

Heritage Overlay No.: 057
Citation No.: 125
Place: Norton Ruin

Other Names of Place: Former Norton House
Location: 1912-1962 Melton Highway, Plumpton (Lot 2 PS447290)
Critical Dates: Construction: mid-late 1850s; major repair and reoccupation c.1905.
Existing Heritage Listings: None.
Recommended Level of Significance: LOCAL



Statement of Significance:

The Norton Ruin at 1912-1962 Melton Highway, Sydenham West is significant as one of the most substantial relics of the early small-farming period in the Shire. It stands in stark testimony both to the wretched seasons of the early 1860s which forced many farmers out of the district and resulted in the land being reclaimed by large pastoralists; and to the historic contest in Australia between small farmers and large pastoralists for land, expressed in the repossession of the property for farming in the early twentieth century under the provisions of the 1904 Closer Settlement Act.

The Norton Ruin at 1912-1962 Melton Highway, Sydenham West is historically significant at a LOCAL level (AHC A4, B2, D2). The place is associated with the first farming phase in the district, which was assisted by the Crown's 1850s alienation of good quality land along creek

frontages in reasonably affordable allotments, subdivided further by the Victoria Freehold Land Society in the name of prominent Victorians Thomas Fulton, Lauchlan MacKinnon and Frederick James Sargood. In particular, the place is associated with the Newnham and Chandler families, who with others had come to Australia at the initiative of a Sussex chapel of the Primitive Baptist denomination to relieve the situations of its poorer members. These families, engaged in general farming, bacon curing, and selling their produce on the Bendigo goldfields and in Melbourne, were the core of a small settlement of adherents of this denomination in Melton Shire. Some of the circumstances and difficulties of their lives, and significant insights into early small-farming in the Melton Shire, are preserved in John Chandler's book *Forty Years in the Wilderness*.

The place is equally associated with the exodus of small farmers, including the Newnhams and the Chandlers, from the area as a result of the hardships in the form of drought, wheat rust, caterpillars, and cattle pluro-pneumonia in the early 1860s, and the consequent annexation of many of their properties by the dominant pastoralists of the Shire, in particular WJT Clarke of the Rockbank estate and William Taylor of the Overnewton estate.

The place is also associated with the break-up of the pastoral estates in the early twentieth century, a key event in Australia's history, expressive of the long running contest between small farmers and large pastoralists for the land, and of the abiding power of the yeomanry ideal well into the twentieth century. It marked a major new era in the history of Melton Shire, then dominated by huge pastoral estates. The general revival of small farming at the turn of the century, and the effects of the Closer Settlement and later the Soldier Settlement Acts, transformed local economic and social life, and necessitated infrastructure for new communities, such as primary schools. One of these, the former Sydenham West state school, the eucalyptus sheleter planting of which survives, was situated on land excised from the Norton property, and prior to its closure was conducted in a weatherboard house that had been located on the property. The bluestone house was made habitable and reoccupied by the Norton family, who purchased the property in the Closer Settlement Board's subdivision and sale of the Overnewton Estate. The Overnewton estate was one of the first, the largest, and the best known of the pastoral estates turned over to farming under the provisions of the Closer Settlement Act 1904. Although the family has not been associated with the property for many decades, it is still known locally as the Norton property.

The place is also one of the most substantial and best preserved of the few remaining relics of the first phase of small-farming in the Shire of Melton. It is also one of relatively few surviving of the numerous farm cottages that were originally built beside watercourses, rather than close to roads as became the norm in later times.

Its ruinous state still dominating a near intact nineteenth century rural setting, powerfully evokes a sense of the passage of time, and past ways of life.

The Norton Ruin at 1912-1962 Melton Highway Sydenham West is scientifically significant at the local level (AHC C2). It includes some unusual design features and building techniques that have the potential to provide information regarding early farming lifestyles in the Shire of Melton.

The Norton Ruin at 1912-1962 Melton Highway Sydenham West is socially significant at the local level (AHC G1). It was identified as a place of heritage significance to the local community in a community forum held as part of this heritage study.

Overall, the Norton Ruin at 1912-1962 Melton Highway Sydenham West is significant at a LOCAL level.

Description:

The ruin at 1912-1962 Melton Highway is prominently situated on the shoulder of an escarpment overlooking the alluvial flat, and redgum-lined course, of the Kororoit Creek to its west. It is in a rural landscape which remains largely undeveloped, the most noticeable modern incursion being a large shed a few hundred metres to its east. There is no remnant and little new planting nearby, contributing to the prominence of the building on the flat plain.

A substantial dry stone wall, with remnant boxthorn, is situated a few hundred metres to its north marks the line of the original abutting Crown Allotment 22B. The wall extends down to the escarpment to the creek; it is included as part of this place. Mount Kororoit (or Mount Misery) is visible to the north through the gaps in the boxthorn.

