

# The History of Picnics in Australia and the Bellarine Peninsula



For the Bellarine Historical Society  
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April 2026

The history of picnics:

The picnic has a surprisingly rich history, stretching back several centuries and crossing multiple continents.

### **Origins in Medieval Europe**

The concept of outdoor communal eating dates to medieval hunting feasts, where nobles and their retinues would feast in the field after a hunt. These were elaborate affairs with servants, fine food, and formal arrangements that were part celebration, part practicality, and very much a display of social status.



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The word "picnic" itself likely comes from the French pique-nique, which appeared in print around 1692, and originally described as a potluck feast; a fashionable social gathering indoors where each guest brought a dish, or a bottle of wine, or paid a share to contribute to a shared table. Interestingly enough, the outdoor element was not yet central to the concept.

### **Post-French Revolution Popularization**

After the French Revolution ended in 1799, the royal parks of Paris were opened to the public for the first time. Parisians took full advantage, flocking outdoors to dine al fresco, and the “picnic” began its transformation into a beloved outdoor tradition.

### **The Pic Nic Society (Tottenham Street, London)**

The Pic Nic Society was one of Regency London's most scandalous and fashionable clubs. Founded in 1801 by Lieutenant Colonel Henry Francis Greville, it began as a potluck supper combining fine dining with amateur dramatics — an evening of food, theatre, and entertainment that proved so popular it was quickly formalised into a subscription society with hired rooms in Tottenham Street.

Every member was required to bring a dish, decided by lot, and six bottles of wine, with each striving to outdo the others in luxury and expense. The lucky ones might get away with a pound cake or China oranges; others drew lots requiring pâté de foie gras or the costly Perigord Pie, made with truffles and game.

After the feast came good wine (a great deal of it), amateur theatricals, and the evening was rounded off with serious gambling; which was what many members were *really* there for. There was singing, dancing, and gambling, but the principal entertainment was always a play.



### **Controversy**

The Members advertised themselves as "fashionables," though others derisively labelled them Dilettanti. William Brinsley Sheridan, principal of the Drury Lane Theatre, mounted a press campaign claiming they were godless and licentious, while caricaturist James Gillray opened them to withering public ridicule.

Their lasting legacy: from their rowdy, extravagant gatherings, was the word "**picnic**" entering the English language; and eventually shed its indoor, aristocratic origins to become the simple outdoor meal we know today.

### **Victorian England**

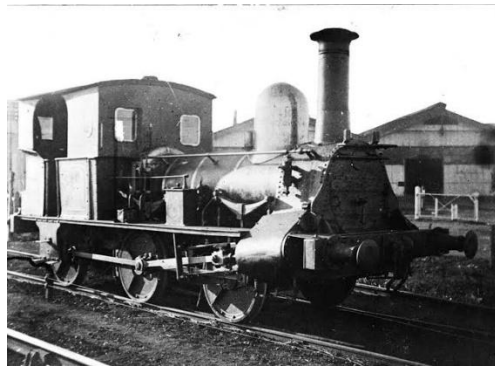
The picnic truly flourished in 19th century England, becoming a cornerstone of middle and upper-class social life with the Victorians elevating it into an art form. Servants would haul furniture, elaborate wicker hampers, cutlery, fine China and glassware, to be laid out on elaborate tablecloths. Cold meats, pies, and champagne were all standard fare. These picnics were performances of wealth as much as meals.

Literature of the era, from Jane Austen to Charles Dickens, frequently featured picnic scenes as social set pieces. The Romantic movement, with its reverence for nature, gave the outdoor feast a philosophical dimension; eating in a meadow or by a river was becoming culturally meaningful.



## Victorian democratization

The expansion of railways in the 1840s was the single biggest turning point. Suddenly, the middle classes could reach the countryside cheaply and quickly.



04 Titania 1855

Titania was built in 1855 for the Geelong & Melbourne Railway Company by Robert Stephenson & Co as a 2-2-2WT (represents the wheel arrangement of two leading wheels on one axle, two powered driving wheels on one axle, and two trailing wheels on one axle with a Well Tank under the boiler) (a special thank you to Claude(AI) for explaining that to me ). In September 1869 it was sold to Victorian Railways; later becoming VR No. 34 and rebuilt into an 0-6-0.

