

CHAPTER 2 – CASE-STUDY AREA PROFILE AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Introduction

Because indigenous mobility is always place specific, it is appropriate to begin by situating the study geographically. The case-study profile sets the spatial parameters of the fieldwork and provides a rich contextual backdrop for the following chapters. It surveys the significant demographic, economic, social, cultural and environmental characteristics of the case-study area at two scales - Yamatji country and Meekatharra. The chapter then turns to a discussion of the research design. The design and implementation of appropriate, effective, and practical research methodologies is perhaps one of the more challenging elements in the emerging field of indigenous mobility research (Newbold, 2004). Methodological advancements have been significantly hindered by a sparsity of accurate and accessible data, and bifurcation rather than integration between qualitative and quantitative approaches.

The emphasis of this methodological discussion therefore is not a mere recapitulation of the fieldwork process, or a checklist of the methodological tools employed. It does describe the specific methods adopted during fieldwork and how some of the important methodological and ethical challenges encountered during fieldwork were engaged with and negotiated. It also describes the tools and processes of data analysis and how they informed the thesis development, providing a crucial context for the presentation of research findings in subsequent chapters. However, this discussion of specific methodological and analysis choices is situated within a broader dialogue addressing the discursive unease regarding data sources and methodological approaches to the study of indigenous mobility, and how the thesis is positioned within and responds to these concerns. In so doing, this chapter builds on a growing academic discussion of innovative methodological designs in the study of spatial mobility amongst indigenous peoples.

2.2 Case-Study Area Profile

‘Case-studies’ are defined in a range of ways in the social sciences literature. Yin’s (1994) definition of a case-study is perhaps most suitable to the present study:

... an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon with its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (p.13).

Yin's definition is particularly appropriate in this context where the boundaries between Aboriginal mobility and its spatial context are not clearly evident. Merriam (1998) notes that case-studies can illustrate the complexities of a situation and the range of factors that contribute to it, demonstrate the influence of the passage of time, and have a particular capacity to identify and explain the underlying causes of particular processes or phenomena. Young (1990) advocated the application of the case-study approach in examining Aboriginal mobility processes:

Contemporary Aboriginal mobility is most clearly understood through detailed examples of what occurs within particular communities, why it occurs and how it affects them (p. 189).

Following Young (1990) then, one of the first methodological design decisions which guided the research project was the selection of one case-study area or region within which the study of Aboriginal mobility processes would be situated. Selecting a single case-study area in which to situate the research presented the best opportunity for reaching the thesis objectives: to undertake a detailed analysis of the nuanced nature of mobility processes and the institutional structures with which these spatial practices intersect.

2.2.1 Selecting 'a Region'

Western Australia's mid-west was selected as the general geographical region within which the study would be situated because prior research (Prout, 2002; 2003; 2004) had identified Aboriginal mobility processes as a subject of considerable public discourse and policy relevance in the area. In 2002, two separate projects were undertaken in the mid-west as part of Honours research. The first studied the obstacles to recruiting and retaining appropriately qualified employees and staff in the small rural town of Meekatharra (Prout, 2003) and the second investigated the contentious nature of the provision of housing for service personnel in the remote Aboriginal community of Burringurrah (Prout, 2002; 2004). During fieldwork for both projects, it became clear that issues of mobility for both Aboriginal people and

non-Aboriginal service personnel impinged significantly not just on those projects but more generally on everyday practices and livelihoods in the region. Knowing that these issues simmered at the surface of social, economic, political and cultural exchanges within this region, and sensing a willingness of individuals to participate in research which sought to address mobility issues, this part of Western Australia was chosen as the general location for the study.

The process of establishing appropriate spatial parameters for the study was a more complicated task. Bounding the study would require a knowledge of the spatial parameters of existing mobility processes in the region, even though these geographical delineations were to be one of the subjects of investigation. This dilemma was ultimately a profound illustration of the subjective and often arbitrary nature of conceptualising geographical scale and creating and maintaining boundaries. Therefore, rather than specifically defining a singular 'region' within which to examine Aboriginal mobilities, the thesis focuses on a specific case-study settlement, the town of Meekatharra, and the mobilities that flow into, out of, and around it. Subsequent chapters will show that there is no single definite 'region' within which Aboriginal people living in Meekatharra undertake their mobilities. The town potentially falls within the margins of several Aboriginal 'mobility regions.' Aboriginal mobilities emanating out of Meekatharra take place within and beyond a range of administrative boundaries. It remains necessary, however, to situate Meekatharra in the broader geographical context within which the governing structures of the dominant culture are enacted and reinforced. So, in a great irony, whilst one of the dominant themes of the thesis is that it is necessary to challenge the imposition of assumed non-Aboriginal ordering and bordering of space on Aboriginal peoples' lives, the practical requirements of research are predicated on such a practice.

