

The Steppes Historic Site



Parks and Wildlife Service Tasmania

DEPARTMENT of TOURISM, PARKS
HERITAGE and the ARTS

The Steppes Historic Site is located on the Lake Highway (A5) in the Central Highland's of Tasmania about 35 km northwest of Bothwell. This State reserve, of 48 ha, not only protects the site's historic buildings but also helps ensure that stories about a way of life, now largely gone, are carried into the future.

Visitors can access the reserve at any time, though the interior of the homestead and some of the outbuildings are locked and can only be viewed on open days. These occur only infrequently.

The Steppes are about a two hour drive from Hobart and about an hour and a half from Launceston. However, weather conditions in the highlands can include periods of poor visibility, rain, frost and snow and such conditions can increase travel times.

Visitor facilities

In fine weather conditions, the site is a most pleasant location for bush picnics.

Toilet facilities and drinking water are available.

There is no formal camping area, but for those happy just 'to pull off the road', the area opposite the homestead is available for overnight camping.

What makes the Steppes special?

The Steppes was the home of the Wilson family for a period of 112 years that began in 1863. During this time, the Wilsons were a focal point of the life of the area. The arrival of James Wilson at the Steppes in 1863 was intertwined with the growth of sheep-grazing in the highlands. With the pilfering of stock, police districts were created on the plateau and mounted police employed.

There is some confusion over the origin of the naming of 'The Steppes', however, the anecdotal evidence suggests that the name was given by James Wilson.

A police station was constructed at the Steppes in 1863 and James Wilson, due to his extensive knowledge of both stock and the Lake Country, was offered the position

of Superintendent of Police, a position he held for 30 years. He was assisted in his work by 2–3 deputies.

Stock was driven up to the highlands to rest the lowland paddocks during the summer months. A series of accommodation paddocks were provided en route where the sheep were held overnight. Some of these paddocks are still used today when sheep are driven from farms in the vicinity of Ouse and Bothwell to highland locations like the Liawenee moors for the summer.

The Steppes are located at the junction of the Interlaken Road and Lake Highway and accommodation paddocks were previously provided here. The road junction was a prudent location for counting sheep as they moved north and re-counting when they returned at the end of the summer.

A family story

Jessie Moyes was the daughter of a Bothwell publican. She and James Wilson courted for over four years before marrying in 1874. Deep snow sometimes prevented James from journeying to Bothwell to visit Jessie during his off-duty time.

During their courtship, James prepared a scrapbook for Jessie that included ornamental greeting cards, pictures of flowers, vintage postage stamps, verse and stories.

Jessie and James raised five children at the Steppes; a sixth child died in infancy and is buried nearby.

James was made redundant when the police station was closed at the Steppes in 1894. The Wilsons were

Miss Madge Wilson at The Steppes about 1965





Interior of Miss Madge Wilson's studio in 1963

allowed to stay as tenants of the Police Department. Ten years later he purchased a 17 acre property about one km from the homestead. James died in 1922, aged 85. Mrs Jessie Wilson and her three daughters continued to live at the Steppes. The middle daughter, Marion, moved away when she married the Reverend Carr, the rector of Richmond. However, in her later years she returned to the Steppes following her husband's death. Mrs Carr died in 1967.

The two sons William and Archie moved away, married and bought farms of their own. Archie returned to the Steppes when his marriage failed and lived there to his death in the 1950s. Mrs Jessie Wilson lived at the Steppes until her death in 1946 at the age of 99 years.

The last of the family was Miss Marjorie (Madge) Wilson who lived her entire life here at the Steppes. She passed away in 1975 at the age of 92 years.

Highland weather observations

In 1910 James Wilson became a volunteer weather observer for the Bureau of Meteorology. From her father's death in 1922, until her own in 1975, Miss Madge Wilson continued these observations. As her eyesight failed her in her later years, Miss Wilson had trouble maintaining the records and Jack Thwaites would travel from Hobart to assist her. In 1973 she became the first Tasmanian rainfall observer to receive a plaque for 50 years continuous service.

Protecting The Steppes

The Wilson family all had a close affinity with the bush they lived in and, in 1929, Miss Mary Wilson

approached the Animal and Birds Protection Board (a forerunner to the Parks and Wildlife Service) with the suggestion that the former police reserve at the Steppes become a bird sanctuary, in part as a memorial to her father. The reserve was gazetted in 1930.

In 1957, the surviving family members, Miss Madge Wilson and her sister Mrs Marion Carr offered their private land at the Steppes for inclusion in the reserve. Their motivation was that it afforded protection to the birds and other wild creatures that they loved so much. Besides this, the reserve is now a memorial to this remarkable family.

The Steppes Church Hall

The St Luke's Anglican Church (located a kilometre north of the homestead) was built in 1911 and was a centre of social activity as much as a place of worship. The part of the hall containing the altar could be shut off when a social event was being held. Dances were held a couple of times a year with people travelling from as far away as Deloraine to attend.

Prior to the church being built, church services were held in the Wilson family home.

The hall, which is still an important feature of highland social life, is now owned and managed by a local community group. Funds raised at the annual Steppes Rodeo are used to maintain the hall.

Further information

Material in these notes was largely sourced from the publications listed below. None of them are currently widely available but they could be located by contacting the State Library of Tasmania.

1. *The Steppes* by Jack Thwaites (National Trust of Australia, 1982)
2. *The Roof of Tasmania: A history of the Central Plateau* by Tim Jetson (Pelion Press, Launceston, 1989)
3. *The Steppes State Reserve Historical Study* by Lindy Scripps (An unpublished report for the Department of Parks, Wildlife and Heritage, 1991)

FURTHER INFORMATION

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