

ELLERSLIE BRIDGE



ELLERSLIE BRIDGE SOHE
2008



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1 ellerslie bridge over hopkins
river ellerslie side elevation



H1029 ellerslie bridge plan

Location

OVER HOPKINS RIVER, HOPKINS HIGHWAY ELLERSLIE, MOYNE SHIRE

Municipality

MOYNE SHIRE

Level of significance

Registered

Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

H1029

Heritage Overlay Numbers

HO3

VHR Registration

August 4, 1994

Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Register

Statement of Significance

Last updated on - September 3, 1999

What is Significant?

The Ellerslie Bridge is a large disused timber and masonry bridge over the Hopkins River beside the Hopkins Highway at Ellerslie. It was built in 1867 at the crossing place then known as Letts Ford. It was designed by noted architect, Andrew Kerr, and constructed under the supervision of carpenter-mason, J A Stone. Although it underwent major renovation around 1900, much of the original carpentry detail appears to have been faithfully reproduced. It has eight timber spans with squared beams secured by iron straps; rare tapered corbels; round-ended walers and crossheads; and unique moulded handrails. In addition to the masonry, some timber members of the substructure may be original. Remarkably, the whole structure is square and without major sags or intrusive additions such as mid-span props or steel relieving beams. Apart from the deck and side railings, is in reasonably sound condition. It is attractively set at the end of a former Avenue of Honour of cypress trees, and amongst mature eucalypts. It is an informal picnic site for travellers.

How is it Significant?

Ellerslie Bridge is of historical, scientific (technical), and aesthetic significance to Victoria.

Why is it Significant?

It is of historical significance for its early age, being Victoria's second oldest positively dated timber-beam road bridge, and one of only two surviving timber bridges known to have resisted Victoria's epic floods of 1870. It

expresses the development and consolidation of the Western District road network in the post gold-rush era, and in particular, the importance of the connection between pastoral properties and the port of Warrnambool. It is the largest of a number of composite masonry and timber bridges built in the district, and at its opening was described as the 'handsomest in Western Victoria'. Its association with the remnants of the original timber and stone ford, and a 1967 reinforced concrete bridge, constitutes a complete historical record of a European-era crossing place. It is the end-point of Ellerslie's Avenue of Honour.

It is of scientific (technical) significance as the largest and most original example of an important class of colonial-era composite timber beam and masonry bridges. Its bluestone abutments and curved wing walls are among the finest and most intact examples of masonry in this type of bridge, providing important evidence of colonial bridge building techniques and craftsmanship. The cast-iron insert panels, and thrust blocks to support the original timber struts, are rare features. Built on a slight skew alignment, with a mixture of foundation types, it incorporates the best surviving example of timber trestle piers over rare stone sub-piers. Its timber components incorporate more rare or unique features of 19th century bridge carpentry than any other bridge in Victoria and are remarkable for their fine craftsmanship and general condition. The bridge is exceptionally intact for a timber bridge of its age, in terms of overall design, the unmodified form of basic timber elements, and surviving original or early detailing. It is one of the largest surviving timber beam road bridges in Victoria, being of exceptional overall length, height and number of spans. It is also of exceptional maximum span length, with its 9.8 metre span being the longest known span length amongst surviving examples of unrelieved square timber beams in the typical nineteenth century style.

It is of aesthetic significance as an unusual example of an architect-designed timber bridge, and for such notable features such as the ornamental cast-iron parapet panels. Its bluestone abutments, wing walls and piers are elegant and finely finished. It also contains fine timber features, some of which appear to be unique, such as its tapered corbels, moulded softwood hand-railings, and the rounded ends of the cross-braces and walers. Its attractive setting comprises the remnant natural eucalypt vegetation along the river bank, and the substantial row of cypresses along its disused approaches, originally planted as an Avenue of Honour. It is highly visible and well appreciated from the new highway bridge adjacent.

Permit Exemptions

General Conditions:

1. All exempted plans and alterations are to be carried out in a manner which prevents damage to the fabric of the registered place or object.
2. Should it become apparent during further inspection or the carrying out of alterations that original or previously hidden or inaccessible details of the place or object are revealed which relate to the significance of the place or object, then the exemption covering such alteration shall cease and the Executive Director shall be notified as soon as possible.
3. If there is a conservation policy or plan approved by the Executive Director, all works shall be in accordance with it.
4. Nothing in this declaration prevents the Executive Director from amending or rescinding all or any of the permit exemptions.
5. Nothing in this declaration exempts owners or their agents from the responsibility to seek relevant planning or building permits from the responsible authority where applicable.

