
HO60 - Mount Aitken Site & Ruin



Mount Aitken site and ruin



View from Mt Aitken looking towards the Dandenong Ranges

Location

740-794 Mt Aitken Road DIGGERS REST, Melton Shire

Municipality

MELTON CITY

Level of significance

Included in Heritage Overlay

Heritage Overlay Numbers

HO60

Heritage Listing

Melton City

Statement of Significance

Last updated on -

The *Mount Aitken* Site and Ruin, 740-749 Mt Aitken Road, Diggers Rest, is of at least local heritage significance as a major nineteenth century stud property under John Aitken and Henry Beattie; and also for its associations with key events in Australia's history:- the European foundation and 'first settlement' of the Port Phillip / Melbourne district; and 'first contact' period encounters between the Aboriginal and European peoples. It is the more important because of the scarcity of other recorded physical evidence of these events in the Port Phillip district.

The *Mount Aitken* Site and Ruin, 740-749 Mt Aitken Road, Diggers Rest, is historically significant at a STATE

level (AHC A4, B2, D2, H1). John Aitken was the first European to settle in the Shire of Melton. He was also one of the first pastoralists to land sheep at Port Phillip. Aitken had been planning to cross Bass Strait as early as 1833, and on 20th July 1835, the day before Fawkner's *Enterprise* departed to lay claim to the foundation of Melbourne, Aitken left Launceston in the *Endeavour* to prospect the pastures which John Batman had discovered across the Strait.

On 22nd March 1836 Aitken sailed again with 1600 sheep; in May 600 of these arrived at the *Mount Aitken* run which he had selected on his 1835 exploration. This has been described as Victoria's first inland occupation of sheep country. For two decades Aitken was revered as the colony's leading flockmaster, described as the 'first and most useful of our wool kings'. Historians have also judged his *Mount Aitken* stud to have been the most significant contributor to the improvement of Victoria's merino sheep up to the 1860s. In addition to being a famous sheep breeder, Aitken was also a respected and popular citizen of the pioneering European community. He named the Pentland Hills, and Governor Sir Richard Bourke named Mount Aitken after him. He was elected as mediator and representative in relation to social and pastoral issues, and for sporting occasions; citizens donated a portrait of him to the Melbourne City Council.

However his relations with the local native population were tense, and his *Mount Aitken* station became the scene of an encounter which would appear to have been instigated by Aboriginal peoples' anxiety to reclaim their country. The hill district from Sunbury to Gisborne, and including Mount Aitken, was the meeting place of the two streams of Victoria's first European settlers (overstraiters and overlanders), and is of key significance in the pastoral development and history of the state. The early painting 'View from Mt Aitken looking towards the Dandenong Ranges' depicting the open woodland and prime grasslands that were the *raison d'être* for the European occupation of Victoria, is indicative of this historical significance.

The place is also significant for its associations with stud-livestock breeder Henry Beattie, whose *Mount Aitken* Hereford stud was one of the best and most famous in Australia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His breeding of Comeback sheep (English Leicester - Merino) made a significant contribution to the development of one of Australia's most useful general-purpose wool and meat sheeps, taken up by mixed farmers in south-east Australia from the early twentieth century. His Shropshire sheep and Clydesdale horse breeding programs were also of note. Beattie served four separate terms as President of the Shire of Melton.

Despite disturbance of the property, it is likely that some archaeological evidence of the Aitken era dwellings, outbuildings or other works survives. It is also likely that evidence survives of part of the original track to the station, which formed one of the alternative routes of Victoria's first inland road, the Mount Macedon Road (and the Mount Alexander Road during the goldrush). Early drystone walls also survive. The original purpose and date of the large ruin, likely to have been built by John Beattie, is not known at this stage. The mature conifer and other shelter plantings on the site are representative of common pastoral and farming practices of a later date, and contribute to the significance of the place.

The *Mount Aitken* Site and Ruin, 740-749 Mt Aitken Road, Diggers Rest, is scientifically significant of at least LOCAL level (AHC C2). Archaeological fabric on the site, and the ruin, have the potential to produce rare information regarding the first European occupation of Port Phillip and the Shire of Melton, and also of contact-era Aboriginal occupation of the site.

Overall, the *Mount Aitken* Site and Ruin, 740-749 Mt Aitken Road, Diggers Rest is of at least LOCAL heritage significance.

Heritage Study/Consultant	Melton - Shire of Melton Heritage Study phase 2, David Maloney, David Rowe, Pamela Jellie, Sera Jane Peters, 2007;
Construction dates	1836,
Other Names	740-794 Mt Aitken Road, Diggers Rest. (Allotment A2, Parish Buttlejorrrk,
Hermes Number	30057
Property Number	

Physical Description 1

Physical Description -

The remains of the *Mount Aitken* pastoral station are situated on Aitkens Hill which is some 2.5 kilometres south of Mount Aitken. A woolshed was once situated near the northern boundary of the property.

