
GEM PIER, CUSTOMS LANDING AND BLUESTONE SECTION

Location

SYME STREET WILLIAMSTOWN, HOBSONS BAY CITY

Municipality

HOBSONS BAY CITY

Level of significance

Heritage Inventory Site

Heritage Inventory (HI) Number

H7822-0383

Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Inventory

Summary of Assessment

In 2003, stage one of Heritage Victoria's Maritime Infrastructure Assessment Project identified remnant piles and a bluestone mound approximately three metres wide in the vicinity of the Gem Pier, Williamstown. The present pier was constructed in 1992, but is known to have replaced earlier structures, the first of which was a stone jetty, built in 1839, using convict labour. It was thought probable that the bluestone mound might represent archaeological remains of the 1839 jetty and that further remains of this jetty might lie under the road approach to the pier. These would be highly significant as evidence of the first government-built jetty in Victoria at the time of permanent non-indigenous settlement.

Interpretation of Site Archival research indicated that the jetty had been extended in 1849 and rebuilt in 1886, 1928 and 1992. It had been variously known as the jetty, the old jetty or old pier, Steamboat Pier and Gem Pier. The evidence of nineteenth century maps suggested that the site of the existing pier is not the same as that of original stone jetty. Potential remains of the original jetty might lie elsewhere under Commonwealth Reserve, Nelson Place Williamstown. This area was reclaimed in 1880-1881 by the Melbourne Harbour Trust. Commonwealth Reserve is covered by the City of Hobson's Bay's Heritage Overlay number HO21 (Nelson Place Precinct). An Executive Director's Meeting held at Heritage Victoria on 27 April 2009 decided that there was insufficient evidence to register the current site of Gem Pier as a site of significance to Victoria. It is possible that the bluestone mound identified in the MIAP Stage One survey is evidence of either steps shown in this position next to the pier in a photograph taken circa 1906 or remnants of a retaining wall constructed by the Melbourne Harbour Trust when it reclaimed land between Ann St Pier and Gem Pier in the 1920s.

Other Names STEAMBOAT PIER, OLD PIER, GEM PIER, GEM PIER BLUESTONE JETTY, GEM PIER CUSTOMS LANDING PILES, KANGAROO PIER,

Hermes Number 13923

Property Number

History

Contextual History

The first non-indigenous settlers in the Port Phillip Bay district arrived by sea in 1835. John Batman, exploring the district on behalf of his Port Phillip Association, anchored off what later became known as Point Gellibrand in 1835 and explored the Maribyrnong and Yarra Rivers. John Pascoe Fawkner's group, in the *Enterprise*, on the other hand, followed the Yarra River all the way up to the Falls (present day site of Immigration Museum) and tethered their boat to a few tree trunks that they felled and fixed in the river. The settlement on the Yarra River became the nucleus of Melbourne. Reports of the fine country here soon attracted many other adventurers from Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) and some overlanders from New South Wales. The sea provided a much more speedy and easy route to the Port Phillip District than the overland route so most new arrivals travelled by ship or boat.

For larger ships, the waters off Point Gellibrand (or Gellibrand's Point) offered the safest anchorage. The water here was deep, while the promontory at Point Gellibrand sheltered the beach. From 1835, stock was swum ashore at Point Gellibrand, while passengers often landed at or near the current site of Gem Pier.

The Port Phillip District's first government representative, Police Magistrate William Lonsdale, arrived in the settlement in 1836 aboard the *Rattlesnake*. The Captain of the *Rattlesnake*, William Hobson, then stayed on to

survey Port Phillip Bay. Though he acknowledged that the major settlement was on the Yarra, Hobson thought that Point Gellibrand offered the best site in the Port Phillip District for placing jetties and wharves. (*Historical Records of Victoria* Vol.4, p.6). When New South Wales Governor Bourke visited the district in 1837, he gave Williamstown its name and ordered Government surveyor Robert Hoddle to lay out streets and quays here (*Historical Records of Victoria*, Vol 1, p. 101). The first Government-built jetty in Port Phillip Bay was constructed here in early 1839. By the next year, when a timber oil-burning light had been erected as an early lighthouse at Point Gellibrand, a Port Phillip Harbour Master was stationed at Williamstown.

Williamstown functioned as a 'transfer' station for immigrants and other passengers arriving in Hobsons Bay. This was not only because it was located close to the deep water anchorage. The depth of the Yarra River prevented larger vessels from navigating upstream to the main settlement at Melbourne. Passengers transferred at Williamstown into smaller vessels which plied up the Yarra to Melbourne or across Hobsons Bay to Sandridge (Port Melbourne) which was a mere two miles' walk to the settlement at Melbourne. Ferryman offered their service to row between Sandridge and Williamstown and, in 1838, the first steamer ferry began operation. With the construction of Railway Pier at Port Melbourne, a regular ferry service in the *Comet* was established between that pier and Williamstown. This was superseded by the *Gem* which operated between Williamstown and Port Melbourne from 1868 to 1908.

