Early settlers of the Anglesea River (and Aireys Inlet) noted the Wathaurong people before the start of European settlement (Wynd and Weber). It was surveyor Charles Grimes who first traversed the area by boat and foot in 1803, producing a map showing lands from Queenscliff to Louttit Bay at Lorne.

But it was not until 1835 that settlers established permanency on Melbourne’s Yarra River and the Bellarine Peninsula at Indented Head. This resulted in a spread of European settlement within Victoria, mostly by squatters through Geelong and along the Barwon River. To reclaim runs from squatters in the 1840s, the Barrabool Shire was surveyed and divided into eight parishes. Lands east of Swampy Creek (prior to being named Anglesea River) were declared as the parish of Jan Juc and land to the west the parish of Angahook. For a short time these lands developed independently, and the parishes were divided into farming blocks and sold, with squatters at that time forced to buy or move on.

The raw remoteness of Anglesea limited development during the late 1800s. The earliest settler was John Airey who moved to Roadknight and Aireys Inlet in 1839. This area was more remote than Swampy Creek as access along the coast at the time involved crossing the “treacherous quick sand” at the river mouth, an indication the river was likely closed more often than not. Later tracks were put in toward Aireys from the north around the Colac area. The first arrival in Anglesea was Michael Fallon who occupied land east of the Swampy Creek (noted on plans in 1845).

After 1890 things began to rapidly change. Swampy Creek became Anglesea River in 1884 and the Shire of Barrabool gazetted Anglesea a town the following year. People had land along Camp Road at this time. Then between 1894 and 1890 blocks of land were sold as part of the Gladstone Estate on the western side of the hill (20 one-acre blocks for between 5 and 10 pounds). Access to the estate involved the river crossing near the mouth because there was still no bridge. This changed between 1889-91 in a somewhat tenuous and lengthy cooperative effort between government and the shires of Winchelsea (Gladstone) and Barrabool (Anglesea). They built a bridge at a cost of 500 pounds.

After a few years of petitioning and community pressure, the bridge construction brought about new growth and a new era for residents. Tourism put Anglesea on the map with either fishing, boating or camping regularly promoted through newspapers. The current bridge was built in 1968.
Conditions were still very difficult for settlers. The road conditions were a constant cause for complaint and wild fire caused havoc. The first mention of fires in the area was 1843, with bushfires in February 1851, and the major ‘Black Saturday’ fire of 1891. More fires in 1893 and 1898 destroyed many early buildings and residences in Anglesea. The fire of 1983 had the biggest impact on the landscape since settlement, re-shaping the estuary during the creation of the Coogoorrah Park channel system to extinguish smouldering peat.

People had drilled coal in the Otway ranges for many years and in 1895 farmer William Box found a significant coal seam at Benwerrin. This was the start of the first large-scale coal extraction project in the Anglesea area. A mine was opened in 1895 and a bullock team transported coal to Deans Marsh railway station. But the mine closed in 1905 after a dispute over land and a tramway. Mining then ceased until the Roche Brothers opened a mine in the 1950s, close to today’s open cut for Alcoa. Alcoa began a 50-year lease in 1961, supplying power to the Point Henry Aluminium Smelter later that decade. The open cut operation continues today with a lease extension granted in 2011 until 2061. The mine is an imposing landscape feature and its impact has been vast. Changes to air quality and the volume of water within the river due to a daily discharge of groundwater used in Alcoa’s cooling process have been significant.

A long running community event began in December 1910 when residents of Anglesea challenged Aireys Inlet to a series of physical tests. After 100 years the gathering still occurs with a New Years regatta on the lower estuary. The initial challenge consisted of a head of the river rowing race, swimming race, golf championship, tennis championship and beer chewing championship.

After the First World War soldiers were employed to construct the Great Ocean Road. Anglesea became the gateway to a major tourist attraction, marking a significant point in the town’s history. The official opening of the road in 1932 was a landmark day for Anglesea’s development and the entire west coast. Anglesea’s holiday and scout camps, such as Eumeralla, flourished as all-year destinations for school and church groups, and summer holiday makers on their regular seasonal pilgrimages.

The great fires of Ash Wednesday in 1983 were a seminal moment in the area’s history, reducing much of the coast to barren wasteland and devastating many towns, including part of Anglesea.

The rapid regeneration of the area’s vegetation, coupled with the resilience of its people has helped reinforce Anglesea’s identity and the town’s sense of community.

Looking upstream during the 1920s, the tussock grasses dominate the river banks.

The Surf Coast Shire has planned for the future of Anglesea with the Anglesea Structure Plan. Together with the Anglesea Riverbank Masterplan, these provide a very detailed plan for the sustained growth and development of the town. In 2006 the town’s permanent population was 2292 people (ABS, 2006), but in peak holiday periods the population increases to over 16,000 people (SCS structure plan 2012). Available land limits future growth, but this should help preserve the iconic bush-meets-sea image of Anglesea in the future. The river will continue to be a central place for the community and a focus of activity.