

VICTORIA'S HERITAGE

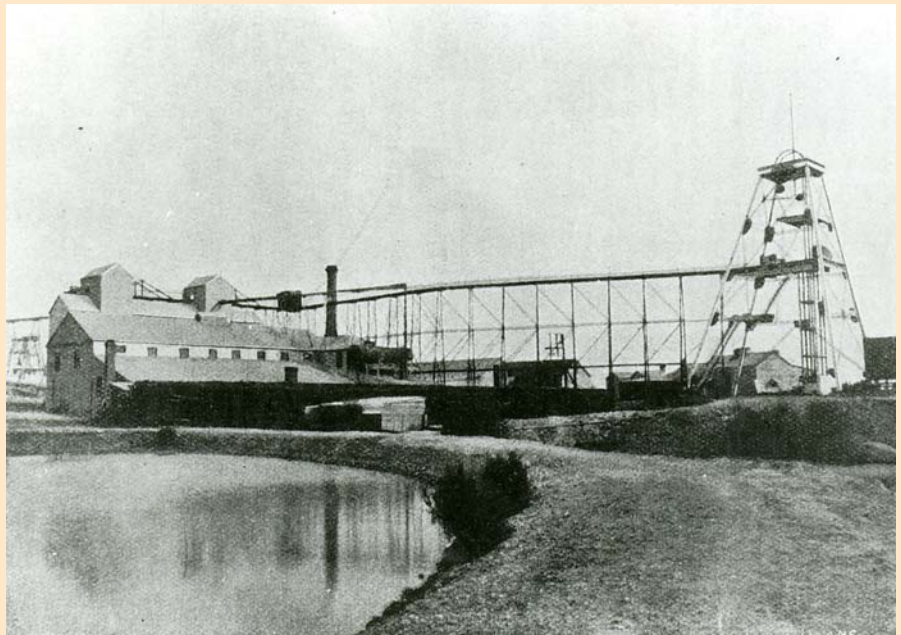
THE WHIPSTICK PUBLIC LANDS

By Daniel Catrice, circa 1995

The Whipstick Public Lands are a unique area of mallee and forest located north of Bendigo in north-central Victoria. Incorporating several nature conservation reserves – Whipstick State Park, Kamarooka State Park and Eaglehawk Regional Park – the Whipstick Public Lands protect a unique tract of mallee vegetation known as 'Whipstick scrub' and some of the best stands of box-ironbark woodland. It has attracted the interest of naturalists since the 1880s, and has been a rich field for gold diggers, "eucy" cutters and charcoal burners. Like many landscapes in north central Victoria, the Whipstick is the product of cultural and natural processes. Historic sites are scattered throughout the forest, beckoning visitors to search for evidence of the past.

The first inhabitants knew the Whipstick as "Neering". According to Ian Clark's analysis of Aboriginal tribal boundaries, the Whipstick scrub fell within the tribal boundaries of the Barababaraba people. The lack of permanent watercourses would have made the Whipstick inhospitable during the hot, dry summer months. At various times of the year it would have yielded foods such as Eastern Grey Kangaroo, Emu, Possum and a wide range of plants such as Murnong, or Yam Daisy.

Squatters and their flocks arrived in the 1830s and 1840s, driving Aboriginal people from their traditional lands. "The very spots most valuable to the Aborigines for their productiveness" wrote E.S. Parker in 1839 "are the first to be occupied. Settlers commonly believe that a squatting run entitles them to



Surface plant of South New Moon Co. Courtesy of DSE.

exclude the Aborigines from their runs". Henry Grey Bennett took up the 85,000 acre "Barnedown" run in 1839, in the process laying claim to most of the Whipstick scrub.

Squatters were in turn displaced by gold diggers who flocked to Bendigo in 1851. Within months of the first discovery, diggers were swarming the gullies and creeks, resembling, so William Howitt thought, "a flight of locusts which tear up and leave the earth desert in a few weeks". By 1852, at the height of the rush, it was estimated that diggers were arriving at a rate of 5,000 to 6,000 each week.

The northernmost limit of the diggings was located at Eaglehawk. Travelling northwards from Eaglehawk Gully, box-ironbark forest gave way to the thick mallee scrub from which 'the Whipstick' derived its name. (The first gold diggers thought the timber of these stunted eucalypts was useful only for making whip handles). With its dense vegetation and lack of permanent water, the Whipstick presented a formidable natural barrier to the

VICTORIA'S HERITAGE

extension of the Bendigo field. Nevertheless, its nuggetty riches proved to be very enticing to the adventurous digger. By January 1852 a small party had penetrated north of Eaglehawk to the vicinity of Lightning Hill where they unearthed a large nugget weighing 332 ounces. The Whipstick proved extraordinarily rich in nuggets with over 90 nuggets weighing over 20 ounces found, the largest tipping the scales at 573 ounces.