Seen here accompanying some travellers, was the Victorian wickerwork picnic basket set, 1837-1901

### POINT TO BASKET

This wicker picnic basket with its neat compartments for plates, cutlery, and glasses became the defining icon of the Victorian picnic, and illustrates the type of utensils taken on a picnic in the mid to late nineteenth century. The makers GW Scott & Sons were known as makers of wicker products sourced from Somerset willows, and luxury leather goods (primarily trunks and tea caddies). The picnic is featured often in Australian leisure imagery and established as an 'Australian institution' by the 1880s, in a trend which coincided with the union movement.

The WELL-TO-DO of England used the Isabella Beeton's famous household manual which devoted considerable space to planning picnic menus:

“The picnic is not a casual affair but a staged "dinner held in the rough," requiring extensive preparation, staff, transportation, and a relative disregard for cost”.

Each member was expected to strive to outdo the others in luxury and expense.

For the authentically Victorian pigeon pie, Beeton instructs that three of the pigeon's feet be cleaned and placed through a hole in the crust, so that diners could identify what kind of pie it was.

With the many pigeons around Flinders St station, it would seem that many of them escaped the clutches of the would-be pie makers.

The book became an immediate bestseller in 1861, selling 60,000 copies that year and nearly two million copies by 1868, becoming the most consulted cookery book between 1875 and 1914.



05 Bill of Fare

### **America's contribution**

In the United States, the picnic took on a distinctly democratic character. It became woven into the civic rituals: Fourth of July celebrations, church socials, county fairs, and eventually Labor Day gatherings. By the late 19th century, a picnic was less about social display and more about community belonging.

### **Australia's picnic history is a fascinating story**

#### **First Nations traditions**

Long before European settlement, outdoor communal eating was deeply embedded in Aboriginal life. First Nations people came together across great distances to share food at Bunya Gatherings focused on the bunya nut harvest, held every three years for many generations. These 8kg football sized cones would drop without warning from 30-40 meter tree tops. The gathering was not just an occasion for consuming food, but for ceremony and stories. [Southern Cross University](#), Wiradjuri scholar Dr Michelle Bovill has described how midden sites across the continent capture moments of celebration and ceremony stretching back tens of thousands of years.



06 Bunya Nut

## Colonial beginnings

When British settlers arrived in the late 18th century, they brought their picnicking traditions with them. The practice adapted quickly to the Australian environment — the vast open spaces, warm climate, and natural beauty made outdoor dining a natural fit. Early colonial picnics were important social occasions, helping communities bond in an unfamiliar land.



07a Early Aus picnic



07b Modern washing up conveniences

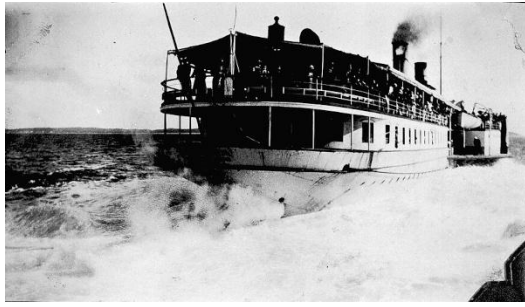
## 19th Century Social Life

Picnics became a cornerstone of colonial social life throughout the 1800s. They were organised by churches, schools, workplaces, and community groups, and served as some of the most anticipated events on the social calendar. Families would travel considerable distances by horse and cart to attend large communal gatherings. The Melbourne Cup picnic tradition and various agricultural show days often incorporated elaborate outdoor dining.



08 Horse and Cart

By the 1870s, excursion traffic to the peninsula commenced, with tourists travelling from Melbourne by paddle steamers to enjoy fishing and swimming by the bay, with the coastal towns becoming major holiday resorts. (Wikipedia) Picnicking was central to this culture of leisure.