Specific Provisions/Exemptions

No permit is required for routine maintenance or minor repairs which replace like with like.

Construction dates 1867,

Heritage Act Categories Registered place,

Hermes Number 4677

Property Number

History

Contextual History:History of Place:

The Bridge and the Western District Road Development

The construction of the Letts Ford (later Ellerslie) bridge (1867) was part of the consolidation and development of the Western District which occurred in the wake of the squatting and gold eras. In the 1860s and 1870s the pastoral and farming pursuits flourished, developing towns were built in bluestone, and the main road networks were established and confirmed by the construction of numerous solid bridges. These bridges serviced the next one hundred years of the Western District's development.

The Hopkins Highway, on which the bridge is located, forms part of a main road between Geelong and Warrnambool. The significance of the Geelong link to the Western District and western ports is clearly evident in the important early bridges which were built over the Moorabool and Barwon Rivers (at Batesford and Fyansford) from the 1840s. At this stage there were two main routes westward from Geelong. The upper route, drier and more favoured in winter, passed through Gheringhap, Bannockburn, Shelford, Skipton and then south-west towards the coast. The lower route, more direct and favoured in summer, was the route of the present Hamilton Highway, passing through Inverleigh, Cressy, Mortlake and on to Hamilton and Portland, or down to Warrnambool and Port Fairy. Thus a crossing place over the Hopkins was established at Letts Ford, apparently by a Thomas Letts, a resident of the district who built the timber and stone ford which still remains on the downstream side of the timber bridge.

The Letts Ford route was not the main one through the district in the 1850s. The other determinants of routes in the locality were the ports of Belfast (Port Fairy) and later Warrnambool. With the discovery of gold these western ports (and Portland) became major landing places for immigrants, many of whom headed north to Ararat and Streatham. A main road developed through Woolsthorpe and Hexham, parallel and to the west of the current Hopkins Highway. Today the oldest surviving bridge in Victoria (a stone arch bridge at Quamby, near Woolsthorpe, built 1856) testifies to the significance of the early transport routes of this region, and the impact of gold.

Gold also stimulated a great demand for agricultural produce, and the development of the rich farming lands around Warrnambool. The fertile soils of the Mount Shadwell area, and the fresh spring water at its base, saw the town of Mortlake take shape there from the early 1850s. Its farmers visited the coastal towns to mill grain and purchase supplies. Farm produce from the coastal belt passed through the budding Mortlake township en route to the goldfields. Soon (in the 1850s), the main coach road from Geelong passed through Mortlake on its way to Warrnambool. As the number of diggers heading through Woolsthorpe and Hexham declined, by the late 1850s Mortlake was quickly overtaking Hexham as the main town in the area. No doubt the much more direct route to Warrnambool through Letts Ford was also becoming more popular than the older route.

During the 1860s and 1870s Mortlake exemplified the town building which characterised this era in the Western District. The outstanding precinct of bluestone church, civic, commercial and private buildings which were built along Shaw Street, Mortlake, testify to its development in this period. The Mortlake Roads Board was formed in 1860 and in 1864 it became the Shire of Mortlake.

From 1864 the new Shire began to agitate for the Warrnambool Shire to help it fund a bridge over the Hopkins River at Letts Ford. Although there would be a benefit to the townspeople and farmers of Mortlake, the area remained largely a sheep-run, with very important pastoral properties such as Merrang, Ballangeich, The Sisters, Mount Fyans, Connewarren, and Keilambete. The necessity of bridges, without which wool could not be got to market, and the fact that lives were constantly lost in attempting to cross flooded streams, was paramount to Victoria's pastoral interests. It was no doubt significant in the ultimate success of the agitation for a bridge at Letts

Ford that in 1865 Mr Charles Stockman, the well-known manager of one of the pastoral stations, was drowned while attempting to cross Letts Ford on horseback. The pastoral interest in the bridge is also evident in the laying of its foundation stone by Captain John Eddington, the owner of the Ballangeich run. It was opened by Sam Macgregor, friend of Neil Black of The Sisters run.

