ROBBIN'S HILL BATTERY

Location

HUNTLY-FOSTERVILLE ROAD, FOSTERVILLE

Municipality

Level of significance

Heritage Inventory Site

Heritage Inventory (HI) Number

H7824-0111

Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Inventory

Statement of Significance

Last updated on - April 14, 2023

What is significant?
The site comprises the remains of a wooden stamp battery and presents a well-preserved example of a late 19th century wooden framed stamp battery. The site has the potential to contain archaeological deposits, features and artefacts associated with the use of the timber battery and archaeological deposits or artefacts prior mining occupation.
How is it significant?
The wooden stamp battery site is of local historical significance.
Why is it significant?
The wooden stamp battery site is of historical significance for its association with late 19th and early 20th century small scale gold mining in regional Victoria.
Gold mining in Fosterville can be characterised as a landscape of boom and bust. Many of the companies were small scale, made very little money, and the Fosterville area was colloquially referred to as the “Poor Man’s Goldfield” (Snoek 1988). Gold miners had to rely on the resources in their immediate vicinity, and the use of roughly hewn timber- irregularly hafted and bolted together, lends to this notion. The wooden stamp battery is representative of this adaptation to the landscape and the ingenuity and resourcefulness of the local gold miners. Insight into the miners’ lives and the operation of small scale gold mining in regional areas can be gained from this site.

Interpretation of Site	Pre- 19th Century: Traditional lands of the Dja Dja Wurrung people. Early 19th Century: Agricultural lands occupied by European squatters for agricultural purposes. Mid-19th Century: Gold discovered in 1850s and private prospecting and alluvial mining commences on a small scale. Fosterville remained a farming community until the 1890s. Small scale and private gold mining claims operated at the site during this time. Late 19th Century: Industrial deep lead and open-cut mining begins throughout Fosterville. John Robbins appears as a property owner on the Township of Ellesmere map in 1876. The Fosterville township is formalized in 1894 and large-scale mining begins in 1896. In 1897, a stamp battery was constructed on the Robbins property and a large amount of soil was removed. Robbins Hill Mine was formally established in 1898. Early 20th Century: Mining begins to rapidly decline, and Fosterville Gold Mining Co. stops work between 1897-1902. By 1903, the township of Fosterville declined, and the mines began to close in 1906. Races and batteries in the area were repurposed for faming industries. Smaller estates were utilised for farming and the soldier settlement scheme. Cyanide works and ore treatments continued to operate until 1939. Late 20th -Present: Between 1988 and 2022, the wooden frame of the stamp battery collapses. Interest in Fosterville is renewed, and an Environmental Effects Statement (EES) was commissioned in 1996 to assess a gold mining venture utilising an open-cut mining method. Current underground mining operations commenced in 2005. Site 2, Wooden Stamp Battery site is situated within the current Fosterville Gold Mine. The site would have been originally part of the alluvial and private diggings that operated throughout the area. A stamp battery was constructed, and a large amount of soil was removed from Robbins property in 1897 and was referenced in a newspaper article. It is likely that the stamp battery mentioned in the newspaper is the remains of the wooden stamp battery, and that the large amount of soil that was removed was a result of the creation of the dam north of the stamp battery and potentially used for the construction of the ramp and the rise for Site 3, Cyanide Vats to facilitate the gravity fed system (Figure 9). The cyanide vats would have also processed the tailings produced by the stamp battery. The stamp battery likely crushed ore from Robbins Hill Mine, and potentially crushed ore from smaller claims in the area as well. Timber frames for stamp batteries are very uncommon, as they usually do not survive well in the archaeological record. It is likely that the missing elements of the stamp battery, the overhead cam shaft, stamp head, battery box, fly wheel, and boiler were all sold off by Robins Hill Mine when it closed in an effort to recoup any losses. An image of a wooden stamp battery related to the South New Moon site in Eaglehawk demonstrates what the Site 2, Wooden Stamp Battery's configuration may have looked like (Figure 10). Based on this image and Snoek's drawing, it is likely that Site 2, Wooden Stamp Battery was a 10 head (or smaller) stamp battery. The stamp battery would have been steam powered and relied on a boiler. The ore would have been loaded via the ramp and deposited into the ore feeder. The ore would have then been crushed by the battery heads and the water and pulverized quartz slurry would have then been passed over screens to separate out the gold. The water and sediment slurry would have then been channeled to the dam north of the battery and the water would have been reused in the mining operations.
Other Names	Site 2, Wooden Stamp Battery,
Hermes Number	209508
Property Number	

History

The majority of the following background history is drawn from the land use history developed for the Historical Heritage Technical Report (Geiberras and Hocking 2022) prepared for the Fosterville Gold Mine Environmental Effects Statement. The study area includes the traditional lands of the Dja Dja Wurrung people who were displaced from their land, as European people arrived and occupied the study area in the 1830s. Squatters were attracted to the area because of the farming potential, breeding sheep for their hides and wool, and later for their meat due to the population increase during the gold rush (Marshall 1996, p. 3 and Ballinger 2020, p.14). In the

