-bid him and took them over in 1850. Hobler and most of his family migrated to California in 1851.

A syndicate consisting of Augustus Morris, Thomas Mort, Thomas Holt and Thomas Smart purchased Wentworth’s lower Murrumbidge stations in 1853. Wentworth’s former Annanomy Run was integrated with ‘Lake Paika’ Station, so that it extended to Balranald, which became an important service hub and river port for surrounding pastoral properties. The boundaries of three large stations – ‘Canally’, ‘Paika’ and ‘Yanga’ - met at the town.

In 1855, Augustus Morris split ‘Lake Paika’ into two parcels for sale. In 1861, the Tyson brothers bought Juanbang, Juanbang Back and Kooncombera runs. Matthew Hervey in partnership with Macfarlane and Co. purchased Paika, Yarrowal, and Yarrowal Back runs. In 1865, Walter Macfarlane and William Webster took over Hervey’s share and in 1870 they purchased four adjacent runs - Bidura, Willibah, Toylambool, and East Toylambool – that were incorporated with ‘Paika’. The property remained in that form until ‘broken-up’ for closer settlement, to conform to the Border Railways Agreement, in 1923.



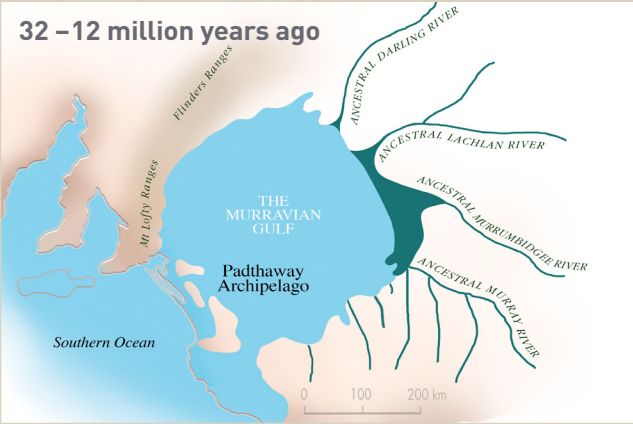
Paika’ out-buildings showing drop-log construction and reed-thatched roofing c1890.

PAIKA LANDSCAPE

‘Living on the edge’

‘Paika’s’ location results in an ecologically rich landscape because it is at the interface of quite distinct geographical and ecological systems at global, continental, bioregional and local scales. Interfaces between different ecological systems are places of ecological ‘tension’ creating ‘hot-spots’ of biodiversity.

Its two parts have sharply contrasting geomorphology, soils and vegetation communities with their associated fauna. The most obvious is the contrast between the semi-arid mallee to the west and the lower Murrumbidgee floodplain wetlands and red gum forest to the east. That interface was once a meeting place between land and ‘sea’. The sandy mallee area was once the floor of an ‘inland’ sea (the Murravian Gulf) and later a freshwater mega-lake (Lake Bungunnia). The floodplain was part of a giant delta formed as the ancestral Lachlan, Murrumbidgee and Murray rivers dropped sediment as they entered the sea, and lake.



The Murravian Gulf - around sixteen million years ago, the approximate final eastern shore line of this ‘inland sea’ was through today’s ‘Paika’ Station.

‘Lake Paika’ Station



DISTRICT STATISTICS 1916	PAIKA STATION
District population: 2 000 (Balranald: 800)	Staff: 35 to 40 (120-130 during shearing)
(One hundred & twenty-one World War I volunteers to March 1916)	Land area: 280 000 acres (Freehold 80 000 acres, Western Lands Lease - originally homestead lease - 200 000 acres)
Balranald Pastures Protection District: average of 500 000 sheep and 200 000 lambs	Average Rainfall: 9.30 inches
Steamer trade: On average 8 000 to 9 000 bales of wool shipped from Balranald each year and shops in the town receive around 1 000 tons of goods from Echuca.	Stock: Sheep 50 000 – 60 000 (carrying capacity six acres to the sheep), cattle: 800, horses: 120.
Average annual wool clip: 11 000 bales	Annual wool clip: 1 000 – 1 500 bales.

PAIKA CREEK

Paika Creek forms a corridor between the two contrasting parts of the Paika landscape. It provided Aboriginal people with access to different resources and the concentrated biodiversity along its channel would have been a rich hunting and gathering area.

The creek also provides a life-giving flight corridor for the endangered eastern subspecies of the Regent parrot (*Polytelis anthoepus ssp. anthoepus*). Regent parrots are confined to areas where mallee vegetation occurs adjacent to riverine woodlands. They nest in red gum and black box communities but feed in the mallee. Their survival is dependent on links between the two.