The place is the site of John Aitken's *Mount Aitken* pastoral run. Access to the place was provided on 28th November 2008; Council's archaeologist was not permitted on this inspection. Prior to that, information about the site came from views to it from an adjacent property, aerial photographs, historical data and earlier photographs. Historical maps and other documents indicate some of the type of places that once existed on-site, and for which archaeological evidence might remain.

The place has been associated with pastoralism and farming since first European settlement of Port Phillip until recent times. Survey by a professional archaeologist is required. Fabric identified on the site by David Moloney, Sara Jane Peters and Steven Ryan on 28th November 2008 included:-

- A large, semi-ruinous, simple longitudinal gable building of masonry construction, principally of red scoria blocks and rubble, very roughly coursed. Its uneven stones and rough stonework suggest that the date of construction may be particularly early. All of its openings - a door and two windows - are situated on its east facade. Some 20 metres from the building is an outcrop of similar stone which may have been quarried. The window and door openings are quoined with alternating massive, roughly squared stones and courses of hand-made bricks. Several layers of mortar have been applied over the years. The south-end gable has a corbelled brick chimney. On one side is what appears to be an oven added later; this may relate to the building being known locally (in the late twentieth century at least) as 'the cookhouse', for workers / shearers. The roof of the building, of sawn timber and later nineteenth century corrugated iron (likely to have been added later) has now completely collapsed, as has most of the northern wall, and the lintels. Some areas of whitewash survive on the internal walls. The interior is becoming overgrown with boxthorn which will contribute to the deterioration of the building.

- The site of a large brick and cement rendered villa overlooking the valley of the Eastern Branch of the Kororoit Creek. Although damaged by bushfire, the walls of this building survived until being bulldozed in the late twentieth century. Considerable evidence of this building survives, including:-

- o earthworks / benches for the building and driveway, including low dry stone retaining walls at the former entrance (east side);

- o foundations of internal and external walls;

- o a large underground cement-rendered water tank, with a square brick / rendered opening (possibly built later, of recycled handmade bricks);

- o piles of quarried bluestone on the perimeters of the site. Some of the stones are massive; there appears to be little if any uniformity in size of these roughly squared building blocks;

- o scatters of handmade bricks, mostly of an orange colour. There are also a few much heavier, glazed blue-grey bricks of a type that appear to have been associated with the "Allisons Patent" brickworks on nearby Jacksons Creek (from the late 1850s until c.1880s);

- o miscellaneous iron materials, including a water pipe from the hill above, and an early clothes iron;

- o broken ceramics, some of which appears to be high quality nineteenth century plates; and glass, including what appears to be early champagne bottles.

- Evidence of buildings, and what may have been stock yards and sheep dip, on the hill above the former villa.
- The site of a former brick building (described in the 1963 thesis as the first homestead). This appears to have been largely obliterated by a small scoria quarry. Around this site (and elsewhere) are bricks, some marked 'Ramsay', a nineteenth century fire-brick.
- The site of a former stone building (described in the 1963 thesis as Aitken's second hut), which has been demolished. Fabric, apparently from this building (rubble stone and handmade bricks with evidence of limewash or paint) survives beyond the old poplar trees into an adjacent shallow waterhole / tank.
- Exotic plantings, including radiata pine and eucalyptus shelter plantings (probably dating from the late nineteenth or early twentieth century), a hawthorn hedge, and ornamental plantings such as stone pine, fig and poplar trees, which typically mark the locations of former dwelling or other buildings.
- Landscape features, including:- Aitkens Hill; rocky outcrops which appear to fit the description of those referred to in the 1838 incident between Aitken and the Aboriginals; views towards Mount Aitken; views over the valley of the Eastern Kororoit Creek, over the permanent waterholes described by Governor Bourke in 1837 and towards Melbourne; the essentially unwooded 'sheep plains' nature of the landscape, although without the natural open eucalyptus woodland. Although the pastoral landscape depicted in an early watercolour is still rural and essentially undeveloped on this property, the original holding has since been broken-up into numerous smaller holdings. Shelter plantings and new buildings also impinge marginally.

There was no superficial evidence of the original woolshed that was marked on early plans. The owner advised that the area had been cropped numerous times. While it is thus unlikely that any building fabric or footings would survive, artefacts may survive.

Evidence of tracks shown on early plans was not superficially visible, but should be investigated further.

While all but one building has been demolished, evidence of building materials, footings and artefacts would appear to remain. These, together with artefacts, possible cellars, or associated water tanks etc, should be subject to expert archaeological survey, as required by the Burra Charter.

Historical Australian Themes

Shire of Melton Historical Themes: 'Exploration', 'Pastoral', 'Farming'.

Physical Conditions

Physical Condition - Ruinous, and partly disturbed

Integrity

Integrity - Partly Damaged/Disturbed (with archaeological potential); partly substantially intact.

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/>