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# BACK CREEK CHINESE GARDEN AND ORCHARD

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## Location

ST GEORGES LAKE CRESWICK, HEPBURN SHIRE

## Municipality

HEPBURN SHIRE

## Level of significance

Heritage Inventory Site

## Heritage Inventory (HI) Number

H7623-0346

## Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Inventory

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## Statement of Significance

Last updated on - June 21, 2021

The social and economic significance of this site lies in the way it demonstrates the insecurity of Chinese settlers in procuring and using land for gardening. The Chinese camp to the west is marked on Land maps as designated for that purpose, but is reported to have never been officially established in the land records (Turnbull 2012). Many different people are known to have been associated with the garden over the years. The transition of the garden to an orchard (Damson Plums) is also significant in representing the marked trend towards Chinese people leaving the area and the Goldfields in the 1890s and early 1900s.

Because of the complex and rather vague history of this site, as a garden and later a 'European' orchard, and nearby mining shafts and sluicing, it clearly needs sound archaeological study. The major Eaton's Water Race, passes above and fed into the south east corner of the garden, and is also the alignment of the Goldfields Trail (part of the iconic Great Dividing Trail to Daylesford and Bendigo).

Interpretation of Site	Because the Back Creek 'Orchard' was planted over the higher, southern part of the original Chinese garden, and then gardening was abandoned, the more fertile and better watered alluvial area of the garden to the north and west is now overgrown and hardly recognizable as a garden site. This lower 'plain' is deep soiled and would be well suited to vegetable gardening in drier times of the year. Perhaps vegetable gardening was abandoned because of frequent damage from flooding of Back Creek (Creswick Creek). Of the known Chinese garden sites to the south in the Cabbage tree area, none are known to have been taken over by Europeans for development of a deciduous fruit orchard. The lower section of the land near Back Creek north of the (later established) orchard near Back, resembles to some extent other Chinese garden sites, with several small beds, channels and watering ponds on a good alluvial plain.
Hermes Number	207156
Property Number	

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## History

The diaries of John le Gerche (forester/bailiff, Creswick) mention Chinese men operating a garden on Back Creek in the 1880s and early 1890s (Taylor 1998). These men were Hok Nea, Ah Soon, Hock Yen and Mosen Yen. Hock Nea appeared in court in 1891 for lighting a fire to drive locusts away from his crop. These gardeners were apparently later evicted because they lacked rights to use the land. Another person mentioned to have managed the garden pre-1900 was Hong Way who owned a house, stable and dam .

Produce from the gardens would have been sold to all local miners, to the Bush Inn off Jackass Road and to markets in Creswick, some 4km to the west. The garden area was later taken over for European fruit growing (Damsun Plums) sometime after 1900. Other remnant trees of European origin are Hawthorn and Elderberry. There was a designated Chinese Camp about 1 km to the west of this site, on the south bank for Creswick Creek, but the land appears to have been taken over for forestry by early 1900s (Turnbull 2012 and the Map by Wettenhall 2018; Taylor 1998, p 104-6).

Notes on Chinese settlers around Creswick from various authors:

From Davies et al 2014.

As the number of Chinese dwindled in the 1880s and 1890s, some continued to live in huts and grow vegetables as they had for many years. They were recognised as expert gardeners and were generally 'industrious, honest, generous, and law abiding (Graham 1987:63). John La Gerche (1885) recorded the names and locations of some Chinese during his patrols through the Creswick forests in 1884-90s.

In 1891 a dispute emerged over the illegal occupation of a site on Back Creek by four Chinese men: Hock Nea, Ah Coon, Hock Yen and Mosen Yen. For- ester John La Gerche arranged for Hock Nea to be deprived of his garden licence but for the three others to remain in occupation with the necessary permits (Taylor 1998:102-105).

Chinese gardeners 4km from Creswick would have been in touch with the Chinese population in their main 'camp' in Creswick township. Daryl Lindsay described the Chinese camp in Creswick at the beginning of the 20th century as: '... a straggling little settlement with a population of five hundred, consisting of two streets of low ramshackle wooden and

galvanized iron buildings. There were two joss houses with brass Buddhas, red and yellow hangings with Chinese characters and a strong smell of incense. But the centre of attraction was the two Chinese stores; the largest presided over by Ah Foo who was a kind of mayor and directed the affairs of the camp. Ah Foo was a well-fed Cantonese with a huge paunch who sat behind a well-polished counter and dispensed conversation in smiling monosyllables or sold exotic Oriental foods – lychees, preserved ginger, cumquats and small pies and hard biscuits with Chinese characters stamped on them in red. The little store was dark with one small window, and leading out of it, was a long low passage that disappeared into utter darkness. On each side of the passage were small, evil smelling cubicles where old China- men with listless eyes reclined on low wooden benches sucking at their bamboo opium pipes, gambled at fan tan, marked tickets in Chinese lotteries or tossed dice.' (Lindsay 1965:19, Quoted by Davies et al 2014).

The 1901 Census of Victoria recorded only 29 Chinese people residing in the Shire of Creswick. The Chinese were known as adept water managers, not only for mining but also for market gardening. They owned races, leased races, sold water to European miners and were often employed to cut and repair races and dams at Creswick.

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