
CEMETERY REEF GULLY CEMETERY

Location

MOUNT STREET CHEWTON, MOUNT ALEXANDER SHIRE

Municipality

MOUNT ALEXANDER SHIRE

Level of significance

Heritage Inventory Site

Heritage Inventory (HI) Number

H7723-0477

Heritage Overlay Numbers

HO979

Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Inventory

Statement of Significance

Last updated on - July 19, 2005

Primary historical records on the cemetery in Cemetery Reef Gully are scant. Its origins lie with the great Mount Alexander alluvial goldrush of 1851-54. Like the other small cemeteries linked to this rush, the Cemetery Reef Gully Cemetery would have closed c.1857. The cemetery is situated at the head of a gully that drains directly into Forest Creek. Gold seekers, in the frenzy for gold, chose a convenient patch of ground where gold was unlikely to be found, but one which was totally unsuitable in terms of the affect it had on the hygiene of those working and living along Forest Creek.

The Cemetery Reef Gully Cemetery is of historical, archaeological and scientific importance to the State of Victoria.

The Cemetery Reef Gully Cemetery is historically important due to its association with a key event in Victoria's history and a defining moment in the development of Australia's character and culture. The cemetery is associated with the first significant rush to the district. The Cemetery Reef Gully Cemetery is historically and scientifically important as a very rare artefact of Victoria's greatest gold rush. A comprehensive archaeological

survey of the Castlemaine district undertaken in 1989 concluded that ' because of the ephemeral nature of structures and technology (predominantly, timber and human sweat) employed in the early gold-rush days there is little physical evidence of the intensity of activity and cathartic social experience sustained by the study area during the rush years'. The significance of this site is also derived from its setting: the cemetery overlooking the heart of the Forest Creek diggings and the township of Chewton.

[Source: Victorian Heritage Register]

Hermes Number 8136

Property Number

History

Heritage Inventory History of Site: BackgroundThe first officially recognised discovery of gold in the Castlemaine district occurred in July 1851. Public announcement of the discovery, some six weeks later, sparked a stampede to Mount Alexander and led to its reputation as one of the world's richest shallow alluvial goldfields. In the earliest days of gold discovery [1851-2], Bendigo was also considered part of the Mount Alexander diggings. News of the new goldfield appeared without fanfare, in the 'Domestic Intelligence' column of the Argus on 8 September 1851. Following the Argus announcement, a trickle of diggers made their way to the spot near Mount Alexander, but the place was not rushed until early November. The Argus' correspondent on the spot reported on 8 November:Since Saturday morning, the scene has greatly changed - then a tent would be seen here and there, but now they are becoming inconveniently crowded... On Saturday, dozens were arriving at a time; on Sunday, hundreds; Monday and Tuesday, one continuous line of new arrivals. Your Melbourne departures are but trifling compared to the arrivals from Ballarat and the surrounding country Argus, 8/11/1851, p2 By October 1852, the population of the Mount Alexander goldfield reached about 30,000, and its output of gold was such that it ranked as the world's richest goldfield at the time. Blainey, G. 1969 The Rush that Never Ended: A history of Australian mining, p33 Many of the laws formed by the authorities to regulate and administrate gold mining in the State were formulated during the chaotic times of the Mount Alexander Diggings rush. From 1851 until at least 1854, the Mount Alexander goldfield was a shifting swarm of tents and flimsy bark huts. Although many gold seekers left for new goldfields, numbers on the Mount Alexander field were kept high by the arrival of large numbers of Chinese miners from 1854. The chaotic and early nature of the Mount Alexander gold rush meant that most deaths went unrecorded. Scant and isolated descriptions document a range of causes, by suicide, murder, accident and disease. Dysentery, in particular, was rife early. The first recorded deaths from the disease were in November 1851, two children buried in boxes due to a lack of boards for coffins. In early January 1952, the Argus reporter described the first adult death on the field from dysentery and that his remains were interred in one of the gullies near Chewton. The move towards distinct burial grounds was rapid as the number of deaths increased. In early March the same Argus correspondent describes the evolution of the first gold rush cemeteries: Dysentery...[is] now stalking abroad through the Diggings... Death follows death in quick succession, until the humble little burial place of four graves, to which one of your correspondents has alluded, has gradually assumed the appearance of a town cemetery. Argus, 22 March 1852 From 1851, at least seven burial grounds were established by the gold seekers: at Chewton , Golden Point, Pennyweight Flat, Castlemaine, Diamond Gully, Irishtown, and Vaughan. They were a product of their times, the dead buried amongst the living, on the fringes of the gold workings. Characteristically the graves were covered by sods and stones, surrounded by a rough fence. As the wealth generated by the gold 'civilised' the place, and the authorities established Castlemaine as an administration centre, the gold rush cemeteries were soon a nuisance, unhygienic and often in the wrong place. For example, the rocky nature of the ground at Pennyweight Flat had meant that the burials were very shallow (around two feet) necessitating above-ground stone mounds to be built, which were likened in a local press report in 1860 as 'tumuli, erected without mortar on pieces of sandstone broken from the surrounding rock'. The hill drained onto a flat which was a favoured location for alluvial gold mining. The only reference to its obvious danger to human health is the following small report in the Mount Alexander Mail, 13 April 1855:Pennyweight Flat Cemetery - A medical gentleman has given us information of the existence of a nuisance in the above burial ground, which is likely to cause disease. It appears the bodies are interred only four feet, the ground is rocky, and the stench arising therefrom intolerable. The depth of each grave ought to be at least eight feet. Mount Alexander Mail, 13

April 1855, pp. 2-3]The first cemetery at Castlemaine, which was fenced by Commissioner Wright in May 1852, ended up being, after the township survey, located in the middle of Templeton Street, in the town's commercial heart. The bodies were dug up and carted to the town's new (and current) cemetery at Campbell's Creek. All these early burial grounds were to be closed by the authorities by 1857, replaced by large formal cemeteries outside township limits: at Campbell's Creek, Chewton, Fryerstown and Vaughan. These cemeteries are still being used. The second wave of cemeteries, all established in the late 1850s are still in use. The first burial grounds generated by the Mount Alexander gold rush have lain abandoned for 140 years and the locations of some - such as Irishtown and Vaughan burial grounds - are not even recorded on Parish Plans. Two of the first burial grounds, Pennyweight Flat and Vaughan 'Chinese' Cemetery have been maintained by the local community as historic artefacts of the founding years of the shire. The recognition of the Pennyweight Flat Cemetery as a significant historical artefacts as has been remarkable, going back as early as the following whimsical report in the Mount Alexander Mail of July 1862:It is a feature in the social history of Victoria, at least in that portion of it which refers to the gold-fields, that we have amongst us now, although only ten years old, an antiquity as real as any other world has produced. In passing through the silent gullies which used to team with a busy population, one encounters in numbers the remains of the sod-built, mud-plastered chimneys, around whose firesides the pioneer diggers and his belongings used to assemble their household gods, in times gone by ... But they have not taken with them all that they brought with them. In strolling through the bush, one will often encounter on the summit of some lofty ridge-rock, or in the silence of some valley among the hills, an unpretending fence surrounding the remains of some pioneer digger, who died before society had consecrated the usual repositories of the dead. They stand their alone But in other places, the population of the district have combined; - have taken possession of a portion of public land for the purpose of internment ... Such a place is to be found on a grassy knoll near the mouth of Moonlight , on the eastern side. Mount Alexander Mail, 28/7/1862

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.

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