The place is a substantial ruin of a larger than normal nineteenth century farming cottage. Its walls are of uncoursed rubble stone, including what appears to be coarsely shaped fieldstone, while its corners and openings retain substantial quoins of roughly squared quarried bluestone. There are a few small sections of handmade brick.

The building is unusual in that it comprised only a single room.

At its west end is attached an unusual construction, apparently original or early, comprising side walls only, and no access to the house. It may have been an extension for a pantry or store, as was common in English cottages,¹ or a shelter for animals, in the style of many traditional European rural dwellings.²

On two of the walls there are unusual small openings at ground level with timber lintels. These may have been associated with a former cellar under the house. The unusually high walls of the dwelling may also have been related to a cellar which was a mostly, but not entirely underground.

In the early-mid twentieth century there were weatherboard rooms attached to the west side of the stone building, and a verandah on the south side of this extension.

Inside, at the west end there is a very large stone hearth with timber lintel. The internal walls retain considerable evidence of a lime plaster.

Nearby is a rectangular shaped brick and concrete lined underground tank, which likely dates to the Closer Settlement period of the sites occupation.

¹ Hill, Valerie R, 'The Port Phillip Pastoral Frontier: A Study in Historical Archaeology', Archaeology PhD Thesis, La Trobe University, 2003, p.197

² Common in Mediterranean countries. In France it is called a 'bergerie'. This comes from the word 'berger' (shepherd), as originally it was a shepherd's hut. It was then used for the part of the house complex where the animals lived. Where the living quarters were downstairs the family benefited in winter from the heat generated by the cows, especially. In more affluent peasant families, the animals were housed downstairs and the family upstairs.

History:

The Property

At the original Crown sales the property Section 22C, Parish of Kororoit (originally described as being of 169 acres) was one of a number of adjacent allotments purchased from the Crown by ‘T Fulton and Others’ on 9th June 1854.³ At this time these allotments were described as ‘good land no timber’ and ‘good arable land’.⁴ The western boundary of the allotments was the Kororoit Creek, which would have added greatly to its suitability for farming.

In 1906 the Melton *Express* reported that Mr T Norton, a purchaser of the property in the Closer Settlement Board’s ‘Overnewton Estate’ sale, was having ‘the old homestead erected by Newnham renovated and made habitable’.⁵

The relatively small (c.150 acre) allotments into which the good farming land bordering Kororoit Creek was parcelled by the Crown in 1854 gave the opportunity for purchase by small farmers. However at least four of these allotments, including Section 22C, were purchased by ‘T Fulton & Others’.⁶ These were Thomas Fulton, Lauchlan MacKinnon, and Frederick James Sargood, of the Victoria Freehold Land Society.⁷ This was no doubt the land syndicate formed by Fulton which invested extensively in Malvern and Gardiner. In 1842 Fulton and Langlands had established one of Melbourne’s first and most successful engineering workshops, and Fulton has been credited with developing the technique for boiling down stock for tallow in the 1843-44 depression. He was active in public campaigns, and the first deacon of the Congregational Church in Victoria.⁸ Sargood, a Melbourne merchant and MLC for Melbourne at this time, was ‘a radical in politics and a voluntarist in religion’. He was the father of Victoria’s first Minister for Defence, and the developer of *Ripponlea* mansion, Sir Frederick Sargood.⁹ MacKinnon, a prominent pastoralist, former MLC, and proprietor of the Argus newspaper, was also highly involved in public debate.¹⁰

The Victoria Freehold Land Society immediately subdivided their adjacent Kororoit Creek properties into approximately 12 smaller properties and sold them at a profit to small farmers.¹¹ In December 1854 the company sold allotments 18-20 to Walter Powell, ‘Ironmonger’ of Melbourne (perhaps someone who knew Fulton). In November Powell sold the property to William Newnham ‘or Kororoit Creek, Farmer’,¹² which suggests that

³ Parish Plan, Parish of Kororoit

⁴ SLV Map: ‘Haughton I 29’

⁵ Melton *Express*, 10/2/1906

⁶ Lands Victoria, Put Away Plan K74 2 (A1)

⁷ RGO Search Notes, Torrens Application Nos:- 2933, 32416, 33210.

⁸ Brereton, R, ‘Thomas Fulton’, in Pike, D (ed), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol.4 (MUP, Carlton, 1972), p.225

⁹ Rickard, John, ‘Sir Frederick Thomas Sargood’, in Pike, D (ed), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol.6 (MUP, Carlton, 1976), pp.87-88

¹⁰ Jacqueline Templeton, ‘Lauchlan MacKinnon’ in Pike, D (ed), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol.5 (MUP, Carlton, 1974), pp.177-188

¹¹ RGO Search Notes, Torrens Application Nos:- 2933, 32416, 33210.