The interest of Warrnambool in the bridge would have been substantial. While the bridge would promote local business from the Mortlake area for its townspeople, its most important benefit would be to the shipping industry. During this period Warrnambool was engaged in a fierce struggle with Portland and Port Fairy for supremacy as a port. Some 5,000 bales per season were being shipped from Warrnambool to Geelong and Melbourne during the late 1860s, a somewhat lesser number than from its rival ports. Warrnambool was outstripping the others in population, however, and dominated the shipment of potatoes (18,000 tons per annum), cheese, tallow and preserved meats in the period. The "development of hinterland roads was a crucial element to its export trade".

By the mid 1860s the current Princes Highway was the main Warrnambool - Geelong road, the initial impediments of the stony rises, forests, lakes and marshes on this route having been overcome. The construction of the bluestone arch bridge at Winchelsea in 1867 was a considerable boost to this route. At the same time, however, the construction of the Letts Ford bridge in 1867 also signifies the major works which were occurring on the alternative route through Mortlake. In 1866, an almost identical bridge, of timber spans with abutments of masonry and cast-iron had been built at Darlington to the east of Mortlake (only the abutments of this bridge survive). In 1865 the Letts Ford road was declared a Main Road. In 1865, and again 1868-71, references to "Main Road Works" "from Darlington to Letts Ford" appeared in Government correspondence and Gazettes.

The government contribution to the cost of the Letts Ford bridge came from a special £50,000 vote by Parliament, in 1865, to assist Shires to build bridges "in special cases, where great engineering difficulties existed, which the revenue of the local bodies was insufficient to provide for." Mr Wheeler, the mover of this motion, said he had "no doubt that Treasury, in anticipation of a large land revenue would find no difficulty in providing the money". The construction of the Letts Ford bridge signified the development of the colony's infrastructure as it settled into more stable patterns after the squatting and goldrush periods.

Building the Bridge

The success of Mr Bayles MLA in having the Warrnambool Letts Ford road declared a Main Road meant that subsidies were available for construction of the road and bridge. Despite Mortlake Shire's urging, Warrnambool shire would not proceed with the bridge "until a definite answer was received regarding the distribution of the £50,000 vote for bridges". In December 1865 the government approved the construction of the Letts Ford bridge, and in July 1866 advised Warrnambool Shire that a sum of £1,200 had been allocated for the project. A Kerr, engineer-surveyor for Warrnambool Shire, reported on the bridge's foundations in October 1866, and designed the bridge. Andrew Kerr also had a right of private practice, and designed many of Warrnambool's early buildings, including the Western Hotel (1869), the Masonic Temple (1870), St John's Presbyterian Church (1875), and the Warrnambool Club (1876). All of these have heritage status. St John's Presbyterian Church has been described as "one of the Presbyterian Church's most eminent buildings in Victoria".

The other parties involved in the bridge's construction were also notably accomplished. The contractor, Mr J R Evans, was a well-known local entrepreneur and civic identity, counting among his enterprises the development of the local meat preserving, beet sugar, and woollen mill manufacturers, and leading involvements in the local Agricultural Association and Warrnambool steeplechase. He also had extensive experience in bridge contracting in the area, commencing with the first large bridge across the mouth of the Hopkins River in 1861. Evans secured the contract with a tender of £3,663 (including earth approach work).

In October 1866 the Warrnambool Shire Council appointed John Amos Stone as overseer of the work on its behalf. Stone had just completed a similar assignment at the Chatsworth bridge over the Hopkins River (1866) for the Shire of Mount Rouse. The Mount Rouse Engineer, the accomplished but generally taciturn James Mylne Knight gave him a glowing reference upon completion of that job:

His task is completed and it gives me great pleasure to be able to testify to the assiduity with which he undertook the detailing. His firmness and judgement has been conspicuous all along even at the expense of much personal comfort and under most peculiar circumstances which were to say the least of it highly disagreeable and disheartening ... he displayed a thorough knowledge of good workmanship and proper fitting both of timber work and stone building. In fact his capacity and general character has been entirely satisfactory to myself and the Council.

Stone was obviously a workman of the highest standard. His family had been stonemasons, while he had been a ships' carpenter before settling in Australia.

The building of the bridge was completed on time, and its rather lavish opening celebrations on 30 May 1867 attest to its significance in the region. The following description of this event and of the new bridge is from the Warrnambool Sentinel of 13 June 1867:

The opening of the new bridge over Letts Ford ... on 30th May, proved a very jolly affair. A really elegant luncheon was provided for a numerous company, at the sole expense of Mr J R Evans, on a scale of unexampled liberality, under the experienced eye of Mr J C A Kruger, of the Commercial Hotel, and was done full justice to by the guests after their long drive. The bridge was formally opened by Captain Eddington of Ballangiech. The feast was presided over by Mr S Macgregor, JP, surrounded at his end of the table by a formidable engineering phalanx, comprising the surveyors of no less than five neighbouring shires.