09 + 10



**1869** - Did you know Picnic Etiquette was *a thing*?

Please note; **Youth is inexperienced, emotional, unguarded and impulsive**, and there is no harm in bearing this fact in mind. We do not allow children just learning to walk to wander unguarded at the edge of precipices, and we ought not to allow young people just acquiring a knowledge of the world to be exposed to perils of the nature of which they are ignorant.

**To come to the point: Picnics, where the party is largely made up of young girls, should be properly “matronized” and governed by a code of proprieties calculated to prevent the appearance of evil. There should be no straying away in couples from the main body of the party**, more particularly when champagne or other vinous beverages constitute a part of the gathering.

We have been told that **there is a certain class of fast young men who make a practice of attending all picnics that are not of a strictly private character for sinister purposes**. However this may be, no judicious and thoughtful parent would dream for an instant of permitting a daughter to attend any festivity of this kind without trusty attendance.

Let a sensible code of **picnic etiquette** be established and rigidly enforced in all excursions of the sort that pretend to respectability, and the perils at which we have hinted will cease to exist.

## **The union picnic — uniquely Australian**

The rise of motor car ownership after 1948 and the end of petrol rationing in 1949, saw picnics become a popular family activity.

What makes Australian picnic history distinctly different from Britain's is its deep connection to the labour movement. Picnics were established as an "Australian institution" by the 1880s, in a trend which coincided with the union movement.

South Australia was the first place in the British Empire to allow the legal formation and registration of trade unions in 1876.

Southern Cross University noted that this gave rise to the "works picnic." The Ballarat Miners' Association held their first annual picnic at the Botanical Gardens in March 1881, where 2,000 miners were joined by their families and friends. In 1884, thousands gathered at Parramatta Park for a picnic to celebrate the eight-hour day.

# **THE GEELONG ADVERTISER.**

**WEDNESDAY. MARCH 14. 1906.**

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## **BELLARINE FARMERS' PICNIC.**

The recent picnic organised by the farmers in the Bellarine district, which took the form of an excursion in the s.s. Edina from Portarlington to Mornington, was a financial success, though the profits were not large. After paying all expenses the picnic resulted in a profit of 15/-, and the sports held in connection therewith 8/-. These amounts were donated to the Portarlington Rifle Club Band; which accompanied the excursion. The committee expressed much satisfaction at the kindness and courtesy extended towards all by Captain M'Farrow, of the Edina.



11b SS Edina

A distinctly South Australian tradition emerged from this: the "chop picnic," which required carrying a rack to cook chops, sausages and onions over a fire, essentially a predecessor to the modern Australian barbecue.

### **Migrant communities and politics**

Picnics also became powerful expressions of cultural identity for migrant communities.

In 1912, thousands gathered all over the country to celebrate the anniversary of the establishment of the Chinese Republic, a tradition that continued for many years.

Greek picnics were reported in the press throughout the century, as early as 1916 in Lismore.

Irish Australians used picnics to maintain cultural bonds, with the Sydney mayor organising a large gathering at Clontarf in 1880 to honour Ireland.

### **Getting there — transport and freedom**

The rise of the automobile gave picnicking a new dimension, making it easy to venture into nature or the countryside. In Victoria, relaxed licensing regulations allowed groups of suburbanites to head for the hills and beaches in an inexpensive hired van.

Moonee Ponds furniture courier Bert Storie used his 1924 R.E.O. Speed Wagon to make extra money from the "picnic traffic" on weekends and holidays. The mix of people this threw together made picnics a social leveller and, reportedly, a prime occasion for romance.



11b 1924 R.E.O. Speed Wagon

The arrival of the railway transformed access. By the late 1870s, a railway line from Geelong to Queenscliff was established that cut across the peninsula to Drysdale.



12 Drysdale steam train

This opened the peninsula to day-trippers and family excursion parties who would travel out from Geelong and Melbourne specifically for outdoor recreation.

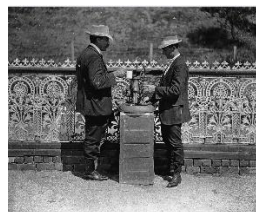
### **The Springs as a Resort Town**

The mineral springs resort was a particularly popular picnic destination in the 1880s with its hotel, bottling plant, mineral waters, and bath house.



