

Heritage Overlay No.: 041
Citation No.: 065
Place: Aitken’s Gap Pine Avenue, Calder Freeway

Other Names of Place: Pine Avenue, The Gap
Location: Calder Freeway, Diggers Rest.
Critical Dates: Early twentieth century.
Existing Heritage Listings: None
Recommended Level of Significance: LOCAL



Statement of Significance:

The plantation of mature Monterey Pines (*Pinus radiata*) is significant as the most substantial evidence of the existence of the Gap township, which originated as a wayside service centre for gold-rush traffic on the Mt Alexander Road. Recent upgrading of the Calder highway into a freeway has removed most of the south-western side of the avenue, and considerably diminished the aesthetic significance of the plantation. The avenue is likely to have been planted by the Shire of Melton, but may also have associations with the Country Roads Board.

The avenue is historically significant at a LOCAL level (AHC A.4). It is the most substantial remaining evidence of the former gold-rush wayside settlement of The Gap, which declined dramatically after the internationally significant rush to Mount Alexander subsided, and after after the opening of the railway (1859/1862). It is also one of a distinguished series of old conifer plantings on this route, since renamed the Calder Highway, most of which have now been bypassed. It is also the most prominent remaining example of a type of street planting associated with the Shire of Melton.

The avenue is also scientifically (horticulturally) significant at the LOCAL level on account of the age of the trees, which would appear to have been planted sometime in the early twentieth century. It is representative of conifer street plantings which were popular in the 1860-80s, but of which there are now very few examples remaining in Victoria (AHC B.2). If it dates back to the nineteenth century, it would be one of the oldest remaining avenues of this species.

Overall, the remnant Monterey Pine avenue at the Gap is of LOCAL significance.

Description:

The trees are the remnant of a mature avenue of Monterey Pine, *Pinus radiata*, on the Calder Freeway at Diggers Rest. On the south-western (Shire of Melton) side the avenue comprises approximately three trees. There are also approximately eight in the median strip, the remains of a very old, substantial and partly intact double row. This total number has been reduced by half in recent years and it is likely that more will be lost during the current severe drought.

The upgrade of the Calder Highway to the Calder Freeway in recent years created a new Melbourne bound lane on the north-east side of the avenue, and what was formerly the north-east side of the plantation is now in the median strip. Most of the south-western side of the avenue was destroyed in these works, and remaining trees are mostly damaged or stunted. However this south-western side of the road is an integral part of a much larger avenue (c.800 metres in length) and necessary to preserve the original purpose of the remnant plantings as an avenue. Overall the trees are considered to be generally in fair to good condition, although some are poor.¹

The context of the area is the Calder Freeway, Gap Road, and the former settlement of Aitken's Gap township, with its residential streets, and a few buildings remaining on allotments to the east side of the road. The plantation is the main evidence of the existence of this historically important settlement; it comprises an interesting landscape feature in the district and on the Freeway.

The extent of heritage area is the remnant Monterey Pine plantings at the former Gap township, and the roadways along which they are planted.

History:

Historical Context: 'Aitkens Gap' (or 'The Gap') Township

Aitken's Gap township takes its name from John Aitken, one of the original explorers and squatters in Port Phillip, who established his run in the area. His original track to Melbourne did not take up the line of the Macedon Road which passed through the later Sunbury and Bulla settlements to the north, but went direct to Keilor roughly along the line of the present highway. By the time of the gold-rush this track was part of the main road to Portland, passing via Melton (later) and Bacchus March. At this early stage the road passed to the west of Mt Tophet, instead of its present alignment to the east of the Mount. However the 'road' would have been just a track, and it is likely that both of these slightly different routes would have been in use.

The present line of road was decided upon by the government surveyors during the early days of the gold-rush. In May 1852 this route was selected in preference to the main Macedon Road

¹Hawker, J, "Report: The Gap, Monterey Pine Avenue", Calder Highway (23 June 1994).

(which passed through Bulla and Sunbury) which would have required the construction of “two heavy bridges”² This decision led to the establishment of a thriving goldrush stopover, and then settlement, at Aitken’s Gap.

Construction of the road, entailing drainage, metal surfacing, and building of culverts and bridges, began about this time, but took many years to complete to a reasonable standard. As a result the progress of the colourful tide of humanity which passed along the road (it was thought to be the busier than any road in England during the gold-rush³) was very slow, and there was the need for places of refreshment and repair at short intervals. And so hotels, stores, and blacksmiths sprang up, and at some of these places the Government surveyed and proclaimed a new township. Thus ‘The Gap’ (between Mount Tophet and Bourke’s Hill) came into official being.

Aitken’s Gap became one of the key stages of the trip to the gold-fields apparently because it was strategically situated for the second overnight stop on the journey out from Melbourne. It also marks a watershed on the journey, the end of the long haul through the Keilor plains (often either a quagmire or a dustbowl), or the springboard for the final run down to Melbourne. It was located on higher and drier ground, and presumably had a supply of springwater.