¹² PROV, VPRS 460/P0/35015

Newnham was already living on one of the adjacent allotments. He may have learnt of the sale through Independent church circles.

The Newnham Extended Family

The ruin on the property would have been built by William Newnham, who with his brother Frederick, established farms in the Melton district in the 1850s.

The Newnhams were among a group of Particular Baptist immigrants from Brighton, Sussex, who had arrived in Port Phillip in January 1850 on the barque *Harpley*. Their chapel had arranged for their passage, along with another six poor families of the congregation, to new farmlands being opened up in Port Phillip. The dream of a co-operative enterprise soon foundered, but as shipmates this group remained like ‘family’ for the rest of their lives.¹³

The Newnhams were cousins of John Chandler, whose family had also arrived on the *Harpley*, and who lived with William for a few years before purchasing his own farm at Melton. As well as being cousins, William and John married sisters of the Harvey family.

Chandler’s memoir *Forty Years in Wilderness*, published in 1893, is not only an outstanding historical document of his times, but a testament to the all-pervading role of faith, and of the Particular Baptist church, in the lives of himself and the Newnham’s and other extended family. The ‘Particular Baptists’ were ultra-Calvinists who believed in pre-selection. In contrast to the General Baptists, who believed in general atonement, the ‘Strict’ or ‘Particular’ Baptists did not admit any but baptised believers as members.¹⁴

The Newnham brothers were enterprising. After settling in Richmond they were involved in timber cutting and milling, carting to the Ballarat and Mount Alexander goldfields and in trying the Castlemaine diggings. With Chandler’s wife’s brother, they came upon a pocket that yielded 12 pounds weight of gold. Flushed with success, Frederick set out for Sydney to buy three horse teams for more carrying ventures.¹⁵ Upon his return in 1853 he married for the first time to Mary Woods of Preston. On the same day William married Mary Harvey (sister of cousin John Chandler’s wife Ruth).

Frederick Newnham and John Chandler sometimes worked together in carting to the diggings. William by this time had established a farm near ‘Mount Misery’ (Mt Kororoit) at Melton:

‘Mr Newnham bought some land on the plains near Melton....They had very hard fare there. They had to grind their own corn in a small mill, and make bread of the meal. They often had to go short of the necessities of life, for they had nothing coming in. Farmers in those days were very independent men ...’¹⁶

John often dropped in to stay with them when returning from the goldfields:

¹³ Chandler, John (Michael Cannon, ed.), *Forty Years in the Wilderness*, Loch Haven, Arthurs Seat, Victoria, 1990, pp.x, xi, 44, 86. The *Harpley* had been condemned by Lloyds as unfit for carrying emigrants. The families congregated at different times in different areas, principally Preston, but also Melton and Sale.

¹⁴ Walter Phillips ‘The Denominations’, in Lewis, M (ed) *Victorian Churches: their origins, their story & their architecture*, National Trust of Australia (Victoria), 1991, p.11; also, Chandler, *op cit*, p.xxi

¹⁵ Chandler, *op cit*, pp.32, 42-4

¹⁶ *ibid*, p.85

‘We got to Keilor Plains and called at Mr W Newnham’s farm, at Mount Misery. They were very glad to see us, as they did not have many callers in those days, for they were a long way off the road.’¹⁷

On other occasions John describes the lonely walk across the plains, ‘with not a house or fence in sight’.¹⁸

Chandler’s memoir provides glimpses of life on the farm. Newnham’s family was living on the property for ‘nearly two years before they saw another female’, snakes were bad, and the property escaped a fire that swept across the plains. When a horse bolted with a cart carrying only a toddler, Newnham’s wife ‘in fright’, put 3 month old Emily down on the ground and tried to save the boy; tragically the horse dragged the cart over the baby, who was killed.¹⁹

The subject site (ruin) is almost exactly the 8 miles or so from the Keilor Road (now Sydenham) railway station that Chandler once quick-walked from William Newnham’s house.²⁰

In late 1857 Frederick Newnham bought about 300 acres of land at Mt Misery on the Keilor Plains, ‘2 or 3 miles from Melton’, which he named ‘Hope Farm’. He planted several acres of mangels and sowed 36 acres of crop. He lost a child in January 1858, and later that year his wife Mary also died.²¹ Frederick owned property approximately 150 acres in Melton, on what became known as the Minns property, on the west bank of Toolern Creek on Minns Road (which was no doubt where he lived), and on the north-east corner of what became Ryans and Mt Kororoit Road. He also owned a township block.²²

