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# MERINO DOWNS HOMESTEAD COMPLEX



52800 Merino Downs Stables  
Henty 078

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## Location

5022 HENTY HIGHWAY, HENTY, GLENELG SHIRE

## Municipality

GLENELG SHIRE

## Level of significance

Recommended for Heritage Overlay

## Heritage Listing

Glenelg Shire

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## Statement of Significance

Last updated on -

What is Significant?

The Merino Downs squatting run, along with Muntham and Sandford, was one of the first three established in the Port Phillip district of New South Wales following the encounter between the explorer, Major Thomas Mitchell, Surveyor General of NSW and the Henty family who were occupying land at what would become Portland. The Hentys proceeded as quickly as possible northwards to occupy the excellent grazing country described by Mitchell as 'Australia Felix': Edward H Sandford (but only until 1847), and Francis Henty (1815-1889), the youngest, at . The brothers also squatted in the Cape Bridgewater area to the west of Portland and had farming, ship-building, and sealing and whaling interests at the Convincing Grounds to the west. Over many years the various brothers came to occupy many other important squatting runs in the Western District of the colony of Victoria after separation from NSW in 1851. Merino Downs and Muntham remained the most important and Merino Downs is the only one still occupied by the family.

Merino Downs Homestead Complex is located on Henty Creek, approximately 80kms north of Portland and 12.5kms south-east of Casterton on the east side of the Portland Casterton Road, Henty. The complex comprises: the new entrance and tree-lined drive; the former homestead site with its extensive garden and mature exotic plantings; the coach house, stables and blacksmith's shop; the woolshed, and the overseer's cottage, as well as the new homestead, various outbuildings and other structures. Other works, specifically for irrigation, are said to survive on the west side of the Portland Casterton Road.

John Henty was put in charge of Merino Downs at first but, because of his mismanagement, was moved to Sandford and Francis soon took over. He was a generous friend and master who adopted a simple lifestyle and was devoted to his property. His small book, 'History of the First Merino Sheep Imported into Australia', told of his family's pioneering role in the development of the Victorian sheep industry. As early as 1837, Francis brought a number of fine-woolled pedigree sheep from the Henty flock in England to the Portland district. The homestead block was granted to Francis Henty in 1848. This land was linked to Francis Henty's 640 acre Pre-Emptive Right property on the opposite side of Henty Creek, secured in 1856. Francis married Mary Ann Lawrence (1819-1881), daughter of William Lawrence of Tasmania. They had four children, one son, Lawrence Shum (1845-1877), and three daughters, Louisa (1847-1924), Caroline (1849-1914) and Alice (1852-1932). Lawrence who was born at Merino Downs, died there and is buried in the Merino Cemetery. Francis Henty ran the Merino Downs property until his death in 1889 when there was a major subdivision of the estate. Then his daughter, Louisa Henty, ran it until her own death in 1924 when it still comprised nearly 5,000 acres. The new drive dates from about this time.

The original timber homestead was begun in 1843, replacing a sod hut and possibly triggered by Francis' marriage to Mary Ann. Presumably there was some sort of subsistence garden begun about the same time. The house was altered and extended over the years along with the increasingly formal garden. Merino Downs, during the occupation of Francis and Mary Ann Henty was renowned for its hospitality. The homestead was demolished in the 1940s and replaced by a new house beyond the original garden's perimeter. The slab woolshed which incorporates much 'bush timber' carpentry must also substantially pre-date the early 1850s, being re-roofed with corrugated iron about 1854. It has been altered and extended but remains a working shed complete with yards and shade trees with a high degree of integrity and in good condition. The stables and coach house probably dates from the 1860s. Substantially intact although badly affected by rising damp, it can be compared directly with buildings at Muntham and Murndal. There are important individual remnant and exotic trees about the complex, perhaps the most important being the remnant *Eucalyptus camaldulensis* and exotic *Populus nigra* beside the woolshed. As well as the former homestead site, there are many other sites of substantial archaeological potential within the property.

How is it Significant?

The Merino Downs Homestead Complex is of historical, social and architectural significance to the State of Victoria.

Why is it Significant?