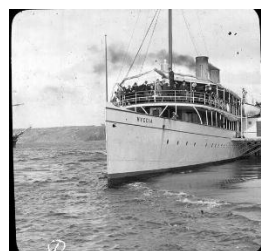
13 Springs Hotel

It was quite the done thing to go there to recuperate. Families would combine taking the waters with picnics on the foreshore.



14 Drinking the waters

Around 1900, the springs was a booming resort. Paddle steamers would bring visitors from near and far to the resort and hotel.



15a Hygeia Paddle Steamer

### **The Picnic Culture**

Victorian-era picnics on the Bellarine were elaborate social affairs — families would arrive by steamer or train with hampers of food, set up on the foreshore reserves, and spend the day swimming, fishing, and socialising. Church groups, friendly societies, and schools regularly organised large community picnic excursions to the peninsula's coastal towns throughout the 1880s–1910s.



15b

### **The Decline**

By 1923, the steamers had gone and the spring novelty had worn off, and the resort fell into disrepair before it burnt.

### **Later Revival**

The site has been rejuvenated into a country club, community centre and golf course, with plans to bring the spring water back and save the eroding cliff faces for people to enjoy once again.

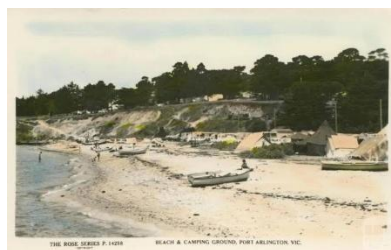
### **The Town of Drysdale Itself**

The railway reached the local station from South Geelong on the way to Queenscliff in 1879, and remained in Victorian Railways service until 1976. (Wikipedia) This railway was central to the town's role in the region.

### **Portarlington & Coastal Towns**

Portarlington was another favourite spot. The town changed from a humble fishing village into a holiday destination when the railway was extended into the Bellarine in 1879.

Its foreshore and grassy reserves made it ideal for family outings.



16a Portarlington

### **The Bush Picnic**

A distinctly Australian version of the picnic emerged around the bush setting — by a creek, under a gum tree, or on a riverbank.



16b River picnic

This became romanticised in Australian art and literature. The Heidelberg School painters of the 1880s and 1890s, including Arthur Streeton and Charles Conder, captured outdoor leisure scenes that reflected this culture. Conder's famous painting [A Holiday at Mentone \(1888\)](#) is a notable example of this era.



17 Conder

### **The 20th Century**

The spread of the motor car opened up beaches, national parks, and the countryside to ordinary families, and the picnic became a weekend institution. The iconic Australian barbecue began to merge with picnic culture; during this period the "barbie on the beach" became a distinctly Australian social ritual. In addition, public parks in cities were designed and maintained with picnicking firmly in mind.



18 Beach Bar b q

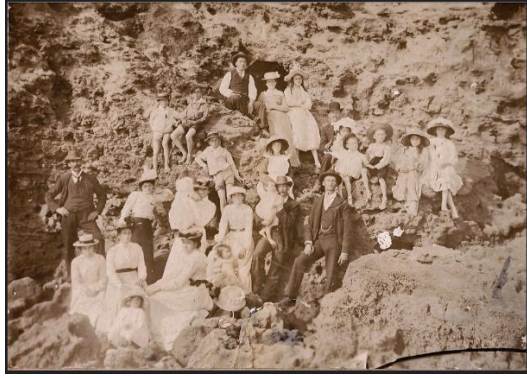
### **Australia Day and Public Holidays**

Picnics became strongly associated with Australian public holidays. Australia Day, Easter, and the Christmas/summer holiday period all became prime picnic occasions. The timing of Christmas in summer gave Australian outdoor dining culture a unique character compared to its British counterpart.

### **Iconic Picnic Spots**

Certain locations became very popular picnic destinations like the Botanic Gardens, the Bellarine Peninsula, the Dandenong's, the Great Ocean Road, the You Yangs, and countless other beaches and national parks across the country.