As Figure 2.1 illustrates, the Midwest area of Western Australia is variously demarcated for administrative purposes by different government agencies as the *Midwest* (Department of Housing and Works, Department of Education and Training), the *Midwest and Murchison* (Department of Health), the *Gascoyne /Murchison* (Department of Indigenous Affairs) and the *Mid west and Gascoyne* (Department of Local Government and Regional Development).

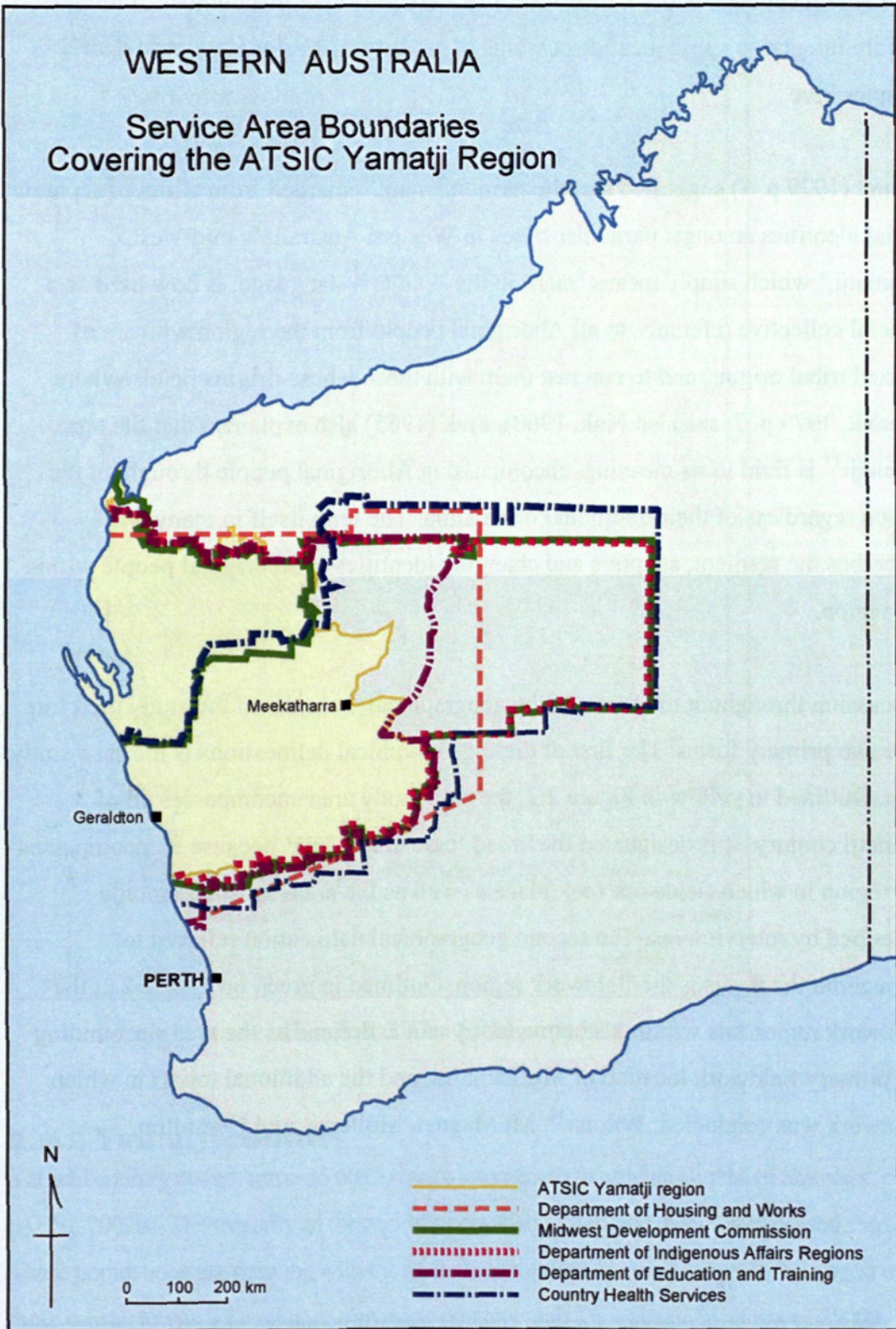


Figure 2.1 Yamatji country and other jurisdictional boundaries

This thesis uses ATSIC's administrative boundary – the Yamatji region – to situate the study in its geographical context because it was the most appropriate of the jurisdictional demarcation for delineating the broader 'case-study area.' The concepts

of 'Yamatji country' and a Yamatji identity were prevalent in a number of interviews and are integral to subsequent discussions of security and belonging, particularly in Chapter Five.