In May 1859 Frederick Newnham married Emma Eastwood at Melton. They attended the Ebenezer Baptist Chapel in Victoria Parade, Melbourne. Emma recalled, ‘of a Sunday we often yoked up the horse and drove 25 miles to Melbourne to arrive at the Ebenezer Chapel in time for the ten o’clock prayer meeting. Often we stayed with friends on Sunday and returned to Melton early on Monday morning.’²³ And once a month, ‘without fail’, their pastor Mr Allen walked 12 miles across the Keilor Plains in burning sun or rain to his small flock at Melton. The Presbyterians ‘kindly lent’ their church, and ‘many of them came to hear him. They showed a very nice spirit’ said Chandler.²⁴ Chandler sometimes went to the Presbyterian services, ‘but it was all Freewill and formality, and it was death to my soul.’ His desire to ‘hear the Word’ contributed to his decision to leave Melton some years later.²⁵

By 1861 Frederick Newnham and family were well established, so much so that Frederick was nominated a Trustee of the new Melton Cemetery representing the Independent denomination. His signature appears in the first Minute Book indicating he could read and write. He purchased four allotments in the Cemetery in September 1862.

A listing of children enrolled at the Melton Common school 1864 shows Frederick’s eldest daughter Mary, and William’s children Frederick and Alfred William entered in the school

¹⁷ *ibid*, pp.86, 111. Presumably this is the road from Bendigo, the main road in the colony at the time.

¹⁸ *ibid*, p150

¹⁹ *ibid*, pp.85, 86.

²⁰ *ibid*, p.159

²¹ WH Newnham, ‘The Newnham Clan 1849-1949’ (private publication)

²² Registrar General Office: Memorial No.237, Book 345; Memorial 48, Book 329; Memorial 853, Book 189.

²³ *ibid*

²⁴ Chandler, *op cit*, p.176

²⁵ *ibid*, p.179

register with their fathers' occupations listed as 'farmer'. Other children of Frederick included George Thomas and William Samuel, whose births were registered in Melton. No local records have been found of any of the children of William Newnham, born during their residence in the Melton district.²⁶

With the decline in carting caused by the advent of the railway and the gradual waning of goldrushes in the late 1850s, John Chandler was taken into partnership by one of his cousins, probably William Newnham. The butter, eggs, cheese and poultry they raised John sold at Bendigo. 'I built a house on Mr Newnham's ground, and brought my wife up to live there.' He sent money to England to bring out another sister of his wife, Mr and Mrs Mitchell and family. Newnham built them a 'small house on his ground', and Mitchell worked for them.²⁷

They had done well, and with the little money he had saved Chandler purchased his own small farm at Melton. They dissolved the partnership, Newnham taking the 'bacon curing department', and Chandler the 'butter and dealing part'.

The Decline of Farming in the 1860s

Chandler purchased a few cows and two horses with which he got a crop in. In late, and with dry weather, the crop was almost a failure. His dealing kept him from 'starving'. In 1863 he:

'...worked very hard ... ploughed 36 acres and sowed it; planted several acres of mangels; and worked day and night to accomplish it; but I was strong and wiry. I had five or six cows milking, besides pigs etc to feed, but had a good servant girl to help us.'²⁸

Farms in the Port Phillip district were starting to be sold cheap by the time Chandler got together the money to purchase his own place. (Alex Cameron reports that Chandler's farm was 'between Oldershaws and Coburns', which was probably a c.70 acre allotment on the south-west corner of Centenary Avenue and Coburns Road West Melton.²⁹) The early 1860s marked a turning point in the district, with many small farmers failing and leaving from this time. The boom prices of the gold-rush had collapsed, the good early yields had quickly exhausted the poor soils, and the crops were infested with rust and caterpillars, and decimated by drought. The advent of pleuro-pneumonia in cattle was devastating for those who relied on their dairy produce. And wheat was now imported into Melbourne, both from overseas and from the new lands being opened in northern Victoria. The peak acreage under crop in the district from Bacchus Marsh to Craigieburn (including Melton), occurred in 1859. This figure was halved by 1864, and a further slight decline occurred during the next two decades.³⁰

The report of the West Bourke agricultural inspector in 1862-63 noted the continued drought, and the advent of 'that dreadful disease, pluro-pneumonia.' This had ruined some industrious families, and was causing many dairymen to turn their attention to sheep dealing.³¹ In 1863 Chandler recorded that he had:

²⁶ The Newnham Clan, *op cit*

²⁷ Chandler, *op cit*, p.160

²⁸ Chandler, *op cit*, p.177

²⁹ Alexander Cameron, *Melton Memoirs* (M&DHS) p.10

³⁰ Peel, L, *Rural Industry in the Port Phillip Region, 1835-1880*, (MUP, 1974), p.90.

