

Heritage Overlay No.: 048
Citation No.: 077
Place: Former Murphy Dam

Other Names of Place: None
Location: 209-247 Plumpton Road Diggers Rest (Lot S2 PS 434718)
Critical Dates: Construction: likely mid-late 1850s.
Existing Heritage Listings: None
Recommended Level of Significance: LOCAL



Statement of Significance:

The former Murphy dam, at 209-247 Plumpton Road, Diggers Rest, is significant as an example of a type of dam constructed in nineteenth century Melton by some small pastoralists and farmers in an attempt to counteract the extremely dry local climate. Its dry-stone construction with roughly worked bluestone is aesthetically pleasing, and an excellent example of a small dam of this type in Melton.

The former Murphy drystone wall dam, Diggers Rest, is historically significant at the LOCAL level (AHC A4, B2). It is a small example of at least five similar, very well built, dry stone dam structures in the Shire, three of which were built on the Clarke Rockbank pastoral estate. These dams express the importance of water in the extremely dry local climate. They may also have been related to the difficulty of excavating large ‘tanks’ (paddock dams) in the area, much of which has high bluestone bedrock. It appears to be an early dam, built c.early-mid 1850s. It

is of particular interest for having been built by a small farmer / dairyman, rather than a pastoralist or large farmer. Built by James Murphy, a pioneering Diggers Rest farmer, it contributed to the success of his small farm and the survival of his family on the otherwise dry-land property for at least two generations. The associated remnant drystone wall complex, of unusual plan, is likely to date at least partly to the 1850s, and is also of historical significance.

The former Murphy drystone wall dam, Diggers Rest, is aesthetically and structurally significant at the LOCAL level (AHC D2). It is a neatly constructed and highly intact dry-stone structure, with a vertical face on the dam side constructed of partly shaped local bluestone and fieldstone. Although now overgrown with reeds it still holds water.

The former Murphy drystone wall dam, Diggers Rest, and the associated complex of drystone walls, in various condition, are scientifically significant at the LOCAL level (AHC C2) for their potential to provide further information in regard to early farming practices, especially in the dry plains areas of the Melton Shire.

Overall, the former Murphy drystone wall dam, at 209-247 Plumpton Road Diggers Rest, is of LOCAL significance.

Description:

The dam is situated on a gully c.1.25 km south east of the Diggers Rest-Coimadai Road, on a gully in paddock to west of railway line c.750 m. behind the Diggers Rest hotel. The gully that runs north south, and then veers west towards Jacksons Creek, generally to the west and south of the Diggers Rest Hotel.

It is a relatively small dam in comparison to the stone dams constructed by Clarke and other larger farmers in the Shire. It is about 25 metres long, and of reasonable height, being c.1.5 metres above the waterline. It is of ‘squared’ drystone construction with an earth wall on the downstream side, and having an outlet channel at the west end. The dam is effective, containing substantial water, but is overgrown with reeds and consequently difficult to view properly. The north end of the stone wall is partly broken, and capping stones partly missing.

The dam is a very good example of dry stone stone work. It has a vertical face on the water side, is about a metre wide on top, and is very well constructed.

The stone and post & wire fences around the dam, of varying condition and integrity are also of high significance, given the historical record which shows that they were early, notable (in being the only such complex recorded in the Parish of Holden, and replicated on many plans, with some changes, until 1938¹), and part of a known farm use. The whole includes walls that are simply remnants of base stone; collapsing 3-4 course walls, with timber posts; and 5-8 course stone fences, with steel drop-posts, probably recently repaired or built. These would appear to be, at least in part, remnants of fences that date to the 1850s, as shown on many plans since that time. They clearly relate functionally to the watercourse and dam, and together with it have the potential to provide information about early farm practices.

History:

¹ Eg, Army Ordnance Plan: Sunbury, 1938.

The dam is situated on Section 9 Parish of Holden, a 640 acre (one square mile) allotment purchased from the Crown by ‘Murphy & Ryan’ in January 1852.²

At the time of the sale the land was described as having ‘no timber’, and being ‘very stony in places’.³ Although this description was not promising, Murphy and Ryan did well to join together to purchase the large property, as the four immediately adjacent square mile sections (to their north, south, east, and west) had all been purchased from the Crown by pastoral giant WJT (‘Big’) Clarke, while of the four similar square mile sections touching the corners of the Murphy/Ryan property, two were also owned by Clarke, and the other two had been purchased by the original squatters John Aitken and the Page brothers.