Life on the Whipstick diggings was especially harsh. The main diggings were in the vicinity of Flagstaff Hill in the present Whipstick State Park. There were rushes to various localities but the inhospitable nature of the country discouraged the development of substantial townships. Water was scarce, the summers dry and hot, and bushfires were frequent. The dense scrub made the Whipstick a perilous place for the unwary digger. "The traveller through it could not see a yard before him or around him" claimed one visitor to the field in 1861, "every step had to be cut through a dense undergrowth of creepers and rank vegetation".

The quartz reefs, source of the alluvial gold, were worked from the mid 1850s. Whilst rich patches were occasionally struck, gold generally failed to be consistently payable at lower depths. The most successful companies worked the Moon reef. The success of the New Moon and South New Moon companies in the early 1900s prompted a great deal of activity on this reef, but by 1910 yields were



South New Moon Mine today. Courtesy of DSE.

declining and by the 1920s all mining had ceased.

Visitors can inspect the remains of the New Moon, North New Moon and South New Moon mines in the Eaglehawk Regional Park. But wherever the visitor may care to look there are signs of the search for gold, including alluvial diggings, mining dams and water races, shafts and mullock heaps.

As the mines went into decline, eucalyptus oil production became an important alternative source of employment. In the Whipstick much land was being taken out of the auriferous class and being thrown open for selection. 'Eucy' production offered a means of subsistence for the battling selector whilst he cleared and improved his land. Experiments into mallee vegetation had proved that this previously contemptible species could be turned to profit. Mallee was particularly suited to long-term production. Its main stem, which grows from one lignotuber, can sustain repeated cutting and as the Acting Conservator of Forests observed in 1906, can be cut and cut again 'like lucerne'.

By 1900 the 'eucy' industry was firmly established, with oil distilled in Victorian forests being exported to the United Kingdom, USA, Canada, India, China and New Zealand. In the Whipstick production remained largely the sphere of the rural poor. Selectors used primitive distillation methods, selling the crude oil to pharmaceutical companies such as Bosisto's for further refining.

In the 1920s the price of oil plummeted, forcing many Whipstick selectors to abandon their blocks. One selector called before the local Land Board told of the hardships faced by many in the industry:

I have over 30 acres now in crop. I have it all fenced, three dams and killed 150 acres, and when the eucalypts oil failed it was a big blow to me as I was depending on it. I could name a dozen around me who have cleared out and left the ground

VICTORIA'S HERITAGE

because they could not make a living. With what I have cleared I will grow wheat or oats. Most of them around only went in for eucalyptus oil and as soon as eucalypts went bung, they had to clear off the land.

During the 1920s and 1930s a large number of failed selections were returned to the Crown as Eucalyptus Oil Production Areas. Small operators were replaced by larger companies such as Bosisto's who obtained leaf from private land and reserved forest. Today only a few producers are a work in the Whipstick Public Lands. The physical evidence of this once thriving industry can be traced through the existing Eucalyptus Oil Production Area, where harvesting continues, and several historic "eucy" sites such as Ruedin's in



Loser's Distillery. Boiler. Courtesy of DSE.

Kamarooka State Park and Hartland's, just north of Loeser's picnic ground, in Whipstick State Park.

Another important forest-based industry was charcoal burning. From 1916 the Noble brothers were working in the Kamarooka forest, producing charcoal for use by a local ice works to line ice chests. With the introduction of petrol rationing as a wartime measure in 1940, charcoal was used as a substitute fuel, burned in producer gas units specially fitted to motor cars and trucks. By mid-1942, there were 221 charcoal kilns and 12 charcoal pits operating in forest reserves throughout Victoria. By this time, to keep up with the demand, there were at least two

gangs of twenty men working in the Kamarooka forest. Evidence of this industry can still be seen in the Kamarooka State Park.

The Second World War marked the centenary of European exploitation of the Whipstick Public Lands, and in that time the forest had changed greatly. Indeed the descriptions of an impenetrable scrub recorded by gold diggers in the 1850s strongly suggests that the forest which Aborigines had kept open with their light and regular burning had altered in just twenty years under European 'control'. With mining came large-scale clearing which was so poorly regulated that a Commission appointed to review the 1865 Land Act recommended that the government establish a system of State forests. The report drew attention to the destruction of forests caused by goldmining and land settlement.

A great number of person employ themselves in cutting timber for the mines. They fell the best, and destroy more than they use, consequently there is unnecessary waste.