1850s, gold was discovered in Fosterville and small scale mining including alluvial diggings such as gold panning and shallow pits operated across the landscape up until the 1890s (Marshall 1996, p.3). The site is located within land that was occupied by John Robbins, Allotment 42b of the township of Ellesmere (now Fosterville) in 1876 (Figure 6). The Robbins family settled early in the area, where active members of the community, and had large holdings of mining land that later became known as Robbin's Hill (Bendigo Advertiser 1899, p.2). The quartz reefs were officially opened in 1894 and the township of Fosterville was formalised (Ballinger 2020, p.44). At least six batteries were operating in the Fosterville area in the early 1890s; however, only two were crushing ore at any given time due to the scarcity of water (Bannear n.d., p.140). A water race was established in 1896, and as a result multiple private claims expanded and became established, with at least eleven stamp batteries recorded as operating by 1897 (Ballinger 2020, p.40 and Bannear and Watson 1994, p.38). In a newspaper article discussing compensation for disputed claims in 1897, it is mentioned that one of the Robbin's family was erecting a battery and that a large amount of soil had been removed from the area (Bendigo Advertiser 1897, p.4). Robbins Hill Mine was established relatively late compared to the other mining companies in 1898; interestingly, it is noted in the Bendigo Advertiser that the area in which Robbins Hill Mine was established was occupied by small private parties and alluvial prospectors (Bendigo Advertiser 1898, p.4). Private claims were common in the goldfields, with known workings by G. Brooks, Roberts and Collins, and Geirisch and Hinton operating along Hunt's line (Bannear n.d., p.149). This is also backed by two newspaper articles documenting grievances between the Robbins family and private miners who were being taxed by the family as well as the government, in the form of miners licenses, and land disputes, where the Robbins family claimed to have purchased leases for land that they already owned (Bendigo Advertiser 1897, p.3 and Bendigo Advertiser 1897, p.4). Information about the numerous small scale private parties is limited, and likely a result of the short lived nature of mining in this area. The area east of Hunt's line began to decline in 1897 and the O'Donnell and O' Dwyer's claims were consolidated, and the company's shares were floated on the market (Bannear n.d., p.149). Between 1897 and 1902, work had stopped at the Fosterville Gold Mining Co., with some prospecting recommencing in August of 1902 (The Bendigo Independent 1902, p. 4). This decline mirrors what happened across the Victorian goldfields; the price of gold, the large scale operations required to access deeper quartz reefs, and the onset of World War 1 were all driving factors towards the consolidation and eventual collapse of historical gold mining in the early 20th century (Ballinger 2020, p. 45). As a further result, the township of Fosterville began to decline in 1903, and the mines began to close in 1906 (Marshall 1996, p.3). It was during this decline that the races once used for the batteries were repurposed for dairying and agriculture for the farming region (Victorian Places, Fosterville, 2015). In 1937, Fosterville was included on the list of closed mines that was to be subject of the shaft filling scheme (Bannear n.d., p.196). This scheme involved the filling and securing of dangerous open shafts and commenced in 1935, funded by grants to create work during the depression following World War 1 (Bannear n.d., p.196). Although mining ceased in the area, the cyanide works and ore treatment plants continued to operate until 1939 (Bannear n.d., p. 197). The site was first recorded by Snoek in 1988 In the late 20th century, interest in Fosterville was renewed and in 1996 an Environmental Effects Statement (EES) was commissioned to assess a gold mining venture utilising open-cut mining methods at Fosterville. The stamp battery site was first identified during a survey for a 1988 Archaeological Study of Fosterville, Central Victoria (Snoek), associated with the EES for the Fosterville Gold Mine (at the time Bendigo Gold Limited). Snoek identified a series of archaeological features associated with the former Robbin's Hill Mine during this survey, these features included Site 1 – Whim, small open cut with loading ramp, Site 2 – Wooden Stamp Battery Frame, Site 3 – Cyanide Vats, Site 4 – Small open cut and loading ramp (Figure 7). Snoek stated that Site 2 consisted of a wooden stamp battery frame manufactured from local timber and that the significant metal components of the battery like the stamp heads and screens were missing (Snoek 1988, p. 14). Snoek also stated that the mortar blocks, cross sills, main posts, and braces were still present and included a drawing of the stamp battery in the report (Figure 8). Snoek describes a loading ramp for the ore feeder component of the stamp battery, and this is rise/hill described in the site inspection results of Geiberras and Hocking (2022). By 1998, the mine was producing approximately 40,000 ounces of gold a year from oxide mineralization with prospects of further gold from sulfide mineralization (Victorian Places, Fosterville, 2015). The current underground mining operations commenced in 2005 and focused on near-surface, low grade mineralization. Between 2015 and 2017, high grade visible gold mineralization was intersected at depth leading to underground expansion doubling the underground mineral reserves. The mine is the largest gold producer in the state of Victoria.