³¹ Victorian Parliamentary Papers, 1864, p.94

‘... lost some very nice heifers on the Common. They got the disease and died, and I had to leave them all, for I dared not bring them home, as my other cattle would have caught the disease. I raised a good many pigs this year, and made them into bacon.’³²

Local farm labourer and carrier Anders Hjorth also records the appearance of the ‘dread disease’ pleuro-pneumonia among the herds grazing on the unsold Crown land to the east of Melton that were used as farmers commons.³³

The agricultural inspector’s report for the next year informs that over the summer of 1863-64 ‘rust and the caterpillar’ had visited ‘nearly every farm in the district, causing great devastation’. The potato crop had been good, and a greater variety of crops was now being planted. While pleuro-pneumonia was no so virulent, the inspector had recently ‘met a gentleman from Derrimut, who informed me that he had lost 27 of his best milkers’ to the disease.³⁴

In 1864-65 it was reported that a much smaller wheat crop had been planted; due to almost complete failure of the previous year’s crop farmers could not afford to purchase the seed. But the rust had been restrained by the continuance of dry weather. However, yet another calamity visited the area, the ‘Black Monday’ bushfire of February 1865: ‘The Green Hills and Melton district have also suffered severely, the fire consuming the produce of several large farms.’³⁵

It was not only large farms that suffered on Black Monday. Suddenly flames swept over the hills and rushed across the plain. With wet blankets Chandler helped to partly save a neighbour’s property, and thanked God that his own farm and family survived. A subscription was got up for those who were ruined, but he was unable to contribute much:

‘...my crops had failed, and I had no grass. My cattle I had to drive five miles to water. They were reduced to skin and bone, and it was distressing to look at them. I had to kill four cows, and I could not bear to see the poor things, and it was more merciful to kill them.’³⁶

The exceptional drought continued through the 1865-66 season: ‘... most disastrously felt over the whole line of the plain country, extending from Essendon to the Djerriwarrh Creek.’ There was still the occasional loss of cattle in the district to pleuro-pneumonia. The hoped-for advantages of the ‘commonages’ to dairy farmers had been disappointed, as they were always overstocked during the growing months, and in drought the ‘wretched cattle’ must die of starvation, said the agricultural inspector.³⁷

The Chandlers lost their three months old boy. Four of his little cousins carried him to his grave under a tree in the Melton cemetery. A few friends followed, and Mr Allen buried him. ‘Those who have lost a dear little one will know what our sorrow was.’³⁸

³² Chandler, *op cit*, p.175 (The bacon paid well and saved him. Newnham had purchased rice damaged in a fire at a Melbourne rice mill and sold some to his cousin Chandler for raising pigs.)

³³ ‘Recollections of Melton 1861-67’, by Anders Hjorth, reproduced in the MDHS News Sheet, April 2001.

³⁴ Victorian Parliamentary Papers, 1864-65, Vol.3, p.93. The drier lands that were soon to be opened for selection on the lower Goulburn and the Wimmera were not affected by rust. Consequently, wheat growing soon moved north from the 1850s farming areas such as Port Phillip and Kyneton.

³⁵ VPP, 1864-65, *op cit*, p.89; see also Hjorth, *op cit*.

³⁶ Chandler, *op cit*, p.175

³⁷ Victorian Parliamentary Papers, 1867, Vol.3, 1st Session, pp.83-84.

³⁸ Chandler, *op cit*, p.176

Chandler's sister and her family came to live with them, after failing at Bendigo: 'We did the best we could for them, but we were all very poor. When bread was very dear we made pollard bread.' His sister also lost a child during this time. When things picked up and Chandler was able to purchase crown land at Melton Forest, 'land sharks' (squatters agents) forced the auction price up to nearly four times the price he would have paid under the Selection Acts.³⁹

'The farm did not pay, for I only got one good crop in three years', said Chandler.⁴⁰ It was probably during this drought that some farmers sent their cattle to Gippsland 'but as the grass was different they did not do well.'⁴¹ In the mid 60s, deeply depressed, Chandler let his farm and took his family back to the city. Eventually he prospered, his sons expanding his hardware business into the publicly listed D&W Chander Pty Ltd.

