

# Virtual Reality Site Study: Migration Experiences (1945-present)

*Paul Grover and Bruce Pennay emphasise the importance of students understanding Australian migration and doing migration History ...*

There is no majestic Statue of Liberty looking over the former Bonegilla Migrant Reception Centre on the banks of the Murray River. There is no stone inscription: *'Give me your tired, your poor/ Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free/ The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.'* Yet, like America's Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, Bonegilla has come to represent the importance of immigration to the nation.

The [Bonegilla Reception Centre](#) was the largest and longest-lasting post-war migrant camp in Australia. At its peak, in 1950, it accommodated 7,700 people, including 1,250 staff. Consequently, it had economic, social and cultural impacts on Albury and Wodonga, its immediate host community.



*Children playing at Bonegilla Migrant Reception Centre, 1957*

Like New York's Ellis Island, Bonegilla was once a noisy, crowded place that was bustling with new arrivals displaced from post-war Europe. But unlike Ellis Island, it was in 'the middle of nowhere' and only rarely caught public attention. Nowadays, Bonegilla is a place where people come to reflect on the impact of migration on Australia – and, perhaps even more importantly, on what it was like and is like to



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be a migrant. Teachers and students can [find out more](#) about this once busy migrant reception centre that had such a significant impact on Australia's post-war immigration history.

Bonegilla Migrant Experience has a new online [3D virtual tour site study](#) with online inquiry-based historical investigations which have been created by Charles Sturt University, in collaboration with the former Bonegilla Migrant Reception Centre, for teachers and students in secondary schools. The Block 19 remnant of the Bonegilla Reception Centre is on the National Heritage Register as illustrative of post-war migration policies and the arrival experiences of 310,000 non-British displaced persons, refugees and assisted migrants, who came between 1947 and 1971.

The long history of migration to Australia is important for student knowledge and understanding about the dynamic nature of social, cultural and political change in Australia, and the key roles that individuals, groups, organisations and governments have played over time in shaping the rich multicultural map of contemporary Australia. Through the study of migration experiences students gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the importance of migration in shaping the story of Australia from the earliest times to the present day, and the continuing influences of migration experiences upon the future of this country, this region and the wider world.

The History K-10 Syllabus: The Modern World and Australia – the globalising world: Migration experiences (1945-present) provides the opportunity for students to explore the significant waves of migration to Australia in the years following World War Two and to investigate changing government policies post World War Two and through the 1950s and 1960s. Students also 'assess the contribution of migrant men and women to Australia's social, cultural and economic development and Australia's changing identity' (NESA, History K-10 Syllabus, 2012).



*One of the former World War Two army buts at the Bonegilla Camp that were converted into accommodation and recreation spaces for newly arrived migrants after World War Two – note the very spartan conditions.*



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## *Walking through Bonegilla in a virtual reality tour*

This 3D virtual tour is a recreation of this real-life heritage site as it exists today. The virtual tour allows students to experience a self-guided tour where they explore the buildings and examine the displays. The creators have included [a teacher guide](#), hyperlinked buttons at key points in the tour with specially created YouTube videoclips, including an introductory Claymation story about the migrant experience, a picture trail with soundbyte podcasts on key events and experiences, and soundbytes from past residents telling their migrant experience stories. There is also a 'quick guide' pdf to explain the virtual tour layout and how to explore the 3D space.

Students can tour at their own pace and in their own time using a computer or Google glasses to explore the site and move from building to building. The 3D online virtual tour opens with the exhibition spaces, and then allows students to visit a variety of key buildings, including the accommodation huts, the recreation hut, the ablutions block, the employment office and the communal kitchen block. The 3D virtual tour is supplemented with a 'Getting Started' short video with views of the physical setting of the Bonegilla Migrant Experience Heritage Centre, guides for teachers and students and video of a drone flight over the whole site to establish the geographical context. Also included are [original government propaganda films](#) that allow students to examine how the migrant experience was 'sold' to potential European migrants, as well as original investigative reporting from the ABC film archives about what life was like in Bonegilla Migrant Reception Centre.

Memory of the Reception Centre and its impact is carefully preserved in the Bonegilla Collection at the Albury Library Museum. The site itself is conserved by Wodonga City Council as a public memory place called the 'Bonegilla Migrant Experience'. Both cross-border city councils worked in collaboration with Charles Sturt University to construct the virtual reality and inquiry investigations website.

## *Investigating Bonegilla - four inquiry-based historical investigations*

The accompanying historical investigations include a set of four inquiry-based online investigations that open with key inquiry questions and provide hyperlink access to primary sources for students to examine and interact with. These investigations are well illustrated and easy to read in the 'Issuu' online magazine format. Students are provided with stimulus inquiry questions as they access primary source documents that include original newspaper accounts, magazine stories and even redacted secret intelligence reports from the time. They then use their historical investigations and research to prepare informed and evidence-based responses to the key inquiry questions for class exploration.

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Calwell spent a considerable time in the children's ward at the hospital. He posed for photographs with a bed-ridden child and with another group of healthy smiling children. He reminded the press that those selected to come to Australia were comparatively healthy, in spite of the privations of Europe and the high levels of malnutrition there both during the war and in the immediate post-war years.

In September 1949, two months after Calwell's visit to Bonegilla, Albury Hospital reported that seven newly arrived infants at Bonegilla had died from malnutrition in just over a month. There were also reports of additional infant deaths in other migrant accommodation centres.

Metropolitan newspapers seized on what was plainly a national health scandal. By the end of the year twenty-three infants who had arrived in late 1949 were dead.

## Key Inquiry Question

- What were the causes and the short and long-term consequences of a national health scandal at Bonegilla in 1949?