The bridge - which is the handsomest in Western Victoria - was erected from the designs and under the superintendence of Mr A Kerr, Engineer of the Shire of Mortlake, and Town Surveyor of Warrnambool, to whom in conjunction with the overseer of the works, Mr Stone, we are indebted for the following particulars:

Extreme length, 232 feet; breadth outside the beams, 16 feet; height from the river bed, 22 feet.

The superstructure is supported on two rows of piles driven 25 feet below the bed of the river, and the remainder on framing resting on dwarf piers of bluestone masonry built four feet below the surface; all the piles and posts are neatly dressed and squared. The beams of the bridge, which are 15 in x 9 in each, rest on strutted corbels, the scarves of the beams being jammed hard up with cast-iron keys. On the top of these beams are laid two courses of 2.5 inch planking which is unusually strong, the lower course being diagonally laid. A kerbing runs along both sides of the bridge, surmounted by a post and two-rail deal hand railing, the top of which is moulded. The height of the abutments from the surface of the ground is 12 feet from the foundations, which are 4 ft 6 in wide at the base; they are built of bluestone ashlar, finished with 15 in. weather coping. On the top of this coping are fine axed piers, finished with heavy caps and rough panels. Between these piers on the wing walls (which are 14 ft in length) at both ends of the bridge are handsome cast-iron bronzed parapets, with open panels, from Chambers foundry. ...The exact contract price was £3,666.

The Chambers foundry referred to would have been that of Enoch Chambers in Prahran. Founded in 1856 the firm was Melbourne's third oldest iron foundry. It produced a wide range of products including mining machinery, stone crushers, lamp posts, building ironwork, bridgework and a single steam locomotive for the contractors of the Melbourne-Bendigo Railway. The foundry closed in 1870 following the death of Enoch Chambers in a buggy accident. Little of the work from this important foundry survives today.

Subsequent History

As occurred at probably hundreds of crossing places in Victoria, the building of a bridge was accompanied by the institution of "The Bridge Inn", and a blacksmith, small store and post master signalled the establishment of a town. In 1867 the town of Ellerslie - named by Captain Eddington after the birthplace of Sir Walter Scott - was officially proclaimed in the Government Gazette. In March 1869 there appears to have been a fire in the vicinity from which the bridge was saved by local young men, although some repairs were necessary. On another occasion the men of Ellerslie stood guard day and night to prevent logs washed down by a flood from striking the bridge or accumulating against it and carrying it away.

There are various local stories pertaining to the subsequent maintenance of the bridge. One would indicate that the bridge was rebuilt in the mid to late 1890s and the other that it was raised six feet in about 1905. No

documentary evidence has been found for such works, although it is likely that some substantial maintenance and replacement of deteriorated timber members would have been necessary in the early twentieth century. There is no evidence in the fabric of the bridge to suggest that the superstructure was ever raised, however, some of the timber elements (most notably the deck and beams) have clearly been replaced because they no longer exactly match the original description published in 1867 when the bridge was opened. Recent VicRoads records indicate that the bridge underwent maintenance work in 1947. It was by-passed by a new concrete bridge in 1967.

The existence side-by-side of what is said to be the original track with its timber and stone ford, the old timber bridge of 1867, and the new reinforced concrete bridge of a century later comprises a complete record of the stages of the development of the river crossing and associated township.

Assessment Against Criteria

Criterion A.

The historical importance, association with or relationship to Victoria's history of the place or object.

It is of historical significance for its early age, being Victoria's second oldest known timber bridge, and one of only two surviving structural timber bridges to have resisted Victoria's epic floods of 1870.

It expresses the development and consolidation of the Western District road network in the post gold-rush era, and in particular, the importance of the connection between pastoral properties and the port of Warrnambool.

It was the largest of a number of composite masonry and timber bridges which were built in Victoria, particularly the Western District. It was clearly an important bridge in its time, built to a very high standard, and described at its opening as the "handsomest in Western Victoria".

Its association with the remnants of the original ford, and the 1967 reinforced concrete bridge, constitutes a complete historical record of a European-era crossing place. The site of the original "Letts Ford" hotel is marked by a stand of cypresses. These comprise an exemplary record of a seminal factor in the formation of hundreds of small towns in Victoria.

