

Tale of Two Dernancourts

Adelaide has a suburb called Dernancourt. It's named for a French village in an association that dates back over 100 years.

In Australia, common pronunciation sounds the 't'. In the French language, unless the last consonant is followed by a vowel, that is not the case; so it is enunciated 'der-nan-kore'.

The story of how it came to be is a fascinating one and VWMA founder Steve Larkins was given the honour of explaining it at a commemoration ceremony to mark the opening of a Memorial in Adelaide's Linear Park in the suburb of Dernancourt Wednesday 31 August, by Her Excellency Governor, the Hon Frances Adamson AC.



Fig 1. The Memorial Plinth on the busy Linear Park cycle and walkway



Fig 2. Steve Larkins, OAM, outlines the history to the association between the 'two Dernancourts'.



Fig 3 L-R Representing the French Consulate, Mr Arnaud Bernassy, Ms Christine Rothauser; HE The Governor, The Hon Frances Adamson AC, and host on the day, Deputy Mayor of the City of Tea Tree Gully, Mr Lucas Jones

The French village was the site of a major battle in WW1 that lasted from the 28th March to the 5th April 1918, where two Australian Brigades (the 12th and 13th) halted three plus German Divisions (odds of 5:1 against) intent on reaching Amiens. The German Offensive was stopped and the Allied positions held but at great cost - over 1200 casualties - nearly half the force.

One of the casualties was a lawyer from Renmark, SA, named Harold Mitchell, killed by a sniper on the eve of the battle. He left behind a wife and two daughters; one of whom, four year old Roma, would go on to become a future Governor of South Australia.

<https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/92921>

After the war, an organisation called 'The League of Help' formed in the UK, advancing the idea of British and Commonwealth towns 'adopting' a French village, and in the vernacular of the movement, to confer assistance " *in the same manner as a godparent would for a 'godchild'*."

Taken up famously in Australia by Melbourne (Villers Bretonneux), in South Australia, it had a very influential and determined advocate in a remarkable lady. Ms Berth Mouchette, a Frenchwoman and widow, had lived in Australia for 40 years. Among other things, she was the Founder of Alliance Francaise in Australia. Having lived in Adelaide, and Melbourne before that, she and her sister Marie Lion were well-connected and were key 'movers and shakers' behind the appeal in Adelaide.

Dernancourt was one of over 400 villages in France obliterated during the four years of war and because of a strong association with SA through the involvement of the 48th, 50th and 52nd Battalions, Dernancourt was duly 'adopted' and became Adelaide's 'godchild'. Over the period 1921-23, money and goods were collected to replace household necessities and even farm implements that had been destroyed in war.

On her way to France, Berthe Mouchette met Dame Nellie Melba, the famous opera singer, who joined the ship after a concert tour of South Africa. She raised an additional one hundred pounds for Berthe's appeal through a shipboard concert.



Fig 4. The children of Dernancourt parade through an arch expressing thanks to the City of Adelaide in 1923

In the years that followed, the Great Depression and WW2 obscured memories of the connection but thanks to the endeavours of a lot of people but most particularly one-time Mayor and Chair of the Dernancourt Centenaire, Lionel Lamotte. Lionel has been fostering the connection and welcoming Australians to Dernancourt for nearly 30 years, so the connection between the two Dernancourts has been re-kindled.

Soil from the Dernancourt battlefield was collected at a ceremony on 4 July and placed in a steel cylinder and shipped to Australia.

The ceremony in France was attended by another person intrinsic in re-kindling this story; former Adelaide Lord Mayor, Jane Lomax-Smith. In London on a visit, she took the Eurostar over to France and attended the Dernancourt ceremony on July 4th.

On Wednesday 31st August it was interred in the Memorial plinth in the Linear Park.



Fig 5. The steel cylinder containing soil from the Dernancourt battlefield is installed in the Memorial prior to being sealed in place. Former Army colleagues Steve Larkins OAM, and Senator Andrew McLachlan, CSC, check that it is so.

It is worth noting that almost three weeks after the battle at Dernancourt, another key and more famous action was fought at Villers Bretonneux, where two Australian Brigades were thrown into a night counter-attack that recaptured the town and halted a last gasp German attempt to break through to Amiens on the southern side of the Somme River.

Almost always overlooked is the fact that one of the Brigades that fought at Dernancourt, the 13th Brigade (including the SA-originated 50th and 52nd Battalions), got to do it all again on the eve of Anzac Day 1918 - and suffered accordingly - again. As a colleague once observed; *"there is a lot of Australian DNA in the soil around here"*.