Berndt (1979 p. 7) suggested that the term 'Yamatji' emerged from a loss of separate social identities amongst particular tribes in Western Australia's mid-west.

'Yamatji,' which simply means 'man' in the Wadjari¹⁰ language, is now used as a general collective reference to all Aboriginal people from the region who are of 'mixed tribal origin,' and to contrast them with those whose origins lie elsewhere (Berndt, 1979 p. 7; see also Fink, 1960). Fink (1965) also explained that the term Yamatji¹¹ is fluid in its meaning, encompassing Aboriginal people throughout the region regardless of their traditional orientation. The term itself in many ways embodies the resilient, adaptive and changing identities of Aboriginal people within the region.

Discussion throughout the thesis of the geographical 'bounds' of the study therefore take two primary forms. The first of these geographical delineations is the case-study area. Outlined in yellow in Figure 2.2, the case-study area encompasses all of Yamatji country. It is designated the broad 'case-study area' because it encompasses the region in which fieldwork took place as well as the areas most commonly described by interviewees. The second geographical delineation referred to throughout the thesis is the fieldwork region. Outlined in green on Figure 2.2, the fieldwork region sits within Yamatji country and is defined as the area surrounding the primary fieldwork location of Meekatharra, and the additional towns in which fieldwork was conducted: Wiluna¹², Mt Magnet, Mullewa, and Geraldton.

¹⁰ The term 'Wadjari' is sometimes used to refer to one of the main Aboriginal languages spoken within the Yamatji region (see for example Douglas, 1981 who uses the alternate spelling of 'Watjarri'). The term is also used to describe the region's major Aboriginal language group (i.e. 'Wadjari people') or tribe (see for example Fink, 1960; Tindale, 1974). Accounts vary about the exact distribution of the Wadjari people historically and today.

¹¹ Fink (1965) used the alternate spelling of Jamadji rather than Yamatji.

¹² The exception here is the town of Wiluna that lies within ATSIC's 'Western Desert' region.