Criterion B.

The importance of a place or object in demonstrating rarity or uniqueness.

It is significant as one of a small number of colonial composite timber girder and masonry bridges. Its stone abutments and wing walls are among the best and most intact of this group, and provide important evidence of colonial bridge building techniques and craftsmanship.

It is a rare example of the use of sub-piers (or "dwarf piers") and timber trestle construction.

Its numerous rare and unique timber features, including moulded handrails, tapered corbels, and rounded waler ends also provide important evidence of colonial bridge building techniques and craftsmanship.

Its use of ornamental cast-iron in the masonry parapets was possibly the first such example of this in a Victoria timber bridge, and is one of only two extant examples.

Criterion C.

The place or object's potential to educate, illustrate or provide further scientific investigation in relation to Victoria's cultural heritage.

It is the most intact of the very few remaining bridges which were built with timber trestles on bluestone sub-piers (only one other bridge of this type is known to retain its timberwork) and thus provides potential to understand nineteenth century bridge building design concepts and construction techniques.

It provides rare, unique and exemplary evidence of nineteenth century bridge building techniques and tradesmanship. These include: moulded handrails, tapered corbels, rounded waler ends, and iron strapwork for fixing timbers.

Criterion D.

The importance of a place or object in exhibiting the principal characteristics or the representative nature of a place or object as part of a class or type of places or objects.

It is the largest surviving, and the most intact, example of Victoria's composite masonry-timber bridges. This is an historically significant sub-group of bridges in Victoria.

It is one of the largest timber girder road bridges in Victoria. It is of exceptional: overall length; height; number of spans (for unrelieved all-timber beam bridges); and maximum span length (for timber beam spans).

It has the eleventh longest timber beam spans of any bridge in Victoria.

It has the longest square timber beams (ie, in the colonial style) which survive in Victoria without steel relieving beams.

Criterion E.

The importance of a place or object in exhibiting good design or aesthetic characteristics and/or in exhibiting a richness, diversity or unusual integration of features.

It was designed and built to an exceptionally high standard. It is the only known timber bridge to have been designed by an architect, Andrew Kerr. It was built by carpenter/mason, John Amos Stone.

Its ornamental cast-iron panels are rare, being the first of only two such examples in Victoria. It was the model for the other example, built a few years later at nearby Darlington.

Its bluestone abutments (which include carefully designed thrust blocks, at a slight skew), wing walls and piers are exceptionally well designed and built, and well finished.

It incorporates a slight skew and mixture of foundation types.

Its unusually fine timber features, including tapered corbels, moulded softwood hand-railings, and the rounded ends of the cross braces and walers, are rare, possibly unique.

Its attractive and historic setting comprises the remnant natural eucalypt vegetation along the river bank, the formal plantation of exotic species along its disused approaches, and the old buildings in the adjacent hamlet to which the crossing place gave rise. It is highly visible from the adjacent new highway bridge.

Criterion F.

The importance of a place or object in demonstrating or being associated with scientific or technical innovations or achievements.

Criterion G.

The importance of a place or object in demonstrating social or cultural associations.

It was designed by architect Andrew Kerr, who designed many of Warrnambool's early buildings, including the Western Hotel (1869), the Masonic Temple (1870), St John's Presbyterian Church (1875), and the Warrnambool Club (1876), all of which are recognised heritage places. St John's Presbyterian Church is regarded as one of the Presbyterian Church's most eminent buildings in Victoria.

Criterion H.

Any other matter which the Council considers relevant to the demonstration of cultural heritage significance.

Extent of Registration

AMENDMENT OF REGISTER OF HISTORIC BUILDINGS

Historic Building No. 1029-

Old Ellerslie Bridge

Hopkins Highway (Eastern Side)

Hopkins River, Ellerslie

To the extent of:

All of the structure known as the Ellerslie Bridge, marked B-1 on Plan 605764, endorsed by the Chairperson, Historic Buildings Council and held by the Director, Historic Buildings Council.

All of the land extending a distance of 5 m from all elements of the bridge structure at each end of the bridge.)

[*Victoria Government Gazette* No. G31 4 August 1994 p.2154]

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.

For further details about Heritage Overlay places, contact the relevant local council or go to Planning Schemes Online <http://planningschemes.dpcd.vic.gov.au/>