Writing in 1910 Isaac Batey recalls an incident that gives some insight into the property. The dam is less than a kilometre away from the Diggers Rest Hotel, which was owned by William Speary, a Vandemonian ex-convict whom the Bateys suspected of actively abetting the cattle duffing that was rife in the area from about 1854 to 1859. ‘The You Yangs with parts adjacent seems to have been a den of cattle thieves’, the destination of stolen cattle and horses, records Batey.⁴ He recounts that James Murphy acquired a half section (320 acres) of land adjoining the hotel in 1850-51:

‘Mr Murphy commenced farming and dairying. The latter occupation then and for some years onwards followed the ancient rule of shutting calves up at night and allowing them to run with their dams by day. A son Mr John Murphy still owns a portion of the old farm. There was an immense area of unfenced country [this would have been the Clarke estate] hence cattle had a wide range. John stated to me that [...?] milker had been swept off at night. A days searching failed to discover sign or trace of the missing animals, but just about sundown the whole lot came home bellowing from a westerly direction, clear proof that they were being taken to Geelong. My friend’s theory was to the effect that the Duffers taking fright abandoned the lot; mine is the cows getting beyond their beat became hard to drive, then further on the pain of distended udders becoming unbearable they got so unruly that it was impossible to drive them. This purloining of livestock became so prevalent that a Farmer’s Cattle Protection Association was projected, meetings were held at Keilor or thereabouts; Mr Batey attended, but ... the scheme fell through.’⁵

Murphy then was a *bona fide* small farmer, on inhospitable land, with some hostile immediate neighbours (a huge pastoralist, and a cattle thief), whose family was still in possession of the property by 1910. Most other ‘small’ farmers who purchased in such areas soon sold out to Clarke, especially after bad seasons (drought, rust in the wheat, and plueropneumonia affecting dairy cattle) in the 1860s and 70s. Indeed Ryan, with whom Murphy had pooled resources to be able to purchase the original Crown Allotment, and who took the western half of the land, had sold out to Clarke.⁶ But Murphy, a traditional small farmer and dairyman, survived. Instead of selling up to pastoralist Clarke, he and his family energetically pursued every small opportunity to prosper. In 1859 Murphy obtained a contract to erect a post and rail fence at the Sunbury police station, and in 1889 Mr P Murphy of Diggers Rest (probably a son) was building roads for Melton Shire.⁷ A John Murphy

² Parish Plan, Parish of Holden

³ Lands Victoria, Put Away Plan H98 2b, 2c (1854)

⁴ Batey, Isaac, untitled typed manuscript (RHSV, 27/1/1910), pp.103-111

⁵ Batey, op cit, p.108

⁶ Parish Plan, Parish of Holden. This shows that the Ryan portion of the site had the same Torrens Application number as the rest of the nearby lands in the Clarke empire.

⁷ PROV VPRS 937, Unit 50 (12/3/1859); VPRS 12879/P1/6, Melton Shire Council Meeting 5/4/1889

bartered with the more hospitable pastoralist Henry Beattie of *Mount Aitken* station at the Gap, whose books record that in 1868 Murphy sold him '2 kids', in return for which he was allowed to graze '6 cattle for 12 months'. Beattie also purchased from Murphy '10 pigs and 3 pairs of hens at 4 shillings per pair'.⁸

Despite its particularly stoney nature, the small gully through the property would have been a major prize in the dry country, and Murphy obviously exploited it to the full, and early. It is likely that the dam he built on the gully through the property played a significant part in the Murphys' survival. The dam was apparently built early, before the wretched seasons of the early 1860s. An undated but early map of the property shows a dam within two large rectangular fenced areas divided into four paddocks. There appears to be a hut at a bend in one of these fence / dry stone wall lines. Another one or two hundred metres south, was a smaller enclosure notated 'Stock Yards'.⁹ The small gully was clearly the hub of the farm.

This is a railway plan, which shows the railway line through the area. The railway went through the Diggers Rest area c.1858. But the complex of walls, including its dam, is likely to predate the railway, as an unusually positioned wall is divided by the railway. The same general arrangement of walls appears in the Geological Survey of Victoria Map, which almost certainly dates to c.1860-61, so it is certain that it was built by that date.¹⁰ The same representation of the outline of the complex is replicated in a 1908 map, and in 1916 a new drawing shows the dam itself.¹¹

