
BESSIEBELLE SHEEPYARDS AND WASH

Location

PYES ROAD BESSIEBELLE, MOYNE SHIRE

Municipality

MOYNE SHIRE

Level of significance

Heritage Inventory Site

Heritage Inventory (HI) Number

H7221-0281

Heritage Overlay Numbers

HO38

Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Inventory

Statement of Significance

Last updated on - September 7, 2005

What is significant?

The Bessiebelles sheepwashes and yards complex is located on the former 14,000 acre Ardonachie Run, established in 1848 by pastoralist Samuel Gorrie, then carrying 6,000 sheep. In 1864 this run was subdivided into smaller runs, and the sheep washes were located within Mount Eccles and Lake Gorrie Run. The date of construction of the washes and walls is not known, although they were probably constructed within the period 1848-1864.

The Bessiebelles landscape is on the southern edge of a rock-strewn lava flow punctured with large natural depressions. Until the region was drained in the 1880s, the water table was high enough for the depressions to be regularly filled with water. The two sheep washes, identified as north and south, both utilized the natural terrain, complemented by the construction of massive drystone wall races, and a network of pre and post washing yards. The large and sophisticated network of races and yards are skilfully constructed of field stone. The races, which are highly intact, are in some places more than two metres thick. Drystone wall sheep yards also existed south of the washes until the 1950s, when they were demolished for road metal. In the north-east

corner of the site, a complex of impressive dry stone walls, with battered profiles up to two metres in height, also survive mostly intact. Their function is not known, but they were possibly folding yards.

The custom in Britain of washing wool on the sheep's back prior to shearing was centuries old and was brought to Australia. Many creeks, streams and crossing places in Victoria bear the name Sheepwash Creek or similar. It was the practice to wash the sheep in a pool of water or a river, in which men were placed, often in barrels or tubs, to rub and squeeze the wool in order to remove gritty materials, mud and droppings, which would not only deteriorate the quality of the wool, but would also blunt the edge of the shears. Additionally, by the 1820s London manufacturers were demanding growers wash their sheep to rid fleeces of their contaminants, and this prompted several developments, from the use of spouts to obtain a high pressure jet of water onto the sheep's back, to sophisticated hot water washes with boilers, of which a number of examples survive in Victoria. No evidence of hot water technology has been identified at Bessie Belle.

Freight costs on greasy wool were also significantly higher than washed fleeces and so scourers also appeared on Victorian pastoral properties, circumventing some of the labour intensive washing process. Hot water was the only means of dissolving the grease, and this practice continued until the 1880s, when technological advances in dyeing processes meant that woollen manufacturers preferred to receive the wool in grease. Sheep washes were labour intensive. In the 1840s, up to 35 men were employed at Bontharambo washing and shearing, and a similar number were employed at the hot water wash at Glen Isla station in the 1880s.

How is it significant?

The Bessie Belle sheep washes and yards are of historical, landscape and archaeological significance to the State of Victoria.

Why is it significant?

The Bessie Belle sheep washes and yards are probably the largest and most sophisticated surviving example of a traditional pastoral property sheepwash in Victoria. They clearly demonstrate the large network of races, yards and folds necessary for washing thousands of sheep over a short period of time. The Bessie Belle sheep washes apparently predate later technological changes and the necessity for hot water washing.

The Bessie Belle sheep washes and yards are of landscape significance as a cultural landscape which has been both modified by, and cleverly adapted to, an annual process that was of critical importance within the pastoral calendar. The drystone walls and races appear to evolve from the rocky terrain, and have a strong organic affinity with the prevailing harsh landscape. The drystone walls demonstrate a high level of craftsmanship and skill in their construction, and reflect the extensive scale of pastoral operations across the landscape.

The Bessie Belle sheep washes and yards are of archaeological significance to the State of Victoria. The site has not been fully surveyed but its complexity strongly suggests a potential to reveal more about the washing processes and associated pastoral occupation and activity in the area.

[Source: Victorian Heritage Register]

Hermes Number 6698

Property Number

This place/object may be included in the Victorian Heritage Register pursuant to the Heritage Act 2017. Check the Victorian Heritage Database, selecting 'Heritage Victoria' as the place source.

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