

# Victorian Heritage Database Report

Report generated 18/11/19



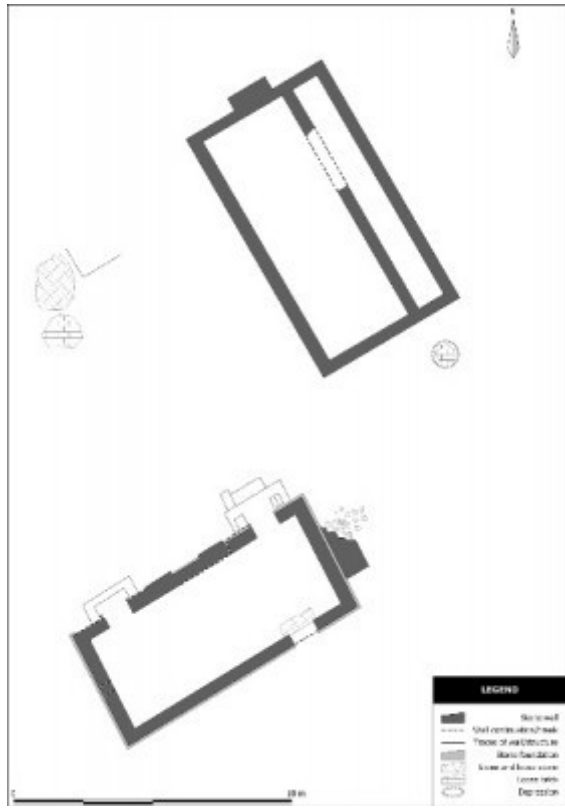
## FORMER MOUNT ALEXANDER SILK WORM FARM



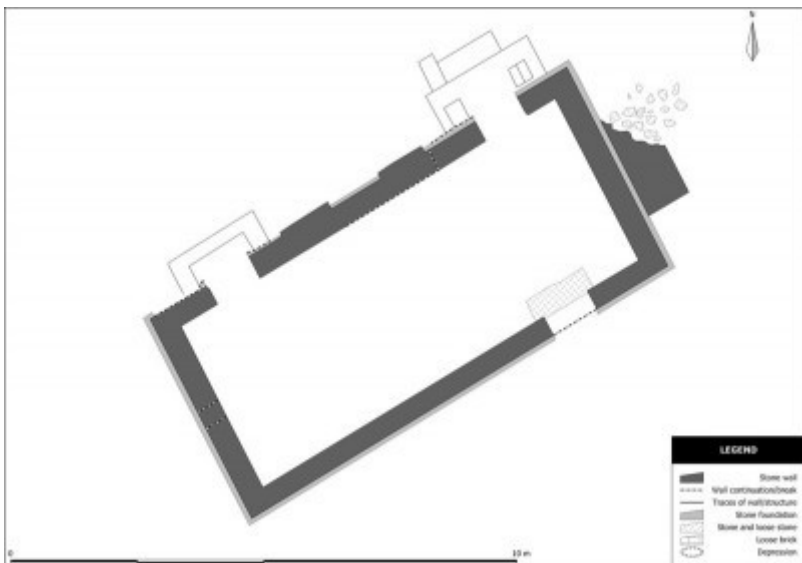
1 former mount alexander silk worm farm  
dog rock saddle road harcourt corner  
view