When the township was subdivided in 1854 the surveyor noted the location of two stores, a hotel, and the Police Station. Reserves were also set aside for the Church of England and Roman Catholic denominations. On the site of one of the stores there were, until the recent upgrading, two wide-spreading Italian cypress (*Cupressus sempervirens*), an uncommon tree in Victoria.⁴ The police station was primarily a staging post for the gold-escort. A bluestone gaol (removed by local citizens and rebuilt at Sunbury a few years ago), was used to secure the gold overnight. There was a large stable and forage component at the station. A Post Office was opened at The Gap store as early as 1856. In 1855 one of Caroline Chisholm’s “shakedown” - cheap and good accommodation erected for women and children along the route to the gold-fields - was constructed at The Gap.⁵

A description of the Gap in the latter stages of this period suggests that it had its origins as a stopping place for bullockies. A traveller, William Kelly, described his ascent by coach up to the “gap” in 1858:

“Arrived at the top, it was a scene of extraordinary bustle and uproar, for it was then a special camping place for drivers and carriers, and the scores upon scores of horse drays and bullock-wagons that were preparing for a start, produced an amount of tumult, altercation, blasphemy, and compound abominations which would not find many readers even if I succeeded in reproducing it”.⁶

The hotel which was shown on the survey plan of 1854 was the Gap Inn. Its improvements only (excluding land value) were estimated by the government to be worth £4,449 in 1854. The weatherboard inn had an attic, and there was a kitchen, a stable, a store, a hayhouse, a cart shed, a laundry, a separate house for the landlord and other improvements. The owner disputed

² Broughton, J.A.S., Walters, N.F. “A General Survey of the Early Settlement and Architecture along the Maribymong between Bulla and Keilor”, (Architecture Thesis, Melbourne University, 1963).

³ Edward Richardson, to the Victorian Institute of Science’s 1854-55 Session, cited in Broughton, *op cit*.

⁴ Hawker, *op cit*.

⁵ Knights, P.S., “The Caroline Chisholm Shelter Sheds”, (unpublished typescript, Oct. 1990), *passim*.

⁶ Kelly, W. *Life in Victoria...1853...1858*, (facsimile ed., Lowden, Kilmore, 1977), p.169 (1858).

the government valuation, claiming that he had twice been offered £7000 for the inn.⁷ Like many hotels at the time it was a de facto mortuary, and had an informal cemetery to its rear where a number of men were buried, some of whom were victims of cart accidents. There was also a quarry at its rear. The Gap Inn later seems to have become the Millett family's Bald Hill Hotel, which an old photograph shows as a substantial two story brick building. A few remnants of the foundations of this hotel survive. Michael Bourke's Manchester Hotel was later rebuilt at the Gap, south of its original site a little further along the highway.

The opening of the railway as far as Sunbury in 1859 and its completion to Bendigo in 1862 had a dramatic effect on the Gap. The Mt Alexander Road became virtually redundant as a route for through traffic. In 1859 both the Gap police gold escort and the Gap mail service were downgraded. The post office now became a branch of Sunbury, with the mail reduced to only three deliveries per week.⁸ By 1862 the price of the nearby National Hotel had plummeted to less than half its 1855 price.⁹

Many of the town allotments sold at the Gap in the 1850s and later in the 1870s went to locals with other nearby investments, such as WJT Clarke, Owen Fisher (storekeeper), G Millett (farmer and publican), and JD Starkie (Sunbury butcher). It would seem that very few people lived in the township itself. Similarly, the sale of 'suburban' allotments (c.10-20 acre, or 4-8 ha) around the town along Gap Road in the 1870s and 80s does not appear to have brought many new residents into the area, most being purchased by Michael Bourke, George Millett, A Funston (whose family was later associated with Toolern Vale), and P Corcoran, and consolidated into larger allotments.

Still, there was some intensive farming in the area, notably the Bald Hill vineyards which were established in the mid 1860s. In 1865 the population in the area was estimated to be 400.¹⁰ This reduced to 100 by 1880, and 50 in 1895. In 1900 the State School, which had had a precarious existence, was officially closed; in the 1930's its site was revoked. The revival of farming in the early twentieth century together with the sale of the surrounding Clarke estate gave the Gap a boost, and the Shannon school was opened a little north of the town. However, the town barely features in the historical record by this stage.

The hotels, Caroline Chisholm shakedown, and all other historic fabric have disappeared from the Gap (apart from some archaeological remains), and the Monterey Pine avenue is only obvious evidence of the historic settlement which had once been a waymark of Victoria's major goldrush road.

The Gap Pines

⁷PRO, VPRS 44, Unit 472.