The Newnhams joined the exodus. In 1863 William mortgaged allotments 18-20 on the Kororoit Creek, repaying the mortgage in 1869.⁴² In the mid 1860's Frederick purchased 150 acres of land at Tylden, and by 1874 he and his eldest son had selected land in the Shepparton district (the lower Goulburn then being Victoria's growing farming area). In the mid 1860s William bought a property in Camberwell. Chandler obtained employment in his Melbourne piggery and bacon curing business.⁴³ In 1874 William Newnham 'of Camberwell', sold his Kororoit Creek property to pastoralist William Taylor of *Overnewton*.⁴⁴

Pastoralism Ascendent

Especially during 1861-64, but also over the following decades, many farmers of the district left their properties. Population movements mirror the decline in farming fortunes. About 250 people per annum had arrived in this north-west region of Port Phillip (Peel's 'Sunbury' area, which included Melton) during the period 1854-57, rising to 600 people per annum in 1857-61. In 1861 however there was a dramatic reversal, with decreases of 190 people per annum in 1861-71, and 55 people per annum in 1871-81.⁴⁵

In line with this depopulation, the number of land holdings fell by 30% in the district between 1860-81. The size of holdings rose steadily as properties were progressively purchased by neighbouring farmers or graziers, especially WJT ('Big') Clarke.⁴⁶

The beginnings of these changes are apparent in the local area in the West Bourke agricultural inspector Watson's report for 1861-62. 'The crops ... have suffered severely from the extreme dryness of the season', blight had affected the hay and the potato crop was not worth harvesting, he reported. Homesteads were 'generally very much neglected', and parties were leaving and selling to their neighbour: 'Mr Clarke and other large proprietors purchasing the small holdings, and the holders leaving for New Zealand.'⁴⁷

³⁹ Chandler, *op cit*, pp.175-6

⁴⁰ *ibid*, p.179

⁴¹ Cameron, *op cit*, p.16

⁴² PROV VPRS 460/P0/35015

⁴³ Chandler, *op cit*, pp.179-180

⁴⁴ PROV VPRS 460/P0/35015; Newnham later opened a bacon curing business in Gippsland, and in about 1890 purchased the Fulham Estate in Sale (later known as the Prison Farm).

⁴⁵ Peel, *op cit*, p 80. (Peel's 'Sunbury' area, from Bacchus Marsh to Craigieburn, including Melton)

⁴⁶ Peel, *op cit*, pp.127-135.

⁴⁷ Victorian Parliamentary Papers, 1862-63, Vol.4, pp.50-53.

Watson was probably referring to the Otago goldfields. Chandler's brother-in-law would have been one of those to whom Watson was referring. After failing at Bendigo and moving in with the Chandlers at Melton, 'he left for NZ, and family stayed at Melton with very little to live on.'⁴⁸

In contrast to the land along the Kororoit Creek, almost all of the adjacent stony plains land to the east, described as 'totally unfit for farming', but 'excellently adapted for grazing purposes', was purchased in square mile sections by pastoralists WJT ('Big') Clarke for inclusion into his *Rockbank Estate*, and William Taylor, of *Overnewton*.⁴⁹ By the 1890s however the Clarke and Taylor pastoral empires had also absorbed virtually all of the farming area along the creek. Newnham's Section 22C, with three similar lots on the Kororoit Creek, had become the westernmost holdings of Taylor's *Overnewton Estate*.⁵⁰

The Closer Settlement Era

Background

The Newnham property was caught up in another reversal of the pastoral-farming arm-wrestle when in 1904 the State government passed the Closer Settlement Act.

The contest between pastoralists and farmers for the land is one of the major themes in Australia's history. Three pastoralists with ready capital - Clarke, Staughton, Taylor and the various owners of Greenhills – quickly dominated the whole Melton Shire as a result of the Crown Lands sales in the 1850s.⁵¹ The agitation by gold diggers to 'unlock the lands' occupied by squatters on cheap leases culminated in the Selection Acts of the 1860s, but these had mixed success, and affected only unalienated land; most land in Melton Shire had already been alienated by this time, mostly to pastoralists.

By the 1890s popular discontent revived, this time calling for the repurchase of much of these alienated Crown Lands which appeared too fertile to be wasted as 'sheep walks'. These should be subdivided and redistributed as small farms in fulfilment of the 'yeoman ideal'. In 1897 the new owner of the Clarke empire, Sir Rupert Turner Havelock Clarke Bart had mused in Parliament about cutting up 40,000 acres of his estate to lease to dairy farmers. He was under some local pressure to make land available for farming, and declared he was keen not to 'disappoint public expectations.'⁵² The Victorian Municipal Directory 1898 entry for Melton Shire made the first of a series of unprecedented reports on movements by big local landholders such as Rupert Clarke, Harry Werribee Staughton, and Harvey Patterson to sell and lease (often under the 'share system') large portions of their estates to small farmers and graziers.⁵³

This 'break-up' of the large estates coincided with major developments in farming in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as new science, technologies, fertilisers, transport and markets enabled huge productivity increases. With inventions such as the Babcock separator, the development of local co-operative creameries and butter factories, and advances in refrigeration creating new export markets, dairying in particular suddenly boomed.

⁴⁸ Chandler, *op cit*, p.177

⁴⁹ SLV, Houghton Plan I 29 (15/5/1854)

⁵⁰ Shire Map Series: Parish of Kororoit (1892)

⁵¹ Peel, *op.cit.*, pp.129-131.