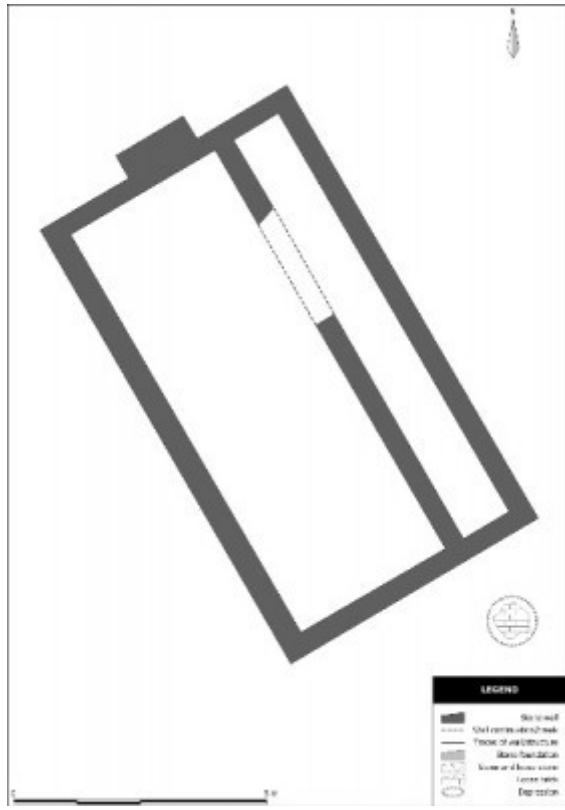
former mount alexander silk worm farm dog rock saddle road harcourt plan



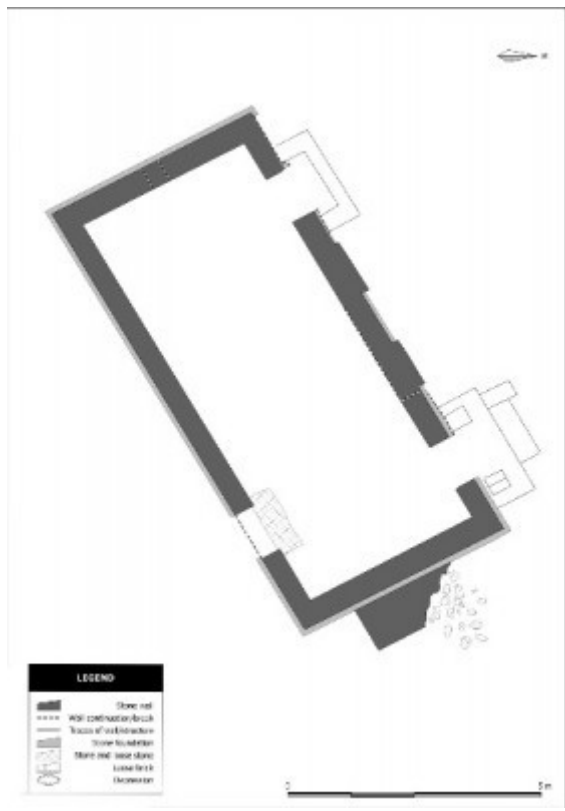
Silkworm Farm Plan.jpg



Silkworm Farm South Structure.jpg



Silkworm Farm North Structure.jpg



Silkworm Farm South Structure edited.jpg

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## Location

JOSEPH YOUNG DRIVE HARCOURT NORTH, MOUNT ALEXANDER SHIRE

## Municipality

MOUNT ALEXANDER SHIRE

## Level of significance

Registered

## Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

H1348

## Heritage Overlay Numbers

HO807

## VHR Registration

September 18, 1997

## Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Register

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## Statement of Significance

Last updated on - May 13, 1999

What is significant?

In 1872 Mrs Bladen Neill and the Victorian Ladies Sericultural Company established a silk worm farm on land at Mount Alexander, obtained through a grant from the Minister of Lands. The farm comprised plantings of mulberry trees with a number of associated structures, including a magnannerie (for breeding worms), a leaf room, a cottage, additional residential quarters, and a building used for educational purposes. The business failed in 1878. The site today consists of a series of ruined structural and archaeological features including the remains of at least two structures, exotic plantings and drainage/water supply elements.

How is it significant?

The Former Mount Alexander Silk Worm Farm is of historical, archaeological and social importance to the State of Victoria.

Why is it significant?

The Former Mount Alexander Silk Worm Farm is historically important for its association with a relatively obscure nineteenth century industry and with the role of women in nineteenth century industry. The farm was one of the first sericulture ventures established by a co-operative group rather than a single individual and it is one of only a small number of archaeologically documented businesses run by women in the nineteenth century. The site has a strong association with the development of the science of sericulture in Australia, particularly through its

association with Mrs Bladen Neill and her efforts in researching methodologies and promoting education programs in sericulture

The Former Mount Alexander Silk Worm Farm is important as an archaeological site as it is the only documented site with substantial material evidence relating to the practice of sericulture in Victoria, and one of only two documented sites in Australia. The site includes a diverse range of feature types and has considerable potential to reveal further information relating to specific activities at the site, both industrial and domestic. Archaeological excavation could reveal artefact and further structural remains which would also assist in identifying the functions of the existing structural remains.