Investigating a health scandal 1949

Bonegilla  
Migrant  
Experiences



## Inquiry 1 – Twenty-three babies die

Why did these babies die?

You will be working as an historian with primary sources. You will research archives and relevant documents that allow you to investigate the reasons for these babies suddenly dying.

Examining newspaper reports of the deaths



Archive 1 – Open the link below to go to Trove at the National Library of Australia

<http://trove.nla.gov.au/>

- 1) Find and open the link: "Digitised Newspapers and More"

- 2) Click on the Adv (Advanced) search function

Investigating a health scandal 1949

Bonegilla  
Migrant  
Experiences

*A sample page from the online historical investigations: this is from the investigation into the health scandal in 1949 when 23 babies tragically died at Bonegilla Camp within a few months of each other.*

Each of the four online investigations uses a visual guide to show students how to find and use contemporary reports about how the Bonegilla site functioned and how people experienced the arrival and the reception centre itself. These inquiry-based investigations begin with the assumption that students are new to researching material in Trove and in the National Archives of Australia. Clear visual instructions show them how to search for specific reports or documents for their investigation, and intentionally leave open the prospect for teachers of further explorations in each cluster of newspaper reports or official files. This means the investigations not only help students locate selected items from these vast and valuable archives, but also increase awareness of the careful detective work required by historians when researching primary and secondary sources. The emphasis in these inquiry-based investigations is on students *doing* History, rather than being *told* History.

These carefully designed introductions to Trove and National Archives searches are a new development for students and teachers in using inquiry-based historical research in schools. The set of four online historical investigations helps advance students' historical inquiry skills and endorses the observation made by the Australian History Association that Trove has had a 'transformative effect on the capacity of historians to undertake research'.

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## Change and continuity

[Investigation 1](#) presents and explores changes to the fabric of the Bonegilla migrant camp over time, as it served different cohorts of migrants. It allows students to examine and evaluate adjustments to Australian post-war immigration policies and practices between 1947 and 1971 and the reasons for these changes.



*Immigration Department publicity photos show the crude mess arrangements used for the displaced persons and first cohorts of assisted migrants and, then, the 'improvements' made to the place in the 1960s to attract, or at least not deter, skilled migrants (National Australian Archives).*

## Troubled times

[Investigation 2](#) is an inquiry-based investigation that invites students to find and assess the historical value of different newspaper and official accounts of a health scandal in 1949, when 23 newly arrived babies died. This investigation examines living conditions, welfare issues and health concerns in the migration experience for migrant families, and explores the reactions of the media, government and health officials.



*A 1949 newspaper article critical of efforts by distressed parents to visit their sick children at the time when 23 babies died at the Bonegilla Camp.*

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## *Migration experiences*

[Investigation 3](#) explores the experiences of the migrants in the Bonegilla Camp and takes students to a variety of Trove and National Archives records, but also draws on migrant personal testimonies from the 'Belongings' archive, created by the former Migration Heritage Centre of NSW. It enables students to explore the verbal accounts that migrants have recorded of their arrival and wider migration experiences. It touches on personal stories like, for example, those of Romulus Gaita and his family at Bonegilla (of 'Romulus, My Father' fame) as well as the circumstances that led to the tragic death of a young wife in the Bonegilla Camp. This investigation allows students to examine these accounts and memories in order to develop historical perspectives on the migration experience using this kaleidoscope of personal testimonies.

## *Protest and riots*

[Investigation 4](#) focuses on the protests and riots that were a feature of Bonegilla in 1961. This inquiry directs students to the National Archives of Australia for different accounts of a riot by unemployed migrants in 1961. It, for instance, points visitors to a file containing a secret report prepared by ASIO on the incident, its causes and its aftermath. This redacted file has records that clearly indicate the long-term complaints from migrants who, because of an economic recession, could not be allocated the jobs they had been promised before they agreed to come to Australia. Throughout, however, it is centred on ascertaining government concerns regarding the influence that Communist sympathisers might have had in inciting violence.



*A protest march by unemployed migrants photographed by a fellow migrant in 1961 (Albury Library Museum).*



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## Original films of the time are included for student study

The online resource package includes a set of two original films from the 1940s and the 1970s which portray the Bonegilla Reception Centre from different perspectives – from its inception to its final days as a migrant reception and processing centre. Both films ask students to consider the changes in the way the centre was represented to the Australian public, and also to potential and actual migrants. So, for example, students are asked to compare a short film made to attract northern European displaced persons to Australia with another that was made to reassure the Australian public about the benefits of the mass immigration program to allay fears of a migrant ‘invasion’.

Two additional short films from the period report on the way Bonegilla was improved to attract skilled assisted migrants in the 1960s. One is a [government promotional film](#) that purportedly shows how well Australia received the newly arrived migrants. Another is a retrospective, presented by a former migrant, made by the ABC [‘This Day Tonight’](#) television news team to mark the closing of the Bonegilla Reception Centre in 1971.

## Final thoughts

This virtual reality and historical inquiry-based resource allows students to develop their historical understandings and skills as they carefully investigate and evaluate what the mass immigration program of the post-war years meant to the nation and to those who came from so far away hoping for a new life and new opportunities.

*Dr Bruce Pennay is Adjunct Associate Professor at Charles Sturt University. He has been a heritage historian specialising in studies of rural and regional NSW and Victoria. He is currently interested in post-war immigration and host society responses to it. He has published books on Albury-Wodonga and its surrounds. He has completed heritage studies for country towns in the Riverina and on the Southern Tablelands. These heritage studies and subsequent museum engagements involved him in assessing significance of heritage items and museum collections. Bruce’s interests focus on two broad topic areas: the cultural heritage of the NSW/Victorian border region; and post-war immigration history and heritage with particular reference to Bonegilla Reception and Training Centre in Wodonga.*

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