⁵² *Sunbury News*: 31/7/1897, 7/8/1897, 4/9/1897.

⁵³ Victorian Municipal Directory, 1898, and following years.

And so the beginning of the twentieth century marked a major new era in the history of Melton. It saw the subdivision and sale of thousands of acres of the Taylor, Staughton and Clarke pastoral empires, and after the First World War, of smaller pastoral estates such as Melton Park and Green Hills.

State legislators promoted and nurtured these changes. The Land Act 1898 had established the “closer settlement” branch of the Lands Department, but it was not until the Closer Settlement Act 1904 that the scheme really developed. This Act introduced the possibility of compulsory acquisition by the government, and increased five-fold the amount that the Closer Settlement Board could expend on repurchasing land. It would be adapted and reincarnated after both the World Wars as Soldier Settler Acts.

The Closer Settlement scheme only commenced operations when the Board was appointed on 16th January 1905. The regulations under the Act had only just been gazetted when, in May 1905, the Board purchased the 11,336 acre Overnewton estate of William Taylor, which included much of the area between Mt Kororoit and Sydenham. One of the Board’s first schemes was the repurchase of William Taylor’s Overnewton in the north and east of Melton Shire in 1905.⁵⁴ This was the first of several massive purchases by the Board between Keilor and Werribee, which included the Exford, and then the Werribee Park, estates. The Overnewton, Exford and the Werribee estates were the only rural Closer Settlement Schemes close to Melbourne.⁵⁵

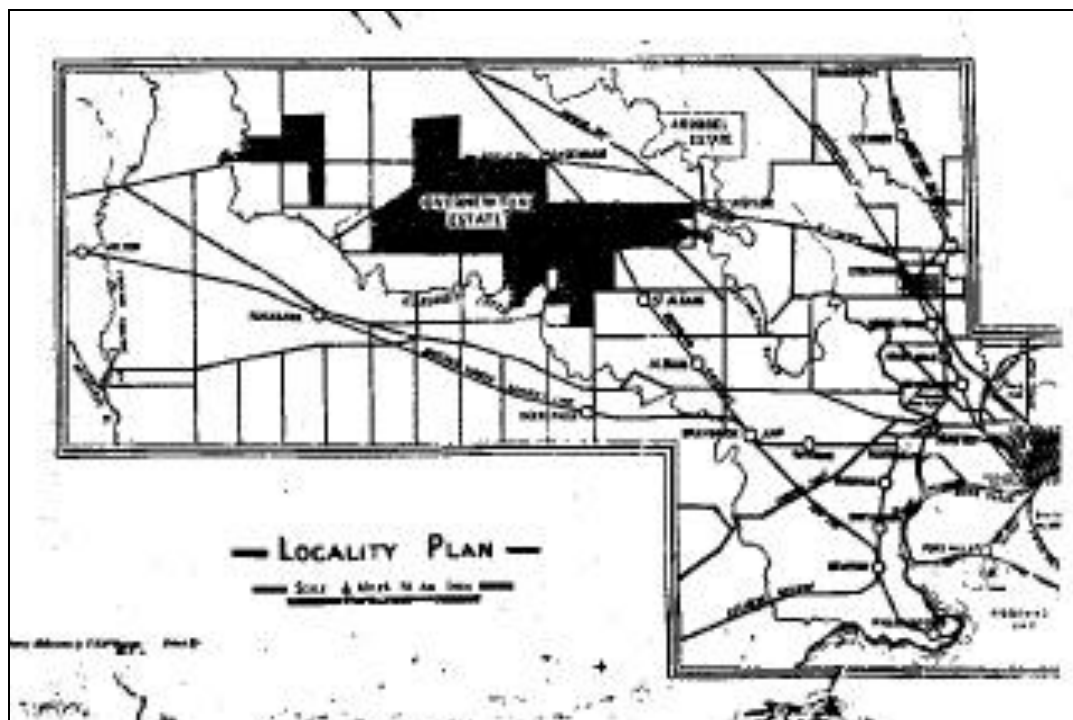
The Overnewton Estate then was amongst the earliest, largest, and most important of the Closer Settlement Board’s estates. It was acquired in May 1905, the fourth and second largest (after Wyuna, an irrigation estate on the Goulburn River, more closely related to the concurrent emergence of the State Rivers and Water Supply Commission) CSB estate.⁵⁶ Although soon to be overtaken by the *Exford Estate*, it was at the time the largest dry-land farming estate purchased, and the closest to Melbourne. It seems to have made it something of a showcase, and perhaps test case, of the scheme. Local media referred to its first stage (the Arundel Estate near Keilor) as Premier Bent’s ‘golden haired girl’.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Victorian Parliamentary Papers, 1905, Vol.3 (1), ‘Report of the Lands Purchase and Management Board’

⁵⁵ VPP, 1908, Vol.2, pp.31-42

⁵⁶ VPP, 1905, Vol.3(1), ‘Report of the Lands Purchase and Management Board’

⁵⁷ Moloney, D, Classification Report, ‘Arundel Road Bridge’ 23/7/1991), National Trust of Australia (Victoria).