The Former Mount Alexander Silk Worm Farm is important for its general association with the role of women in industry, business, and philanthropy in the second half of the nineteenth century and for its specific association with Mrs Bladen Neill and the women's co-operative - the Victorian Ladies Sericultural Association - set up to promote sericulture and to educate poorer women in rural areas, indicating an awareness and understanding of the contribution they could be made by women and children to the economic and social spheres of nineteenth century Australia.

## Permit Exemptions

### EXEMPTIONS FROM PERMITS:

(Classes of works or activities which may be undertaken without a permit under Part 4 of the Heritage Act 1995)

Harvesting of pine trees and root extraction by hand.

Construction dates	1872,
Heritage Act Categories	Registered place,
Hermes Number	5256
Property Number	

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## History

### Contextual History:History of Place:

(reference: C. Snelgrove, 1993 Results of a Survey at the Mount Alexander Silk Worm Farm H7723/90, report prepared for the Victoria Archaeological Survey)

Sericulture, the breeding of silkworms for the purpose of producing silk, was practiced in the nineteenth century most successfully by France, Italy, China and Britain. In 1825 it was suggested that silk production could be a profitable industry in Australia and the activity was included in the original prospectus of the Australian Agricultural Company. As the industry is dependent on mulberry trees the successful growth of mulberries in the colony during the first half of the nineteenth century was seen as being portentous for a viable future for a silk industry. The first commercial attempt to establish the industry was made in 1848 at Eastwood in New South Wales and there was at least one successful silk worm venture operating in Victoria by the 1860s (this was run by Mrs Ann Timbrell in Collingwood).

The basic requirements for silk worm farming were Mulberry trees, silkworms, buildings, and equipment. Mulberry leaves were required to feed the silk worms and if the trees were not grown as part of the operation it was possible to import the leaves to the site from another source. Two buildings were required for a certain time each year. The first was the magnannerie for the breeding of worms. Traditionally this building could be constructed of either timber or stone, was about 30-40 yards long, 11-12 feet wide and ideally 18-20 feet high. It was required to be well ventilated with a series of openings which could be fitted with shutters and glazed sashes or gauze. The building was divided into three rooms, two of which connected onto the third larger room. One of the smaller rooms was used for hatching the worms and had two stoves at one end; the other was used for preparing, cleaning and sorting the leaves. The larger room was fitted with shelves and used to rear the silk worms. A second building would need to be constructed if the silk was to be processed on site as a reeling room

was required for spinning the cocoons for silk.

Unfortunately sericulture was never a great commercial success in Australia. This appears have been due a series of reasons but the general complaint seems to have been that the industry was never taken seriously - possibly due to its association with women - and there was little encouragement to take it from the cottage industry level to larger commercial ventures. There were also issues to do with the choice of unsuitable land for the cultivation of Mulberry trees and charges that a suitable species of Mulberry was never developed to suit Australian conditions. Lack of suitable equipment, capital and expertise also took their toll.

#### Mrs Bladen Neill & the Victorian Ladies Sericulture Company Limited

Mrs Bladen Neill was a well known figure in nineteenth century Australian agriculture although her visions of the success of silk worm farming were never realised. Her activities indicated an awareness and understanding of the contribution that could be made by women and children to the economic and social spheres of nineteenth century Australia. She stands out as a woman who had the ability to express a feminine and domestic idealism within the economic reality of the Victorian era.

Mrs Bladen Neill established her first silk worm farm at Corowa in NSW after the early death of her husband in 1859. She travelled to England and southern Europe to increase her knowledge and arrange for the import of various mulberry species and breeding worms. Her first major failure - the death of 30,000 worms - didn't deter the Corowa enterprise, then known as "Mulberry Farm", and the subsequent introduction of new technology proved successful.