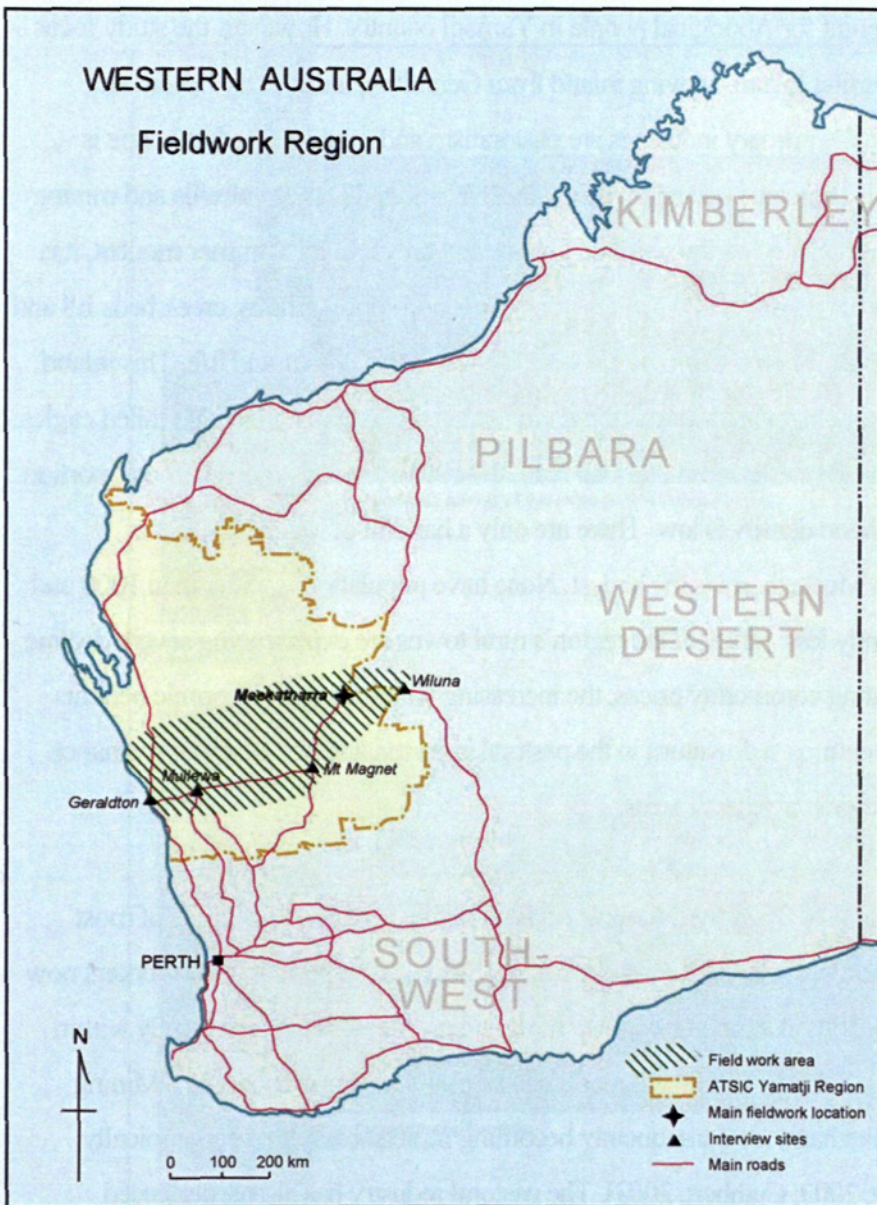


Figure 2.2 The Fieldwork Region

2.2.2 Yamatji country

Yamatji country covers some 35 6015 square kilometres (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2002b). The majority of the region's population live along the western coastal strip. These populations are growing with the increase in tourism and sea-changers. The largest of these coastal towns is Geraldton: a growing port city with a population in excess of 25000. Geraldton is the focus of the regions' administrative, commercial and service activities. The town's growth has been perpetuated by a strong fisheries industry, a prosperous agricultural 'coastal strip' which borders the town to the east, and an influx of populations experiencing the strain of rural decline in the more 'remote' parts of the region. Geraldton was a prominent fieldwork sight given that all regional service providers are based in the town, and that it is a

common reference point for Aboriginal people in Yamatji country. However, the study focus – Meekatharra – lies further inland. Moving inland from Geraldton, the country becomes increasingly arid and the primary industries are pastoralism and mining. The landscape is characterised by rocky outcrops and hardy scrublands. It is dotted with windmills and mining pits, and coloured in shades of earthy reds and greens, and greys. In the summer months, it is suffocatingly hot and dry. However when the rains come and spring arrives, creek beds fill and wildflowers and grasses emerge to produce a stunning display of colour and life. This inland part of the region is abundant in kangaroo, bungarras (giant goannas), and wedge-tailed eagles. Feral goats and donkeys, cattle and sheep also roam the country. In this more ‘remote’ portion of the region, population density is low. There are only a handful of townships east of Geraldton, of which Meekatharra is the largest. None have populations greater than 1000 and most have significantly less. Many of the region’s rural towns are experiencing severe decline as a result of fluctuating commodity prices, the increasing withdrawal of economic benefits from local mining ventures, a downturn in the pastoral industry, and neo-liberal governance dictating service withdrawal to rural areas.

The recent introduction of fly-in fly-out mining has meant that economic benefits of most mining operations now bypass small rural townships (Storey, 2001). Most mine workers now live for short shift periods at temporary on-site mine camps, rather than permanently within nearby rural towns, resulting in a reduction of the local population and economy. ‘Mining towns’ such as Meekatharra are consequently becoming more socially and economically vulnerable (Bradley, 2003; Cuthbert, 2003). The pastoral industry has also experienced significant decline in recent years in response to exposure to global markets, declining commodity prices, severe droughts, and withdrawal of government support (Lawrence and Gray, 2000). These conditions have placed considerable pressure on pastoralists in the Midwest, unsettling succession practices and casting doubt on the long-term viability of the industry in the region. Speaking of the region’s graziers, one interviewee explained:

... they’re a significant group but a reducing group because they days where you could have two or three groups in your family supported by your station has gone. The day where Mum and Dad could retire to the coast has gone. So we now see elderly mums and dads struggling away on this great big station with generally not actually very good facilities. And the kids have all gone. The kids have gone to private schools and they’re now teachers, lawyers, whatever, not wanting to come back to the station (Murchison Health Director, 23 July 2004).