Contextual evidence of pastoral water supply history also points to an early date for construction for the dam. Pastoralists' first 'permanent improvements' after obtaining security of tenure were erecting fences and sinking waterholes.¹² But the excavation of large 'tanks' (shallow dams in paddocks on drainage lines, and across shallow gullies, rather than on watercourses) only began to come into general use in the 1870s,¹³ so it is possible that the dam pre-dated this later solution. In any case the excavation of 'tanks' in the plains district would have been particularly difficult, if not impossible in many places, due to the very shallow basalt bedrock of much of the area. Unable to dig 'tanks' in the earth, the Melton solution seems to have been to construct earth dams (no doubt shallow topsoil scooped from the dam area by man or animal power¹⁴) across the shallow gullies of the plains. These were then faced with professionally-constructed quarried bluestone dry stone walls. At least three similar dams are

⁸ Beattie, Stewart K, *The Odd Good Year: Early Scots to Port Phillip, Northern Australia, Gap, Gisborne, and Beyond* (Southwood Press, Marrickville, 1999), p.64

⁹ Lands Victoria, Historic Map, Rail Plan 9A (nd).

¹⁰ Geological Survey of Victoria Map GSV No.7SE (Lands Victoria, Historic Map, MD 7D). The dam is not specifically marked within the complex of walls shown in this plan, which only shows the outer perimeter walls of the complex. This perimeter is identical with that of the earlier plan; including its relationship to the dam site.

¹¹ Lands Victoria, Historic Map, M/Def 94 (1908); Sunbury Army Ordnance Map (1916)

¹² Peel, *op cit*, pp.108-109; also Brown, PL (ed), *The Narrative of George Russell of Golf Hill* (OUP, London, 1935), pp.373-374

¹³ Hughes, Trueman, Ludlow, 'Wells and Underground Tanks', prepared for the Heritage Council of NSW (nd), pp.25-28; also Albrecht, CE, *Measurements and Drawings of Tanks and Dams*, Melbourne, Arnell & Jackson, [1885?]

¹⁴ In early days pastoral tanks were scooped out manually, with the aid of a plough and wheelbarrow. This was superseded by use of horses, and bullocks for very large tanks such as were built by the Clarkes. Afterwards there was debate about the economy of using steam powered ploughs and scoops, but these never seem to have been extensively used. (Cannon, Michael, *Life in the Country: Australia in the Victorian Age*: 2 [Nelson, West Melbourne, 1978], p.221; also A Pepys Wood, 'Tanks and Wells of New South Wales, Water Supply and Irrigation', in *Journal of the Royal Society of New South Wales*, Vol.17, 1883, pp.149-189.)

known to have been built in the Shire, by the Clarkes on their *Rockbank* station, and another smaller one by small grazier, William Beaty.

Thematic Context / Comparative Analysis:

Melton Historical Themes: 'Water', 'Farming'

Known comparable examples:

This is one of a number of 'drystone' dams in the Shire. Most were large, professionally constructed dams on WJT and Sir WJ Clarke's Rockbank pastoral station:- the Rockbank Headstation Dam (Site No.443); ; the Plumpton Dam (Site No.151); the Coimadai – Diggers Rest Road (Site No.082); and the Holden Road Dam (Site No.110).

Another dam was built by large farmers – grazier William Beaty also built a drystone wall dam on his Rocklands property (Site No.164). This is the most comparable dam. It is of similar scale (although a little larger), and similarly low, also with a vertical wall, and well constructed of roughly shaped bluestone.

There is also a dry stone wall dam substantially constructed of fieldstone, with several walls on several sides, and across part of the dam, at 847-1071 Blackhill Road Diggers Rest. This dam would have been built by the Beaty family.

There has been no thematic study of pastoral dams in Victoria, and there are no other similar pastoral dams have been identified in the Victorian Heritage Register, or the National Trust register. The lake at Rupertswood, Sunbury has bluestone edging, but this is an ornamental or landscape feature.

Condition:

Good. But overgrown with rushes at present, so difficult to obtain a good view of it.

Integrity:

Substantially Intact (a small portion is broken, with coping stones removed)

Recommendations:

Recommended for inclusion in the Melton Planning Scheme Heritage Overlay.

Recommended Heritage Overlay Schedule Controls:

External Paint Controls:	<i>No</i>
Internal Alteration Controls:	<i>No</i>
Tree Controls:	<i>No</i>
Outbuildings and/or Fences:	<i>Yes</i> (dry stone wall complex around the gully)

Other Recommendations:

- A preliminary archaeological survey of the former Murphy drystone wall dam, and the associated complex of drystone walls, has the potential to provide further

information regarding early farming practices in the dry plains areas of the Shire of Melton, and is desirable.