After another overseas business trip in 1871 Mrs Bladen Neill returned to Australia with hopes of establishing a cooperative company to train both male and female "grainers", "grain" being the term used for a silk worm egg. The aim was to encourage these grainers, especially the women, to on-train farmers' wives and daughters and spread information on sericulture through the rural community. A driving motivation was a recognition of the poor living conditions of this group of women - both social and economic - and a desire to provide a viable alternative source of income. As an initial step a number of women formed the Ladies Association for the Promotion of Sericulture (LAPS) in Melbourne which in 1872 led to the establishment of the Victorian Ladies Sericultural Company Limited (VLSC). The objectives of the company were "the production of grain and cocoons, and the reeling of raw silk; the carding of pierced cocoons; and the encouragement of silk farming throughout the whole of the colonies". It is interesting to note that the Memorandum and Articles of Association of the company stipulated that only women were eligible to be Directors.

In 1873 Mason, Firth and McCutcheon published a book by Mrs Bladen Neill titled "The Silk Worm: Its Education, Reproduction and Regeneration on M. Alfred Roland's Open-Air system".

After the failure of the Mount Alexander silk worm farm (see below) Mrs Neill and the Ladies Sericulture Company directed their resources and energy into extending the farm at Corowa. Silk from the Corowa farm was sold in Australia, Britain and Europe. It was even reported in 1877 that the Princess of Wales had ordered Corowa sericulture silk to make clothes for the royal children. The silk also won awards both nationally and internationally, including a Diploma of Merit from the Vienna Exhibition.

Mrs Neill passed away in August 1884, never having recovered from serious burn injuries inflicted by an accident in 1881.

#### History of Place:

In 1872 the VLSC secured a land grant from the Minister of Lands for 1000 acres at Mount Alexander. The reserve was set aside temporarily for the purposes of sericulture. An application for permanent reservation of the land was made two years later by Mrs Jessie Grover, a joint director of the VLSC with Mrs Bladen Neill, but was refused. Local residents were opposed to the scheme due to concerns relating to the potential loss of common and grazing land and curtailment of recreational activities - a total of 69 petitions against the farm had been submitted to the council.

Nothing daunted, the society continued with their silk worm activities at Mount Alexander and an article in the Castlemaine Mail dated 17 November 1874 provides a detailed description of the silk worm farm, noting the existence of a cottage, the magnanerie and a new building called the Leaf Room. It also indicates that the VLSC had commenced taking in pupils to teach them the skills needed for sericulture. According to Public Works records by 1875 they had planted 10 or 11 acres of land with mulberry trees and shrubs and had trenched, ploughed, fenced and cleared the ground, constructed a large dwelling house (probably the cottage referred to by the Castlemaine Mail), kitchens, a magnanerie and offices at a total cost of around 678 pounds.

trees and silk worms. In 1877 the mulberries were removed from Mount Alexander, under the direction of Mrs Neill, and taken to Cropper's Lagoon, four miles from Corowa. By 1878 the land had been sold and the public buildings placed in the hands of the new owner. The Victorian Ladies Sericultural Company was officially wound up and its assets disposed of in 1893.

#### COMPARISON:

The Mount Alexander Silk Worm Farm is the only currently known site in Victoria which retains structural evidence of nineteenth century silk worm farming. The only other documented example in Australia is at Corowa in New South Wales. The driveway at Chateau Tahbilk, a building which is on the Heritage Register, is lined with over a hundred white mulberry trees and these are included on the National Trust's Register of Significant Trees. While these may have been planted with intentions of engaging in sericulture there is no identified material evidence of sericultural activities at the site.

### Extent of Registration

1. All the archaeological features marked as follows on Diagram 501835 held by the Executive Director:

- F1 ruined rectangular granite building;
- F2 ruined two-roomed granite structure;
- F3 chimney remains;
- F4 three briar roses;
- F5 dam;
- F6 quarry site;
- F7 granite paving;
- F8 remains of drain or well;

2. All the land contained within a 250 metre radius of the point with Australian Map Grid co-ordinates 260650 5900100.

*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 data owner.*

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