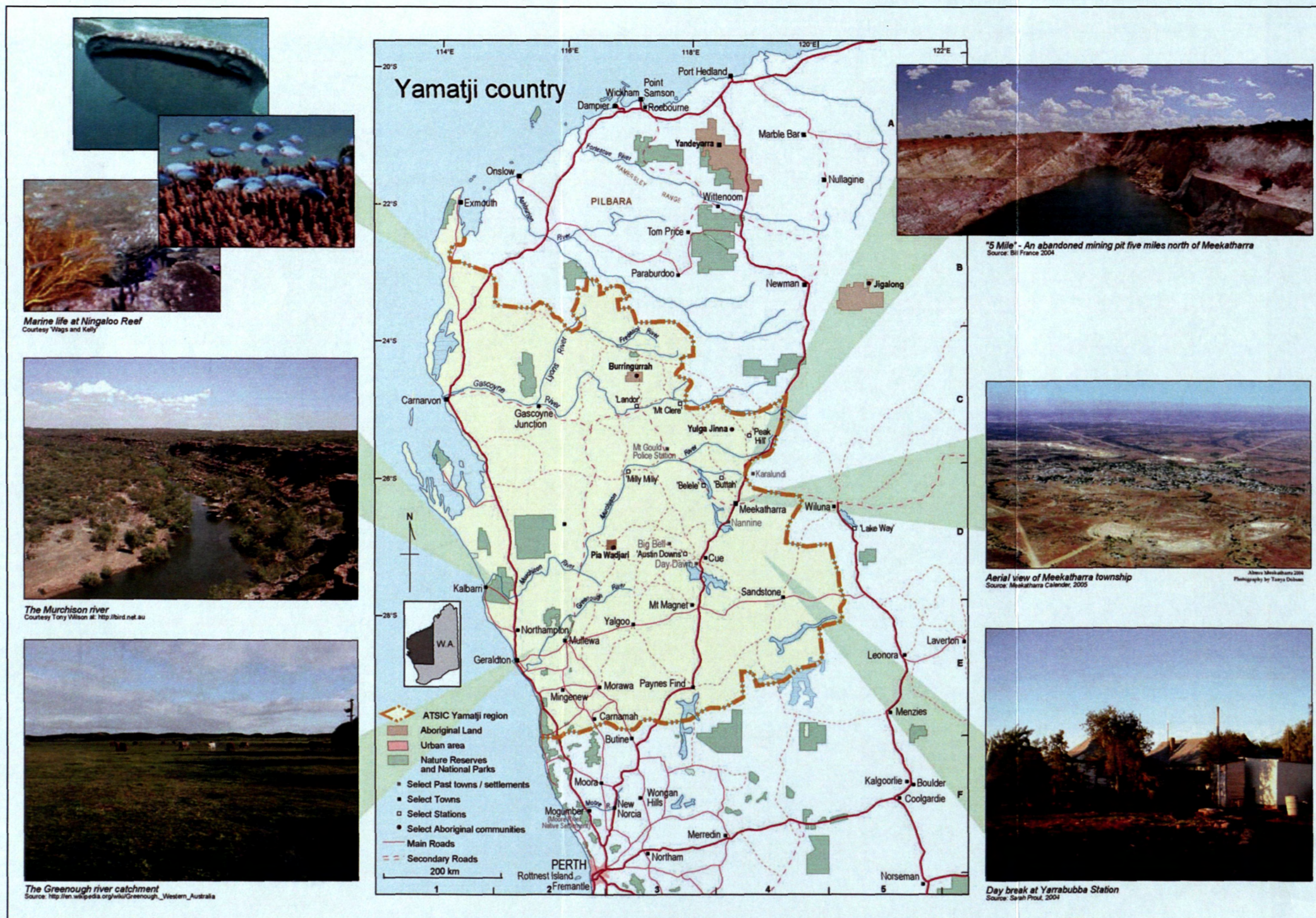


Figure 2.3 Detailed map of Yamatji country and surrounding region¹³

¹³ The numbers and letters on the X and Y axes of this map are used as reference points in following chapters. The cross-references appear in-text as follows: (XY Figure 2.3).

