

The Story of Yagan

Yagan was born around 1795, the son of respected Aboriginal elder Midgereroo of the Nyoongah people who lived in the South West region of Western Australia.

In 1829, when Captain Stirling established the Swan River Colony, Yagan was probably in his thirties with a wife and two children.

In the early days of the settlement, Yagan was friendly with a number of the settlers. However, in 1830, misunderstandings and tensions arose between the Nyoongah people and the new pioneers.

An incident concerning the shooting and death of a young Aboriginal boy who had entered a homestead near Melville caused a serious rift between the settlers and the local Aboriginal community. Under Aboriginal law the boy's death had to be avenged.

Yagan, family and friends entered the homestead and speared a servant who had been working in the house.

Further tragic and retaliatory events occurred. Finally Yagan and two friends were caught and sentenced to an indefinite period of time on Carnac Island, a small limestone outcrop just south of Fremantle. Yagan escaped from prison and spent many months avoiding recapture.

On 11 July 1833 two teenage brothers named William and James Keats discovered Yagan and his brothers and suggested that they join them in hunting kangaroo. When the Keats pair found an opportunity Yagan and his brothers were shot and killed. Yagan's head was removed and placed in the wedge of a smoking tree in order to preserve it.

The head was eventually taken to England and was on display at the Royal Institute in Liverpool until 1964 when it was eventually buried in Everton cemetery.

In 1990 a request by the Western Australian Nyoongah community was put to the British Government to exhume the head. Permission was finally granted.

164 years after it was sent to England Yagan's head was brought back to Australia for burial according to Nyoongah custom.

However due to the uncertainty of the whereabouts of the rest of the body, burial has not yet taken place.

Yagan was considered a warrior by his people.