⁸Eg, PRO, VPRS 937 (50). Letters 21/7/59 & 23/7/59 re downgrading Keilor station, warranted "now that prisoners are conveyed by rail from Sunbury". In that same year it was recommended (28/9/59) that Bulla station was no longer necessary. Straight after the opening of the first stage of the railway, to Sunbury, the advantage of removing the gold escort facilities from the Gap to Sunbury was contemplated (17/2/59). Due to its being a changeover for the gold escort, the Gap station at the time had one of the largest forage orders in the colony, but this was closed down completely in January 1864 (PRO, miscellaneous reports, filed under Police). Waghorn, JF, "A History of the Buttlejork Post Office", in George Evans Museum PO Folder.

⁹Luebbers, R, *An Archaeological Investigation of the National Hotel (H7822-0152); A Mid-19th Century Roadhouse on the Calder Highway between Millett Road and South Gisborne, Victoria* (VicRoads, November 1994).

¹⁰ *Victorian Gazetteer*, 1865.

From the 1860s Monterey Pine became widely available in nurseries, the State Nursery (Macedon) and Botanic Gardens, and was distributed to landowners and Crown reserves. It was the most popular species of the conifers which became popular from this time for parks, gardens, cemeteries, streets, and as windbreaks.¹¹

The species *Pinus radiata* lives for 80-100 years on average, though a few isolated cases extend to 150 years. Observation suggests that the Gap pines date from sometime between the 1870s and 1920s. A nineteenth century date would make this one of the oldest remaining avenues of this species. Further, only a few examples of the use of conifers for street plantings remain in Victoria, as from the 1880s deciduous trees, instead of the conifers, were recommended for street planting.

During the nineteenth century Melton Shire extended into the heart of Sunbury, in a wedge between Vineyard and Gap Roads. The township of The Gap, or Aitkens' Gap, was at that stage completely within the jurisdiction of the Shire of Melton. There are matching *Pinus radiata* street plantings in the streets of Sunbury, but only in that part to the west of the railway line, which was within the Shire of Melton. The Sunbury pines are prominent along the approach roads from Melton - Vineyard Road and Horne Street from Diggers Rest, and also mark the entrance to the town on Gap Road. There is a matching plantation of pines at the other end of Gap Road at Aitkens Gap. It appears then that the pines were planted by the Shire of Melton, probably to signify Melton Shire's presence and legitimacy as well as simply to beautify these areas.

The right of Melton Shire to land right in the heart of Sunbury was contested by the Shire of Bulla, especially around the turn of the century and in the early twentieth century, when lack of adequate sanitation services in the Melton area west of the railway was blamed for pollution of Jacksons Creek. This represented a serious health hazard, as Jacksons Creek was used for various purposes, especially in times of drought. Sometime between 1892 and 1924 the portion of Melton shire within the town of Sunbury itself was transferred to the Shire of Bulla. (The whole of the balance of the area north-east of the Calder Highway was not transferred to Bulla Shire until the late 1950s.) It is likely then that the pines were planted at least by 1924, and probably sometime around the turn of the twentieth century.

Thematic Context / Comparative Analysis:

Melton Historical Themes:

- Community: Towns and People.
- Transport.

Known comparable examples:

There are also other similar Shire of Melton Monterey Pine street plantings at Gap Road (both at the Gap and in Sunbury), and in Fitzroy Street, The Gap. The plantings at the Gap are relatively intact and attractive avenues. However the Vineyard Road / Horne Street Sunbury plantings now consist of only a few isolated remnants, most having been removed in recent years.

¹¹All the information relating pines, their general history, and visual assessment of the age of the Gap pines, comes from Hawker, *op cit*, and pers. conv.

The Gap avenue is also one of a series of different conifer plantings along the Calder Highway, and are a significant landscape feature of this old goldfields road. There are other plantings at Keilor, Macedon, Gisborne, Woodend, Malmsbury (two plantations, north and south of the town), and Harcourt. The Gap planting however is one of only a few of these which are not already, or will not be, bypassed by the new alignment of the highway. The existence of these plantings along the highway suggests a possible link with the formation of the Country Roads Board (c.1913); the road was named after the first chairman of the Board, William Calder.

Much poorer specimens of Monterey pine street plantings also survive in the drier southern part of Melton Shire, on Boundary Road at Truganina: these may have been planted by the former Shire of Braybrook.

Other conifer street plantings remain at Bright, Berwick, Hamilton, Coleraine, near Trawalla, and near Creswick. There are also Norfolk Island Pine (*Araucaria heterophylla*) plantings at Warrnambool, Port Fairy, and Portland.

Condition:

Fair

Integrity:

Damaged/Disturbed

Recommendations:

Recommended for inclusion in the Melton Planning Scheme Heritage.

Recommended Heritage Overlay Schedule Controls:

External Paint Controls:	<i>No</i>
Internal Alteration Controls:	<i>No</i>
Tree Controls:	<i>Yes</i>
Outbuildings and/or Fences:	<i>No</i>

Other Recommendations:

- The life of the existing plantation should be maximised, and their health monitored by a professional horticulturist.
- A long term policy should be developed to preserve the tradition of this historical *Pinus radiata* plantation at Diggers Rest. This may involve use of the same species for infill of gaps, gradual replacement (every second, third, or fourth tree), or block removal and replacement.