A group from Geelong, circa summer of 1901-2, visiting one of the beaches of the nearby Bellarine Peninsula.



**19 Early Bellarine Peninsula picnic**

### **Geelong's Picnic Heritage**

As one of Victoria's oldest and most significant regional cities, Geelong developed strong picnic traditions from the earliest days of European settlement. The city's position on Corio Bay made waterfront gatherings a natural part of social life. The Eastern Beach and Western Beach foreshore areas became popular spots for families and community groups to gather, and the Geelong Botanic Gardens — established in 1851 — provided a refined setting for leisurely outdoor meals in the Victorian tradition.

The Barwon River was another beloved picnic corridor, with its shaded banks and gentle scenery drawing families from the city throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Rowing clubs and sporting associations often combined their activities with riverside picnics.



**20 Eastern Beach**

### **The Bellarine Peninsula**

The Bellarine Peninsula, stretching southeast of Geelong toward the entrance of Port Phillip Bay and overlooking Bass Strait, became a cherished escape for both Geelong residents and Melburnians from the mid-19th century onward.

In recent decades, the Bellarine Peninsula has developed into a significant food and wine region, with numerous vineyards, breweries, and farm gates transforming the picnic experience. Many wineries such as Oakdean, Scotchmans Hill, and Jack Rabbit offer picnic grounds with vineyard views, elevating the humble outdoor meal into something more indulgent. This has made the Bellarine a popular destination for leisurely weekend picnics among both locals and visitors from Melbourne.



21 Modern luxe picnic

Towns like Queenscliff, Portarlington, Barwon Heads, Ocean Grove, and Point Lonsdale developed as holiday destinations, and picnicking on the beaches and headlands was central to the appeal. Queenscliff in particular had a fashionable reputation in the Victorian era, attracting well-heeled visitors who would promenade and picnic along its scenic coastline.



22 well heeled

### **Portarlington and the European Connection**

Portarlington deserves special mention for the way its picnic culture intersected with its community identity. The town became home to a significant Greek community over the 20th century, and its foreshore became famous for communal gatherings centred around food, music, and family — a Mediterranean sensibility transplanted to the Victorian coast. The Portarlington Mussel Festival, while a modern event, reflects this long tradition of celebratory communal eating by the water.

### **Community and Civic Picnics**

Like much of regional Victoria, Geelong had a strong tradition of large, organised picnics tied to churches, schools, and workplaces. The major wool and manufacturing industries that defined Geelong in the 19th and early 20th centuries often held annual works picnics, which were significant events for working families. The railway connection to Melbourne also made it easy for city dwellers to travel to Geelong and the surrounding region for day outings.

### **Multicultural Influence**

Post-World War II immigration significantly enriched Australian picnic culture. Greek, Italian, Lebanese, and later Asian communities brought their own outdoor food traditions, and the Australian picnic expanded to embrace a much wider variety of foods and styles.

## Today

The picnic remains deeply embedded in Australian life. Long weekends see parks and beaches fill with families and groups, and the culture of bringing food to share outdoors is as strong as ever. The modern Australian picnic might feature anything from meat pies and lamingtons to antipasto, sushi, or Lebanese dips — a reflection of the country's multicultural character.

The Bellarine Rail Trail, which winds through the peninsula's countryside, has added a new dimension to outdoor leisure, with cyclists often stopping for picnics along the route. Farmers markets in towns like Barwon Heads and Queenscliff supply fresh local produce perfect for assembling a picnic spread. The combination of beaches, bay, bushland, wineries, and historic towns makes the Geelong and Bellarine region one of Victoria's finest picnic landscapes.

## The modern form

Through the 20th century the picnic simplified into the casual, blanket-on-the-grass format most people recognize today. The post-WWII suburban boom added the backyard barbecue as a close cousin. In recent years there's been a revival of interest in the "curated picnic" — elaborate spreads with grazing boards, floral arrangements, and low tables — essentially bringing the aristocratic aesthetic back.



23 the Q train experience