State Heritage Areas
of South Australia

former Unicorn Brewery Cellars and Wall
Bridge Terrace, Burra
SAHR 10005 –confirmed as a State Heritage Place 24 July 1980
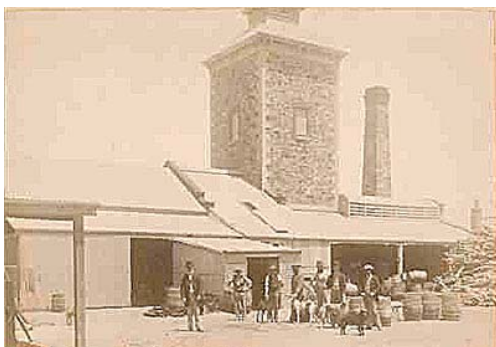
The manager's residence, storeroom, underground cellars and the walls of a brewery block are all that now remain of Burra's Unicorn Brewery that, between 1873 and 1902, supplied beer to Broken Hill and a quarter of South Australia.

It is the cellar and the boundary wall that are specifically entered in the South Australian Heritage Register, but it is all of the Brewery's 30-year history that highlights their significance.

In 1873 the erection of a new brewery in Burra probably seemed a risky venture. Although the Burra Mine was still working, the number of miners employed there had dropped from 1 000 in the early 1860s to less than 300, and the town's

Entrance to Unicorn Brewery, 2005

population had fallen to 3 000, with more mining families leaving each week. There were still nine hotels open in the townships, but these were supplied by another, long-established brewery in Burra.

Unicorn Brewery, Paxton Terrace, Burra 1890
Photo B 10380: State Library of SA

Quite probably though the new brewer, William Banks, and his financial backers were counting on the expansion, beyond Burra, of the Northern Railway. (In 1878 it extended to Hallett, in 1880 to Terowie and in 1887 to Cockburn near Broken Hill.) The arrival of the line to Burra (in 1870) had made the delivery of barley and the brewery's machinery much easier, and enabled cheaper transport of bottled and casked beer.

Another factor that contributed to the new brewery's success was the opening up of the northern areas for agriculture in 1872. Each new township soon had a hotel, and so a market for the brewery's products was assured.

The Unicorn Brewery's machinery, and the extensive cellars that held 500 hogsheads, was far superior to their rivals, and by 1875 Unicorn was the sole brewery in Burra.

When the Burra Burra Mine closed in 1877 the loss of trade in Burra was soon counter-balanced by the unexpected opening of the Silverton and Broken Hill mines. From 1880 until 1902, thirsty Broken Hill miners drank mostly Unicorn Ale.

Following Banks death in 1878, the Unicorn was taken over by an Adelaide Company, and run by the Lockyer family until its closure in 1902, following legislation to control individual breweries.

A Commonwealth Act that came into force on 1 January 1902, stated that "*No person shall make beer unless licensed to do so.*" The new regulations were so stringent, and the required paperwork so involved, that only the larger breweries could afford to comply.

Brewery wall and entrance, 2005

The sale of the brewery buildings and machinery proved difficult, and for many years the complex remained deserted.

In 1911 the South Australian Education Department acquired a portion of the property for a school residence and used some of the brewery stone for its construction.

In 1913 the massive malthouse tower was dismantled and stone used to build the row of three cottages now on the site. The offices were converted to a residence, while the cellars and storeroom remained intact, but largely forgotten.

Cellar vents and school residence, 2005

In the early 1970s the underground cellars were 're-discovered' and opened to the public. In 1987 the cellars were acquired by the local council, restored and re-opened in 1989.

The cellars are a unique design. They are 5 metres wide and approximately 600 metres in total length, and have been tunnelled to form an underground square, the centre of which has been subdivided. The stone vaults are arched, with earth flooring remaining in five main cellar runs.

An interesting item is the cold room, which is a basement at the level of the cellars.

Massive timber beams support the flooring of the storeroom at ground level.

Underground tunnel, 2005