2.2.2.1 Demographic Characteristics

This environment of rural decline directly impacts on the region's demography and service delivery processes. Rural decline has triggered widespread non-Indigenous de-population in many of Australia's regional areas (Bell and Hugo, 2000; McKenzie, 1996), and the Midwest is no exception. Many people have abandoned their rural homes and migrated to larger regional or metropolitan centres. Some pastoralists have remained on their stations but as the above statement indicates, this is largely an ageing population. Whilst Mt Magnet still has a majority miner population, non-Indigenous populations in towns such as Cue and Meekatharra are largely comprised of professional service workers such as teachers, nurses and police, as well as local business people and Council members, most of whom have lived in the town for several generations, and whose children have since migrated elsewhere.

According to the 2001 Census¹⁴, the region's Indigenous population comprise only 9% of the total population. Inland, however, the Aboriginal population makes up a greater percentage of the total population (see Table 2.1). More than half of the region's Indigenous population are located in the major towns of Carnarvon and Geraldton. The remainder of the population live in the small towns and remote Aboriginal communities scattered throughout the region.

Table 2.1 Selected Town Populations in Yamatji country, 2001

	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous	Total	% Indigenous
Yamatji Region	5665	54951	62998	9
Geraldton	2224	23212	25436	9
Carnarvon	1076	6197	7273	15
Mullewa	213	319	532	40
Mt Magnet	172	721	893	19
Cue	94	196	290	32
Meekatharra	342	620	962	36

(Source data: ABS, 2002a)

¹⁴ As following sections will discuss, there are methodological deficiencies in the census enumeration of the Indigenous population. Therefore, the census statistics presented in this discussion should serve as approximations only.

In setting the context of his 1957 study of Aboriginal mobility practices in western New South Wales (NSW), Beckett (1965) described the Aboriginal population in that region as essentially having lost their culture. He based his assertion on four observations: firstly, that tribal groupings were dispersed and local populations were of mixed origin; secondly, that there had been no initiation ceremonies in the region for more than 50 years; thirdly, that old kinship behaviours (including prescribed marriages) had been forgotten; and fourthly, that tribal languages were scarcely spoken (Beckett, 1965 p. 7). Fink (1960), who studied the changing cultural identity of Aboriginal people in the Murchison region (the southern part of Yamatji country) at the same time as Beckett's work in NSW, described a similar 'cultural loss' amongst Aboriginal people living in the region:

One can study among [a group of Aboriginal people in the Murchison region] the transition from being culturally Aborigines to becoming merely a group who are descended from Aborigines and who are still differentially treated from the rest of the white community because of this fact (Fink, 1960 p. 30).

Beckett and Fink's assumption that the absence of these cultural expressions was indicative of wholesale cultural breakdown is highly contestable. For example, although a number of research participants in the present study contrasted themselves specifically, or Yamatji people more generally, with the more 'tribal' or 'traditional' people of the Western Desert, most of these participants did not have a diminished sense of their own Aboriginal identity. Many Aboriginal people living in Yamatji country today exhibit similar characteristics to those described by Beckett. However, this thesis argues that such observations are indicative of cultural change and adaptation rather than wholesale cultural loss. Nevertheless, Beckett's four categories of observation regarding ethnic origins, kinships structures, ceremonial activity, and language provide a useful framework for discussing some of the social and cultural characteristics of the Aboriginal population living in Yamatji country today.

In relation to origins and ancestry, Aboriginal people living in Yamatji country have diverse backgrounds:

Again, you're not necessarily dealing with all Yamatji people either. We've got one of the most - you talk about multiculturalism; blackfellas are more multicultural than white

people. They are! Half of them have got different - there's no specific one - blackfellas aren't blackfellas in the sense of blackfella / whitefella. They've got German, French, Irish, Pom¹⁵, you name it! Afghan, the whole box and dice ... roaming around, you've got mother's Noongar, but the father's Yamatji. I'm in the same situation: black mother, white father. My Grandfather is an Afghan. My Grandmother, part Irish. So you've got all these mixed people here (Ashley Taylor, 14 September 2004).

The present study sought and obtained very little information regarding ceremonial activity in the region¹⁶. Fink (1960) noted that during the time of her research, initiation ceremonies were still taking place in certain forms and in certain places within the region. However, it is not within the ethical or conceptual parameters of this study to comment further on either the nature or extent of current ceremonial activity within the region.

In relation to kinship structures in the region, Fink (1960) suggested that pre-colonial forms of social organisation and marriage arrangements no longer exist. However, fieldwork for the present study indicated that whilst pre-colonial structures may no longer be in place, Aboriginal people in Yamatji country maintain a detailed knowledge of their kin relationships. These relationships remain integral to social organisation and provide a framework for what partnerships are and are not appropriate¹⁷.

