Changing Relationships between Colonists and Aboriginal People

In 1832 Joseph Hardey wrote “We have already see the wilderness become a fruitful field...” (Johnston, p 19)

This “wilderness” had provided food, shelter and spiritual sustenance for Aboriginal Australians for 40,000 years. From 1829 the land was claimed by the Crown (the British government) and was approached from the point of view of the European colonist. It was a resource to be exploited commercially to create material wealth. The new arrivals came with attitudes about Indigenous peoples – many seeing them as inferior “savages” who had not made the land “fruitful” and therefore had no claim to its bounty. The new settlers did not see any positive attributes held by Aboriginal people and did not wish to learn about their lives. They used their own values and biases to judge the Aboriginal people. The land was believed to be “terra nullius”, land belonging to nobody, which enabled the British to claim it for their government.

A few Europeans learnt Aboriginal languages to facilitate communication, including Francis Armstrong, Louis Giustiniani, Bishop Salvado and a handful of other colonists and priests. Even Joseph Hardey from Peninsula Farm had notebooks containing translations of Aboriginal words. Early positive interaction was aimed at converting Aboriginal people to Christianity or ‘civilising’ them to become servants or work for the settlers. Methodist and Roman Catholic missionaries established schools for Aboriginal children. The Methodist Francis Armstrong supported by Joseph and John Wall Hardey and others conducted lessons for Aboriginal children in a small school near Mt Eliza and later at Guildford.

Early cooperation between the colonists and Aboriginal people occurred in the form of:

- Trackers assisting Colonial exploration parties
- Aboriginal assistance to find lost European children
- Aboriginal mail carriers during the 1830s to 1850s, especially in the Bunbury and Vasse region
- Domestic servants
- Aboriginal farm labourers assisting with ring barking trees, burning off, collecting tree roots, fencing and locating lost stock.
- Assisting with water and bush tucker.

However, due to the expansion of European settlement, diverging values over land and the attitudes of colonists during the 1830s, conflict brewed.
An attitude of fear among the settlers is clearly expressed in this extract from Neville Green’s book, *Broken Spears*:

“The settlers’ response to the Aborigines reflected a personal set of cultural values. Consider the obvious anxiety of the genteel girl far from her native England who wrote, ‘I feel distressed at the idea of living amongst such a people; so low, so degraded a race’.

*In common with many men and women of her times, she was inclined to measure a person’s worth by his lands; his possessions; and by his degree of conformity to English Middle Class (ideas) of acceptable social behaviour. When measured in these cultural scales, the Australian Aborigines were found lacking. Similarly the Europeans ranked poorly on the Noongar scale of values which included extended family relationships and respect for the knowledge of elders in contrast to the youthful nuclear family structure of the immigrants. They assessed the individual by the qualities that benefited the group rather than the possessions that enhanced the status of the individual...And there were the differing views of land ownership!”* (Green, pp 53 – 54)

By the end of the first five years of settlement Noongar life had been greatly changed. The loss of kangaroos, yams and bush tucker as well as fencing of ceremonial lands meant cooperation between the races had dwindled.

A significant event which brought tensions to a head occurred in Pinjarra in 1834. It is one of many clashes between Aboriginal people and the new settlers that occurred across the colony. Pinjarra showed Stirling’s concessions had ended and fear became a way of life for many rural settlers. It is a significant event in the history of the settlement of the Swan River Colony and variously referred to as either a ‘Battle’ or a ‘Massacre’ depending on the perspective.