The report concluded that "if steps were not taken to enforce a more economical use of native timber, and to conserve the forests, there will soon be a difficulty in getting timber for the use of the miner".

Conservation of the Whipstick Public Lands was thereby predicated on the need to protect a resource for future exploitation by industry. In 1873 24,000 acres of forest north of Whipstick was reserved as the Kamarooka and Egerton State Forest. In the following year a Mr. A. Warren was appointed caretaker of the forest, which was described at the time as highly degraded. Lack of funds and inadequate staffing meant that forest protection, let alone silvicultural treatment of denuded stands, was largely ineffectual. In 1884 the Kamarooka and Egerton State Forest was reduced to 17,500 acres through land selection, and in 1899 grazing regulations were introduced to allow any person residing within 20 miles of the Kamarooka and Egerton

VICTORIA'S HERITAGE

State Forest the right to depasture 30 head of cattle. As one historian has perceptibly written, Crown land reserves in Victoria, far from being symbols of *the* public interest, were reminders of the existence of *many* public interests.

Interest in the natural history of the Whipstick was demonstrated surprising early, considering the perceived inhospitable nature of the country. In 1857 the Whipstick correspondent to the Bendigo Advertiser responded to derogatory comments about the forest in the following terms:

To appreciate the pictorial effect and poetic grandeur of the landscape [you must visit the reefs] at eve, when the sun's low down the west, or at early dawn when dew drops sparkle on the leaves. [You] will then see all the lights and shadow of the picture to advantage and the... tints and mellow shades and fair perspective of an Australian landscape that could scarcely be exceeded in point of characteristic beauty and powerful effect.

Towards the latter half of the 19th century, the Field Naturalist Club of Victoria and the Bendigo Science Society were keen advocates for the conservation of the abundant botanical and animal life of the Whipstick scrub. Over the next fifty years a number of surveys were carried out to identify and list the plants, birds and animals found in the Whipstick. It was one of these naturalists, A. Tadgell, writing in the Victorian Naturalist in 1940, who first mooted the idea of reserving part of the scrub as a national park.

The Bendigo Field Naturalists Club, formed in 1945, took up the challenge, urging the then National Parks Authority to have 2,560 acres of forest surrounding Flagstaff Hill designated as a national park. The Authority rejected the submission, proposing instead a Phebalium reserve for the area. Undeterred the Field Naturalist Club and the Bendigo Jaycees organised a Whipstick Seminar which

recommended that the Whipstick Crown lands, and the reserved forest north and south of the Crown lands, be set aside as a national park and that "tactful attempts" be made to purchase any private land necessary to conserve a "complete, unbroken viable ecological unit". Significantly, the Seminar made allowances for the continuation of eucalyptus leaf harvesting which was seen as contributing to the floral diversity of the forest and was considered a preferred land-use option than agricultural clearing.

In 1971 the Forests Commission created the Whipstick Forest Park, covering 8,000 hectares. The proposal for a national park had stalled, but significant progress was being made on other fronts. In 1974 local forester, Bill Flentje, drew up a list of blocks for priority acquisition based on their ecological significance. By 1984, 26 allotments totalling 1,940 hectares had been purchased through grants and land exchange. Following Land Conservation Council recommendations in 1986, the Whipstick and Kamarooka State Parks were proclaimed and officially opened by Minister for Conservation, Forests & Lands, Joan Kirner, in April 1987. The remaining public lands were set aside as the Eaglehawk Regional Park, the Eucalyptus Oil Production Area, gravel reserves, Phillips Gully Flora Reserve and the Kamarooka Reference Area.

The reservation of large tracts of the Whipstick Public Lands for conservation of natural and cultural resources heralded a new era in the history of the Whipstick scrub. Yet, in many respects it reflected simply a new emphasis or phase in the historical relationship between humans and this unique environment. Exploited by miners and leaf cutters, described by visitors, surveyed by naturalists, and mapped by forest managers, the Whipstick Public Lands is the product of interactions between the cultural and the natural world. For those with an interest in history, or for that matter those interested in wildflowers, bird and animal life, the Whipstick Public Lands are well worth a visit. Clues to the history of this

VICTORIA'S HERITAGE

unique landscape are writ large for those who make the effort to look.

SOURCES

This article is based largely on research carried out by Kathryn Evans for her M.A. Thesis, 'Cultural Landscapes of the Whipstick Public Lands, Bendigo', Monash University, 1991. Additional information came from Historic Places Section Resource Collection files, *Whipstick Public Lands Proposed Management Plan*, Department of Conservation, Forests & Lands (1989), and W. Perry's book, *Tales of the Whipstick*, (Eaglehawk, 1978).