Griffith Island

L10276 Griffith Island

L10276 Griffith Island Causeway

L10276 Griffith Island Lighthouse

L10276 Griffith Island Sand Dune

Location

PORT FAIRY VIC 3284 - Property No L10276

Municipality

MOYNE SHIRE

Level of significance

Regional

Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

H1659

Heritage Listing

National Trust

Statement of Significance

Last updated on - January 11, 2008

What is significant?

Griffith Island has played an important part in the historical development of Port Fairy commencing with a whaling settlement (1833), followed by grazing and then designation as a public park and recreation zone. The original three islands have been consolidated by man-made breakwaters, walls and spoil deposition, and have a history of human intrusion which changed the island as successive generations sought to shape the land for their purposes. The landward (north) boundary is formed by the River Moyne, and extensive training walls were constructed between 1869 and c.1920 in an effort to achieve a self-scouring effect and facilitate navigation.

Griffith Island is an unusual landform as an isolated basalt outcrop, overlain with calcareous sand. It lies at the extremity of the Mount Rouse lava flow of 300,000 years ago, and it has been suggested that the South West Passage, which separates it from the mainland, is the remains of a collapsed lava tunnel (Eric C.F. Bird, The Coast of Victoria,Melbourne University Press, 1993, p.43).

The seaward perimeter includes a number of small basalt ringed bays and lagoons. The island is the site of a major short-tailed shearwater (mutton-bird) breeding colony.

How is it significant?

Griffith Island is significant for historic and scientific reasons at a State level.

Why is it significant?

Griffith Island is significant as an example of a coastal landform which has a history of persistent human interference or use since the beginning of European settlement in Victoria, in the expectation that the construction works would facilitate human use of the site. There is also some, if limited, evidence of earlier aboriginal occupation.

Other Names	Rabbit/Goat/Griffith Island,
Hermes Number	71606
Property Number	

Physical Description 1

Griffith Island is formed by a basalt flow that originated from Mt Rouse, near Penshurst (Museum Victoria, Volcanoes Discovery Trail, and Penshurst Volcanic Interpretative Centre). The flow is overlain with calcareous sand dating from about 6,000 years ago (Edmund D & K.W.Gill, The Geology of Port Fairy, Western Victoria, Australia, Victorian Naturalist, Vol 90, No.9, September, 1973). Gill also suggests that the South West/Back Passage and other distinctive landforms around Griffith Island may be collapsed lava tunnels, citing the rock jointing and bay shapes (E.D.Gill, op cit).The vegetation in these areas includes Limonium australa, Calocephalus brownni, Rhagodia baccatt and Clematis microphilla. There is a small area of calcarenite rock apparent within the basalt boulders at the western end of the beach behind Dusty Miller Island on the southern side of the island (Appendix 2 n, o &q).

The island now appears as a continuous landform, but that is a result of human intervention by the construction of a breakwater, training walls (along an artificial line) and deposition of river bed spoil, so that the outline of the island is quite different to what it was in 1854. Although the above sea level profile has probably been modified by wind blown sand movement, the essential elements o remain, as indicated by the Sailing Directions (op cit)

(1855) and the detail contained in maps/charts of similar time(see Appendix 1c).

The sands on the island are unusual in being composed of unconsolidated finely broken shell fragments; they are yellowish-brown, friable and structureless (Land Conservation Council, Corangamite Study Area, May, 1976 p.50). Vegetated areas behind the sea front dunes on the south of the island contain significant accumulated decayed vegetative material in the upper profile, and are supportive of a variety of locally indigenous low level plants. The filled areas contain noticeable numbers of Leucopogon parviflorus and Lepidosperma gladiatum, in addition to marram grass, Tetragonia implexicoma and sundry weeds species.

Although not particularly noted for its flora, there are a number of historically interesting plantings in the government reserve, planted by the lightkeepers, including small patches of Stenotaphrum secundatum (buffalo grass), Iris germanica "Florentino", Saxifrage agax urbium (London Pride), Freesia alba, Vinca major, Narcissus tazetta (white jonquil), Pelargonium (old fashioned red geranium), Allium triquetrum and Allium ampeloprasum, Salvia africana-lutea and Zantedeschia aethiopica (Arum lily), as well as 8 Araucaria heterophylla (around the compound perimeter, and a few others within the island), Leptospermum laevigatum and Coprosma repens planted by the Haldanes, the latter as vegetative protection that subsequently reached nuisance proportions. There are also isolated Rhamnus alaternus, Echium vulgare, Agave americama and Lycium ferocissimum (boxthorn) plants on the island, although recent coastal protection programs have considerably reduced the extent.