Finally, in relation to Beckett's fourth observation, few Aboriginal languages are spoken in Yamatji country today. Gerritsen (1994 p. 103) suggested that prior to colonisation, there were 18 distinct Aboriginal language groups within the region. In more recent times though, traditional languages are spoken in a generalised form – modern Wadjari being one example. In 1973, Douglas (1981) estimated that there were probably less than 200 Wadjari speakers remaining in the region, and these individuals were scattered throughout the region from Meekatharra to Geraldton. In the 2001 national Census, 89% of Aboriginal respondents in Yamatji country

¹⁵ Australian slang word for an English person.

¹⁶ Tonkinson (pers. Comm. 2006) indicated that there has been little anthropological research focussed around Meekatharra or Yamatji country more generally.

¹⁷ It is not intended that the thesis presents a detailed study of kinship or ceremonial processes. This brief treatment of kinship and ceremonial processes serves only to provide a contextual background to the analysis of mobility and service provision presented in subsequent chapters.

indicated that they spoke only English. Only 3% of Aboriginal respondents (170 people) indicated that they spoke an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language (ABS, 2002b).

Following chapters will describe many of the processes that have produced the culturally diverse Aboriginal population in Yamatji country today and the ways in which this diversity is expressed in mobility practices. Chapter Four will also discuss the ways in which rural decline has effected the demographic composition of Aboriginal populations in Yamatji country, particularly in relation to service withdrawal.

2.2.3 Meekatharra

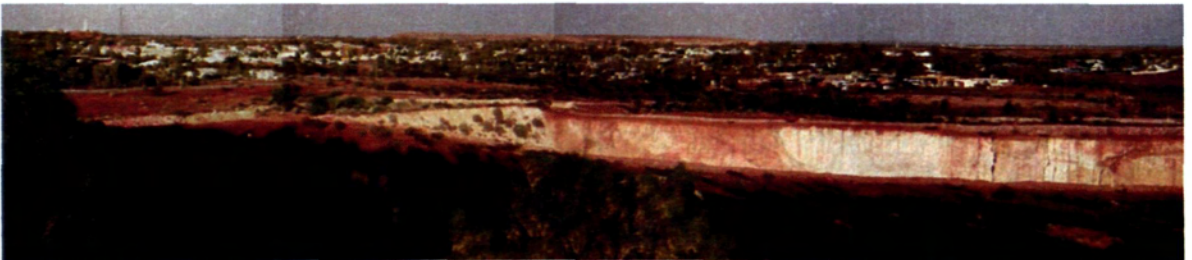


Plate 2.1 Panoramic view of Meekatharra from the town lookout

(Photo: Sarah Prout, 2004)

Located 760km north-west of the Western Australian capital city of Perth, Meekatharra (Plate 2.1) lies on the eastern border of Yamatji country and the western edge of the Western Desert. The town was originally established as a mining outpost during the Gold Rush of the late 1890s. Although mining ventures around the town were not as productive as in other parts of the State, Meekatharra's geographical location was perhaps its saviour. In the early 1900s, when the railway line was constructed, Meekatharra became the railhead for cattle routes into the East Kimberley and Northern Territory. Although the railway was closed in the 1970s, Meekatharra's central location in the State facilitated its continuing status as the primary service centre for ongoing mining operations and the pastoral industry in the region.

Today, Meekatharra remains a district service centre. Many State Government agencies have district offices in Meekatharra, from which they service nearby towns bordering the Western Desert including Wiluna, Cue, Sandstone and Mt Magnet. The

town also hosts a range of other government services including a 28 bed hospital, a 13 officer police station, and a District High School. Given its geographical position within the State, Meekatharra also serves as a base of operations for the Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS)¹⁸ and a School of the Air¹⁹ which services children on more remote pastoral stations. The town boasts a range of other social and retail services (Plate 2.2) as well as a variety of sporting and recreational facilities.



Plate 2.2 Meekatharra Main Street

(Photo: Sarah Prout 2004)

2.2.3.1 Rural Decline

The vast range of services and facilities available in Meekatharra masks the underlying process of rural decline that has affected the town. Rationalisation and technological change in mining operations and the downturn in the pastoral industry in the wider region have facilitated an out-migration of the town's service population. Although the town has historically endured the economic, social and demographic booms and busts resulting from fluctuating commodity prices, diminishing resource availability, reduced mineral exploration, and the introduction

¹⁸ Meekatharra is one of only five RFDS bases in Western Australia.