The Merino Downs Homestead Complex is of historical significance for its associations from the late 1830s with the Henty family, pastoral pioneers of the Port Phillip district. Along with their runs Muntham and Sandford (now razed), it was the spearhead of their advance into Major Mitchell's 'Australia Felix'. The Hentys played a major role in the early development of Victoria's sheep and wool industries, as well as early European settlement in the Western District. The site of the Merino Downs complex of farm buildings has particular historical significance as a portion of 60 acres of land on the west side of Henty Creek, and on the south side of the Wannon River, granted to Francis Henty in 1848. This land was linked to Francis Henty's 640 acre Pre-Emptive Right property on the opposite side of Henty Creek, secured in 1856.

The Merino Downs Complex is of social significance for demonstrating the highly respected position in society held by the Henty family. Francis Henty, who ran the Merino Downs property from the 1840s until his death in 1889, and his daughter, Louisa Henty, who owned the property from that time until her own death in 1924, were prominent and popular district residents. Descendants of the Henty family have retained an interest in the property, and it is the only remaining one of the original three properties.

The surviving nineteenth century elements of the Complex are of architectural significance. Although the original homestead no longer survives, its garden does and the whole of that section of the Complex has a high archaeological potential. The woolshed, which adopts a traditional vernacular form and plan, includes the original section which almost certainly dates from the earliest period. It also demonstrates through its sequence of development a continuous use from the earliest period of wool production to the present day. It is directly comparable to many of the earliest woolsheds in the Western District. The brick coach house, stables and

blacksmith's shop are also traditional in their form and plan and can be compared with the brick barn at Muntham, another Henty property, and the coach house and stables at Murndal.

Heritage Study/Consultant	Glenelg - Glenelg Shire Heritage Study Part One, Carlotta Kellaway, David Rhodes Mandy Jean, 2002; Glenelg - Glenelg Heritage Study Stage Two (a), Heritage Matters, 2006;
Construction dates	1830,
Hermes Number	52800
Property Number	

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## Usage/Former Usage

Residential and farming

## Physical Description 1

Merino Downs Homestead site is located on a gentle slope, looking north east over Henty Creek, a tributary of the Wannon River. The homestead 'paddock' has been fenced off, and although the timber homestead built in the 1840s is long since demolished, a substantial 'skeleton' of the garden survives, with a number of mature trees and unusual bulbs appearing every Spring. The garden is dominated by a mature *Araucaria bidwillii* (Bunya Bunya) which would originally have been located at the front of the homestead. The north east boundary of the site, towards Henty Creek is defined by a hedge of *Crataegus laevigata* (English Hawthorn) mixed with *Crataegus laciniata* (Oriental Thorn) which is planted in a broad sweep, now much overgrown. The garden is a typical mixture of ornamental and practical plants, with several specimens of *Crataegus laevigata* (English Hawthorn) arranged around the area close to where the house was, as well large specimen trees including: *Cupressus macrocarpa* (Monterey Cypress) now removed; *Cedrus atlantica* (Atlantic Cedar); *Fraxinus oxycarpa* (Ash); a variety of different species of *Cupressus* spp.; and *Quercus ilex* (Holm Oak). Other decorative plants which are included are typical of the mid to late nineteenth century. These include *Coprosma repens* (Shiny Leaf), *Nerium Oleander* (Oleander), *Melianthus major* (Honey Flower), *Cercis siliquastrum* (Judas Tree) and a range of bulbs. Most of the bulbs were not in flower at the time of the site inspection, but those species which were included a number of different *Narcissus* sp. (Daffodils), *Nectaroscordum siculum* (Mediterranean Bells), and an unknown *Allium* species.

The remains of an orchard and vegetable garden are located towards the north east boundary of the garden site, with several *Pyrus communis* (Pear Tree) and a *Lauris nobilis* (Bay Laurel) surviving. Several large *Eucalyptus camaldulensis* (River Red Gums) planted to the east of the main garden indicate the route of the previous driveway, which originally linked Merino Downs with the township of Merino over Henty Creek to the east. Under a small gabled iron roof, there is a suspended section of the trunk of an oak tree with a plaque stating 'planted by Francis Henty in 1843'.

The current driveway to Merino Downs dates from the 1920s and includes an avenue inter-planting of *Ulmus procera* (English Elms) and *Corymbia ficifolia* (Flowering Gum). The driveway is 950m long and extends directly from the Portland-Casterton Road entrance to the site of the main yard of the property. There is no pattern evident, and it is thought that the *Corymbia ficifolia* were planted to give some substance to the driveway and protect the *Ulmus procera* until they were larger. It was originally intended that the *Corymbia ficifolia* would be removed, and the driveway be *Ulmus procera* only. Competition, compaction and removal of plant material in the past fifty years, combined with very dry conditions have seen the trees not develop to their expected size or structure.