The Victorian gold rushes of the 1850s placed intense pressure on the port of Melbourne, not only because of the thousands of immigrants who arrived in Port Phillip Bay, but also because of the increased flow of imported goods into the colony. A Select Committee on the Harbours of Melbourne and Geelong recommended that wharves and a breakwater be constructed at Williamstown. The Government constructed Ann Street pier in 1854 and began work on Breakwater Pier in 1859. The Melbourne, Mount Alexander and Murray River Railway Company constructed Railway (later Gellibrand) Pier between 1854 and 1859. In the same decade the Sandridge Town Pier and Railway Piers also increased accommodation for vessels in Hobsons Bay. The Port Melbourne piers gradually became the major disembarkation and embarkation point for overseas passengers. The construction of the Coode Canal and Victoria Dock on the Yarra in the 1880s and 1890s enabled most inward cargo to the Port of Melbourne to be unloaded close to the city. The

Railway and Breakwater piers at Williamstown, however, remained in use for the despatch of rural exports such as wheat and wool.

History of Place

Members of John Batman's Port Phillip Association landed their stock at what was then called Gellibrand's Point in November 1836 (Lack and Ford, p.8) The foreshore at what was later called Williamstown was sheltered by the promontory of Point Gellibrand. In addition it was located close to deep anchorages in what would become known as Hobsons Bay. In 1837, Governor Bourke ordered that quays be laid out at Williamstown.

Under the direction of Robert Russell, convict labourers erected a jetty at Williamstown in January and February 1839. (*Historical Records of Victoria*, Vol. 3, pp 281 -282) On February 23, 1839, William Lonsdale, Police Superintendent for the Port Phillip District, reported that the jetty was 'made entirely of stone'. It was 110 feet [33.5 metres] long and varied in breadth from 12 to 20 feet [3.6 to 6 metres]. It was 6 feet 9 inches [2 metres] high at its outermost point which Lonsdale felt would be 'quite sufficient depth for all purposes of landing by boat' (*Historical Records of Victoria*, Vol. 3. p.213) One immigrant who arrived in Port Phillip later that year described the jetty as being formed of 'huge stones piled loosely together' ('A Resident', 1996, p. 6).

Tenders were called in March and July of 1849 for parties to extend the Williamstown jetty with stone (*Port Phillip Government Gazette*, 1849, pp 223 and 542). However, later in that year, David Lennox, the Superintendent of Bridges, called for tenders for piles and planking for the jetty (*Port Phillip Government Gazette*, 1849, pp 840 and 942). No evidence has been found to suggest whether the stone section of the jetty was demolished as the pier was extended with timber. A visitor arriving in Port Phillip Bay in 1853 described it as a 'rickety pier, which rocked enough to make an inlander sea-sick' (Kelly, p. 29).

In 1854, there were further additions made to the jetty. By now, with the Ann St Pier under construction, the jetty was labelled the 'old jetty' (VPRS 957/p0 Unit 1, p.981). The jetty was widened in 1859 (VPRS 979/p0 Unit1). In 1872 the water around what was now called 'Old Town Pier' was deepened, presumably to allow for vessels of greater draught to approach the pier. (VPRS 979/p0 Unit 27)

After Port Melbourne Railway Pier was completed in 1854, there was a regular steamer service between Port Melbourne and Williamstown. The *Gem* provided this service for forty years from 1868 to 1908 (Elsum, p 34).

Customs boats and water police also used the pier. A bluestone morgue (VHR 1512) was built near the pier in 1859, but relocated to its present site in 1873. Williamstown's second Customs House and Sea Pilots headquarters (H0984) was built nearby in 1873-1874.

The Melbourne Harbor Trust assumed responsibility for the pier when it was constituted in 1877. In 1879 the Williamstown Council requested the Trust to reclaim the portion of the foreshore between Steamboat Pier and White's Slip [Gem Pier is labelled as

Williamstown Steamboat Pier on Sir John Coode's 1879 plan] (MHT Commissioners' Report 1879, pp 22-23). The land was reclaimed by 1884 (MHT Commissioners' Report 1884, p. 24). Prior to this, there had been a narrow foreshore between Nelson Place and the high water mark on what is now Commonwealth Reserve.

In the 1880s, the pier seems to have been sometimes referred to as Gem Pier and sometimes as Steamboat Pier. An 1884 report of the MHT Commissioners calls it Gem Pier, but in 1886, the Trust reported that Steamboat Pier was 'removed and lengthened 100 feet at a cost of nearly £2000'(MHT Commissioners' Report 1886, p. 17). A dredge deepened the berths at the reconstructed pier. The Harbour Trust demolished and reconstructed the pier in 1928 (MHT Commissioners' Report 1928, p 31). Though it reported at this time that 'the old structure was in existence when the Trust was first constituted in 1876', photographic evidence suggests that the pier circa 1870s is not the same pier as that pictured circa 1906. The 1928 timber pier included stairs and Customs landings and the Trust built a road approach (now Syme Street) to the pier.

The pier was rebuilt again in 1992 and lengthened in 2003. Ferries and tour boats depart from Gem Pier. The museum ship HMAS *Castlemaine*, which was built at the nearby Naval Dockyards during World War II, is tied up at the pier.

Sources

Public Works Department, Yearly Abstract of Costs and Register of Works and Buildings, PROV, VPRS 957/p0 Unit 1

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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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