¹⁹ The Meekatharra School of the Air is one of only five in Western Australia

of fly-in fly-out mining operations in more recent years has seen Meekatharra's non-Aboriginal population decline significantly:

In 1994, '91, '92, up to that period there, '94, we probably had 2000 odd people living in town. And now we're down to about 800 ... the mining company - St Barbara's - has just shut or closed down temporarily at the moment. I think at one stage, they had about 56 houses in town. So they've got rid of a lot of those. So hence probably looking at going down the fly-in fly-out path again which kills the little towns like us ... See, one of the original blokes that had the mine down here, they - because it was so close to town, they built all the houses and put them in there and that was good. But Plutonic [gold mine] which is only 180km up the road, and that's got an 800 man camp, but that's all fly-in fly-out. It's just too far away to use us as a -. If that was probably 100 mile closer, we'd probably be singing along here because we'd have a lot more (Tom Hutchison, 4 September 2004).

In 2001, Meekatharra's population was approximately 962 (ABS, 2002a). However, local residents explained during fieldwork that, in 2002, operations at the Bluebird mine (located approximately 15km south-west of Meekatharra), were reduced to a repair and maintenance scheme. Prior to that decision, 300 mine employees and their families had been living in Meekatharra. By 2004, only three remained. Although the exact population of the town was not known at the time of fieldwork, the significant out-flux of the non-Indigenous population after the 2001 Census suggest that it was certainly well below 948. Tonts (2000 p. 52) described how rural depopulation, a classic symptom of decline, results in the contraction of the local economy, rising unemployment, breakdown of social institutions and networks, and withdrawal of services. Meekatharra has experienced each of these processes.

Many of the social services available in the town struggle to be maintained. The hospital is not equipped to take any emergency cases and is not staffed by a permanent doctor, although the Royal Flying Doctors provide their services when possible. The District High School has limited facilities and is constantly under siege for the standard of education it delivers. There are significant difficulties in attracting and maintaining professional staff to many of the government service agencies in the town (Prout, 2003). In the last two years, five of the 16 Main Street businesses have closed their doors (although one has subsequently re-opened) and more are considering closing. One interviewee described the process of rural decline taking place in Meekatharra with sobering clarity:

I've worked in isolated and I suppose poor socio-economic areas for a number of years so it just firms the perspective that in fact the reduction in services to rural settings, reduction in skills in the bush so to speak, relocation or centralising of jobs and employment to cities, just creates a further impact. Along with the loss of people there's a reduction in stimulation and challenges in the community. So you see a loss of - it started with the move towards fly-in fly-out mining so that the people who were once involved in the town were no longer involved ... so all the sporting bodies, all the creativity, the stimulation, the activity ground to a halt. Along with that the businesses wind down, so in fact if you go into Lloyds [local supermarket / department store which has since closed down] now there is not this same degree of reading matter that was there say 12 months ago. So things like you'll only see absolute mainstream magazines, so you won't see things like The Bulletin and Time and Newsweek and New Scientist and things that may have created further information and further stimulation ... there's a downgrade in the amount and types of food, which means that people fall into a I suppose just a continuing rut: they eat the same stuff, they don't try new things. So there's actually a significant reduction in the way people live their lives. It becomes an existence rather than an activity. And you know, there's further effects of reduction in socio-economic index, further unemployment which is a downward spiral into continuing poverty and along with that can increase the drinking and drug taking behaviours, you can see an increase in family neglect and an increase in developmental delay and desensitising of children (Murchison Health Director, 23 July 2004).

Social networks and institutions, which Jones and Tonts (1995) and Alston (2002) have suggested are central to rural social sustainability, have diminished significantly in Meekatharra. Social decline is perhaps most evident in the break-down of recreational and sporting activities (Tonts and Atherley, 2005). In years past, local sports teams (cricket, football, netball, basketball, indoor cricket, darts etc) were thriving. Today, no local sporting teams exist and many of these recreational facilities are under-utilised if not abandoned²⁰. Similarly, the outdoor picture garden, which used to be a central social attraction in the town, now only shows movies sporadically. Auntie Mavis Curley reflects upon the diminished social networks and institutions within the town:

... and there was a time when everyone was friendly and they got on with everybody and joined things, made the clubs work, you know like the Lions Club and then the Rotary and everything else. There was enough of them looking for a social life and there was people in town who were looking for something to do. So they got on well. When that mining company moves on. All those people I think - the people that are left here

²⁰ Plates 2.3-2.6 show some of the town's variously utilised sporting facilities.