1899 – the birth place of Australia’s first environmental movement to protect a wetland

As a high off-take, the reduced frequency of water flowing through Paika Creek into Paika Lake was an indicator to district residents by the 1880s that upstream water diversions were impacting on the extent of flooding on the lower Murrumbidgee floodplain and their linked livelihoods.

As the floodplain is flat, a reduction in flood height of just 20 centimetres can mean that hundreds or even thousands of hectares of land are not watered. Reduced flood heights and duration also mean that outlying billabongs and off-floodplain lakes, such as Paika Lake, are not filled, thus excluding large areas of the surrounding plains from grazing.

In 1899, local community action was triggered by a proposal to further widen and deepen the cutting into Yanko Creek, with government assistance. The greatest fear was a rumour that a weir was to be constructed across the Murrumbidgee to permanently divert water into the creek.

Communities at Hay, Maude and Balranald, supported by local newspaper editors, established river defence leagues and associations to lobby for the continued receipt of floodwaters to sustain the vast wetland ecosystem. The social, economic and ecological resilience of the whole district was linked to the health of the *flooded country below Hay*. Walter Macpherson of ‘Paika’ was the chair of the Balranald group.

Coordinated community action won the ‘battle’ but not the ‘war’. A NSW Department of Public Works Board of Reference acknowledged in 1901: *that the water diverted in the past and proposed to be diverted in the future, has had and will have, a deleterious effect upon the low-lying lands below Hay* and recommended that *a weir and lock be constructed by way of compensation*.

The construction of the recommended ecological diversion weir never took place. The lack of infrastructure to compensate for greatly reduced flooding, resulting from upstream developments over the past century, has ‘stranded’ more than 65 000 hectares of rich alluvial flood-dependent soil and taken it out of ecological and agricultural production. However, it has been acknowledged that ongoing vigilance by residents throughout the twentieth century has played a major role in the survival of this ecologically strategic floodplain to date.

LAND-USE

Evidence of a large Aboriginal population

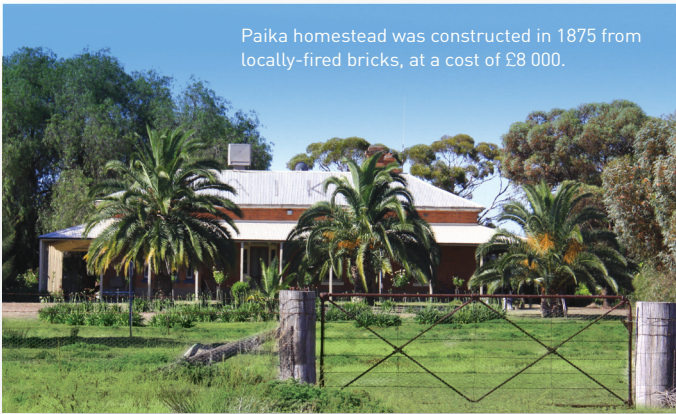
The biologically rich and diverse landscape supported a dense Aboriginal population for more than forty thousand years. The explorer, Major Thomas Mitchell made the following observations when he passed through the ‘Paika’ landscape on 15 May 1836:

One artificial feature, not observed by me in other places, distinguishes the localities principally frequented by the natives, and consists in the lofty mounds of burnt clay, or ashes used by them in cooking ... Some of them were so very ancient, as to be surrounded by circles of lofty trees ... I saw the first of these heaps, when near the end of the last day’s journey along the Lachlan ... I understood that the “Balyan” or bulrush-root (*Typha sp*), which is the chief food of the natives there, is prepared in those kilns.

Working with the environment - ‘ecological complementarity’

A feature of traditional European land-use in the western Riverina in the nineteenth century were strategies to deal with low rainfall, the Murrumbidgee flooding regime, and the vagaries of climate and markets. The key to social, economic and ecological resilience was the utilization of different ecosystems, called ‘ecological complementarity’. When the floodplain was inundated each winter and spring, stock (sheep and cattle) was moved to graze on the surrounding saltbush plains, or on elevated areas within the floodplain. After the floodwaters receded, stock returned to graze on floodplain pastures during summer and autumn. This process supported high stocking rates, it allowed both ecosystems time for recovery, and provided a variety of feed for healthy animals.

During periods of difficult economic conditions, such as droughts or depressions, which generally occurred around once in a generation, community members made a living from red gum forest products. That meant that they did not have to leave their community to find work, and the local economy and social activities, such as football games, were sustained during ‘hard times’. As forest work is ‘hard’ and dangerous, workers returned to their normal jobs as soon as conditions improved, leaving the forests to recover.



Paika homestead was constructed in 1875 from locally-fired bricks, at a cost of £8 000.