The woolshed survives from the earliest period of the homestead complex, the oldest, central section on the south side almost certainly dating from the 1840s. The woolshed has three main wings and further additions and yards beyond. The central wing, which is the bottom of its U-shaped plan, is approximately 10.5m by 25m and is

comprised of a 'nave' with side aisles. It is framed from adzed, pit-sawn and timber in-the-round, poles, for example, being used for tie-beams. The roof is clad with split timber shingles on closely spaced sawn battens with corrugated iron sheets above, much of which is modern. However, loose sheets of corrugated iron survive in the woolshed which are stamped indistinctly in white paint 'BEST TC [as a monogram surmounted by a crown] BEST / TUPPER & COMPANY / MANUFACTURERS / LONDON & BIRMINGHAM'. These sheets also have small galvanised iron lugs on the underside. Identical sheets have been seen at the former Caledonian Inn, Sandford which was built in 1854. Other examples by the same manufacturer with a similar but not necessarily an identical stamp are recorded by Miles Lewis: at the Old Melbourne Gaol, commenced in 1853; on a shed at 92 Victoria Street, Eaglehawk and at a barn at Rouse Hill, NSW (Lewis, Australian Building, on-line database). Small sections of the roofing have been replaced with 'Laserlite' to allow more light into the interior. The side or south wall of the central section of the woolshed is very low and is built with vertical timber slabs, approximately 1.2m high, set on a timber plate on a rubble stone base. The end wall is hardwood weatherboards. The main door is a sliding panel of wide vertical boards on a ledge and brace frame. This is off-centre to the left and may be modern. The side door is also ledge and brace construction and clearly much older with beaded edges to the framing and a timber slip rail and housing. Externally, the doors are painted cream and the weatherboards are painted deep red, the only part of the woolshed which is painted. There are modern ramps for loading and off-loading equipment and animals on either side of the main door. The west wing may be almost as old as the central wing. The corrugated iron 'tower' for the wool press is positioned at their junction. The wing crosses the end of the central wing and continues both its profile and form of construction. Its gable is approximately 3.6m wide and there is a further return section of aisle. There are unpainted hardwood weatherboards above the slabs and in the spandrel. Other sections are clad with corrugated iron, particularly the later extensions. The east wing is approximately 16m by 6m and has a simple gabled roof intersecting with the main roof. It is of later construction and is typically framed and clad with similar weatherboards. The internal holding pens, slat flooring, machinery and other fittings are all typical and survive well with the usual modifications in a working woolshed. The last extensions are for a machinery shed room and, in about 1985, for counting out pens.

There is a very large *Eucalyptus camaldulensis* (River Red Gum), almost certainly remnant vegetation, located near the south-east corner of the woolshed. There is a *Populus nigra* 'Italica' (Lombardy Poplar) located at the north-west corner.

The building incorporating the coach house, loft and stables with a blacksmith's shop in an extension also survives from a very early period. It is one and a half storeys, the upper level being used for storing hay. It is made of soft, locally made bricks which suffer excessively from rising damp particularly at the southern end, which is the blacksmith's shop extension. There is evidence of a lime wash, tinted a light brown, over the bricks. The early corrugated iron roof is a simple gable with a skillion at the rear which has been further extended. The ledge and brace doors, the timber bars on the lower window openings and the timber trellis in the upper windows survive externally as do the usual fittings for horses and carriages internally. The building is reminiscent of the brick barn at Muntham Homestead at Carapook, another Henty property, and the brick coach house and stables at Murndal at Tahara, the property of the Winter-Cooke family.

The overseer's cottage which is included in the 1924 inventory has not been inspected and its significance is not yet determined. The modern house which replaced the original homestead which was demolished in the 1940s is not considered, at this stage, to be of particular significance. There are also modern sheds, barns and tanks within the complex which are not considered to be significant.

## **Physical Conditions**

The woolshed is in good condition. The stables, coach house and blacksmith's shop is suffering badly from rising damp.

## **Historical Australian Themes**

Theme 3: Developing local, regional and national economies

3.5 Developing primary production

3.5.1 Grazing stock

Theme 5: Working

5.8 Working on the land

*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/>*