In addition to a large colony (an estimated 40,000 burrows Port Fairy Gazette, 23/10/1970, letter from Gracie Bowker, bird observer) of annually migrating short-tailed shearwaters nesting throughout the island, the LCC note (op cit, p79) that the area is important for other migrants, and a variety of other species.

CONTEXT

Griffith Island is accessible by a permeable causeway built across the South West Passage in 1912 and made trafficable in 1959 (Port Fairy Gazette, 19/10/1959). Since the obstruction of the Passage, the channel has filled with sand carried to both sides by the ocean, and it is now possible to cross onto the Island at low summer tide through the previously deep Passage without difficulty.

The causeway allows access to an island surrounded by the ocean to west, south and east, and the varied tidal level of the Puddeny Grounds and the extended causeways clearly isolate the visitor from the mainland to the north. Despite the evidence of human intrusion in the history of the island, the visitor is led into a walk defined by a narrow track (surrounded by burrows) leading through a variety of estuarine and coastal landforms, with clear evidence of the underlying basalt flows, which form a black necklace to the west, south and at the eastern tip of the island.

To the west there are similar basalt formations and lagoons stretching to Cape Reamur, and the sand dunes behind South Beach to the westward of the island (approx. 1 kilometre) contain further shearwater burrows (see Appendix 2r&s).

The area is approximately 400 metres from residential development (to the north) and there is a wetland ("Sandy Cove") between, which is a remnant of the original environ and regularly floods in Winter/Spring. This area is separated from the residential development by open, grassed land (the eastern end of Southcombe Park) that is used for camping in the warmer months, and as a public open park for the remainder of the year. It contains a drainage way from wet lands further to the west, which feeds into Sandy Cove, and ultimately into South West Passage if the water level becomes too great.

The surrounding areas are linked to the island by geology, vegetation and, to some extent, fauna, as the mutton birds inhabit non-marram grass areas of South Beach, and the wallabies move between the island, Battery Hill and Southcombe Park. Exotic vegetation escapees from the town have slowly been carried into this area and onto the island. Similarly, the proximity to the town is probably attractive for cats and dogs to go onto the island. The tidal area of the Puddeny Grounds is attractive for wading and sea birds, for food and shelter, as it affords a degree of separation from visitors.

Intactness

While the outline of the island has been extensively modified, as described earlier, the topography of the basalt flow and overlying sands has been little modified by human action, and the only obvious change is the extent of the beach and the shape of the south facing dune on the ocean side of the island. Human traffic into the burrow area is small, so that, although an estimated 100,000 visitors per annum traverse the Island, most remain on formed tracks and footprints are usually all that is left behind. There are two vehicular tracks, one leading south to service the pumping station and outfall, and the other leading to the lighthouse. Vehicle access is prohibited to other than authorised vehicles. Neither single lane track causes significant intrusion.

There is scattered and varied evidence of the range of past human activities on the island, but their location and interpretation is not obvious. Seven interpretative signs focus on the broad history of the island and the lighthouse area, which is noted on the Victorian Heritage Register (H1659). Other cultural relics (cited in the text) are generally located off the track and therefore at little risk of damage, other than by natural decay.

The major threat to the habitat is from the expansion of exotic weed species, particularly Coprosma repens. Projects to remove Rhamnus alaternus, Lycium ferocissimum and other "intruders" have generally been successful (planted exotics have generally been confined to the lighthouse area), with the exception of Vinca major, which although confined, is not effectively controlled. The Coprosma has probably reached its current state of intrusion only since the 1930s, when the Haldanes used the plant for protective hedging. Starlings have been responsible for the distribution of the seeds across the island, and it is now a problem in the basalt rocks and starling roosting areas where it has formed some thick clumps, harbouring fox warrens and reducing nesting area. It is clearly eaten by the wallabies, and the Habitat Protection Plan (op cit) proposes the removal of the perimeter growth (see Appendix 2b-d).