

HISTORY: The manufacture of firebricks in Bacchus Marsh is said to have commenced in the 1880s when William Wittick, in partnership with a Mr Akers (and Telford?), quarried a rich deposit of fire clay at Darley. In 1902, financial assistance was obtained from the contractor and businessman, David Mitchell. A large, two-storey weatherboard building was erected, containing a pug mill, steam powered clay grinding and brick pressing equipment, coal fired, down-draught kilns and a Chilian mill. Adjoining this building were engine and boiler houses, above which rose a brick and iron chimney shaft. 'The supply of clay' observed the *Bacchus Marsh Express*, was 'practically unlimited'.¹

However, it is not known if fire bricks were manufactured on the site prior to 1902. Mitchell was a prominent building contractor and building material supplier operating a large lime quarry and associated kilns at the David Mitchell Estate in Lillydale, and with interests in many other ventures including the lime kilns at Coimadai. Later the Darley brickworks became a wholly owned part of David Mitchell Estates.

A second kiln was built in 1905, another was erected in 1907, and a third was some months later.² The *Bacchus Marsh Express*, a keen observer of events at the Darley Firebrick Company, proclaimed the enterprise 'Marvellous and Prodigious'.³ Two chimney stacks were erected in 1907 and 1908. Also constructed were a two-storey transverse shed and a 'cemented' water tank holding 25,000 gallons (113,650 litres).⁴

Within a few years of commencing operation, the products of the Darley works were recognised by Australian gas engineers to be the equal of imported refractories.⁵ Local clays contributed to the quality of the bricks. The works has been a major supplier of refractories for gas works in Melbourne, with side-lines in moulded fire bricks for foundries and smelting furnaces and complete kiln liners for potteries.⁶ During the Second World War, the firebrick works was supplying refractories to many munitions factories and had reached a point where all possible workers in the local area had been recruited to the factory. Retorts and refractory bricks were subsequently supplied to gas utilities throughout Australia.

By 1936, the Darley Firebrick Company employed 56 workers, and produced 'every conceivable form and size of refractory ware... from that used at the backs of domestic grates up to the huge gas retorts'.⁷ There were then sufficient deposits of fireclay and silica 'to keep the works busy for the next fifty years at the very least'.⁸

¹ BME 18 January 1908.

² BME 22 August 1905; 19 January 1907; 3 August 1907.

³ Ibid. 6 July 1907.

⁴ 113,400 litres.

⁵ Proudley, *Circle of Influence* p.369

⁶ Vines, *Western Region Industrial Heritage Study* p.38.

⁷ *Bacchus Marsh Centenary Celebrations*, p.24)

⁸ Ibid.

VISUAL DESCRIPTION: The principal buildings include a bank of down-draft kilns, the clay processing works and brick processing works. These later two contain machines of c1930 vintage including edge-runner mills and dry-press brick-making machines. Other hand presses appear to date from a much earlier period, as does the edge-runner mill sitting in the yard, which bears the makers plate of G.M. Seward & Sons of Melbourne. Little evidence survives of the tramway system once used for clay and brick transference. Sheds are of timber and corrugated iron construction, but the processing buildings have substantial brick footings for machinery and drive trains.

Sections of early buildings remain along the east side, where original timber louvred walls are intact. These provided ventilation for drying green bricks before firing. The kiln shed at the northern end also appears to be an early structure, while the tall clay processing building may be original in part, but has been extensively altered, to accommodate modern plant, and has recently been entirely reclad in colourband sheeting.

Three brick chimneys survive, although only the southernmost is in use. This dates from 1902 and is circular, with iron reinforcing bands added. It has lost its ornamental top, having been truncated by several metres some time after the 1950s. The central chimney, which is believed to date from 1907, is square, with decorative cream brick bands and retains its corbelled and ribbed crown. This was built for the steam boilers and engine which originally drove all the machinery via line-shafting and belting, some evidence of which can still be found. Concrete pads mark the boilerhouse site just north of the chimney. The northern-most chimney is also square, and dates from 1909. It is not shown in the available early illustrations, but closely matches the boilerhouse chimney with a similar decorative crown.⁹

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: There are seven nineteenth century industrial buildings or sites in Bacchus Marsh. This is the only surviving nineteenth century industry still operating. This is the only remaining firebrick works with any early structure remaining in Victoria, one of the few brickworks retaining its original chimneys (they are of a particularly fine design), and with substantial, although altered buildings dating from the establishment of the works on the site. Some remaining pieces of plant may also be significant. The kilns have been rebuilt over the years as have those of any brickworks.

Comparable to the few remaining brickworks in Victoria: the Hoffman Brickworks at Brunswick, which has three Hoffman kilns and the Standard Brickworks at Box Hill, with a single Hoffman Kiln. The Wunderlich tileworks at Mitcham has several down-draft kilns similar to those at Darley and perhaps also other kilns.

⁹ Moore & Oomes, p. 64; D.B. Doyle, (Manager David Mitchell Estate) 'Manufacture of Gas Works Refractories A Local Enterprise', *The C.G.A. Service Messenger*, December 1942.

SIGNIFICANCE: An early twentieth century industrial plant, buildings and chimneys, manufacturing firebricks for almost a century, and possibly since the 1880s. Sections of early buildings survive and three prominent brick chimneys: circular (southernmost, 1902), square (central, 1907) and northernmost (square, 1909). There are early clay brick hand presses and c1930s claybrick processing equipment.

The equipment, plant, buildings, quarry and chimneys are of state historical significance as a representative embodiment of an early twentieth century industrial and extraction process. It is socially significant, locally as a local landmark, used by the community for orientation.

INTACTNESS: Reasonable.

CONDITIONS & THREATS: Reasonable. The industry is now located in the developing residential suburb of Darley, and presumably its viability must be limited for this reason.

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299.