Map of Overnewton Estate c.1905.⁵⁸

The Newnham/Norton allotment is the westernmost of the estate marked here in black. The Arundel Estate is marked in white. Taylor also had other smaller holdings on Mt Cotterell Road in the south of the Shire that were also sold as Closer and Soldier Settlement Estates.

In 1906 the CSB reported optimistically that the Minister for Mines had put a new boring machine to use at the Overnewton Estate where:

‘an almost unlimited supply of good stock water of fair quality for domestic use has been obtained at a depth of 210 feet, which will materially enhance the value of this property.’⁵⁹

A year later it reported that 12 bores had been put down and windmills erected at Overnewton - providing water that was ‘mostly excellent for stock’, and some good for domestic use - at a cost of £1,847.⁶⁰ In keeping with Australia’s tradition of ‘Colonial Socialism’, the state government had stepped in to sponsor the development of the land. But this was still a tiny outlay compared to the expenses undertaken in providing irrigation channels, dams, railways, roads and swamp drainage (Koo Wee Rup), and even house construction (Boisdale) in other Closer Settlement estates.

When applications were invited for its 79 farms in October 1905, the Overnewton Estate was described as ‘good agricultural and grazing land’, with ‘good railway facilities - Sydenham Station is on the property’, with ‘good roads’. By mid 1907 the CSB reported that already 129 residents were living on the Estate, with 3451 stock and 1454 acres cultivated:- ‘A number of houses are exceptionally well-built, and the fencing generally is substantial ... The planting of trees is being carried out on many of the farms, and when grown, will afford shelter for stock.’⁶¹

⁵⁸ Lands Victoria, Historical Plan: PROC (2) 40

⁵⁹ VPP, 1906, Vol.2, ‘Report of the Lands Purchase and Management Board’

⁶⁰ VPP, 1907, Vol.2, ‘Report of the Lands Purchase and Management Board’

⁶¹ VPP 1906, *op cit*.

The Shire was transformed by the Closer Settlement and Soldier Settlement Acts of the early twentieth century. New roads were surveyed and ‘macadamised’, and the occasional bridge was thrown up (eg, the Bridge Road concrete bridge south of Melton). The establishment of new primary schools at places such as Sydenham West, Exford, Melton South, and Melton Park reflect the emergence of whole new communities. Some of Melton’s most historically celebrated residents, such as international trap shooter Hector Fraser, were amongst the new settlers. Other sons of the new farmers are commemorated on memorials of the world wars.

The Subject Site in the Closer Settlement Era

Prior to obtaining the Overnewton land Thomas Norton had been leasing 220 acres on the Kororoit Creek from Moylan.⁶² In 1902 ‘Mr Norton of Kororoit Creek’ is recorded as having brought a load of hay to the chaff mill weighing over 6 tons.⁶³ Overnewton was put up for sale in 1905 by the Closer Settlement Board. T Norton purchased allotment ‘E’ of Section 22, Parish of Kororoit (200 acres 2 roods and 28 perches), while R Norton (presumably his wife Ruth, also known as Ruth Everett) purchased the abutting Section 22C (147 acres and 20 perches), upon which the bluestone ruin is situated. Freehold to both of the properties was obtained on 1st March 1927. In 1914 the Sydenham West school was excised from the south-east corner of the Norton property.⁶⁴

The Norton family raised sheep and poultry and grew crop and hay and had a few pigs. A number of dairy cattle were kept. The Norton daughter Hazel helped out with milking cows on the farm.⁶⁵ In 1915 the local paper carries a notice of sale from Thomas Norton to J Moore.⁶⁶ Another listing in 1917 records fat lambs being sold on account Mrs Norton at Newmarket. At an early stage TL Aitken became the occupier of the south part of the Norton allotment, living in a timber house. In 1920 a clearing sale notice for Aitken lists a number of items on account of Mrs T Norton – stock, poultry, farm equipment including a tree puller and a windmill.⁶⁷ Some of the family moved to Sunbury; Jimmy Norton stayed on working the property until 1945/6 when he moved to Bunyip.

After the 1944 fire the timber ‘Aitken’ house was purchased from the Norton family by Messrs Trethowan and Finch for use as the Sydenham West Primary School. It was moved to the school site on the corner of Leakes Road and the Keilor Road and subsequently moved to Picketts Lane, Sydenham where it is now a private residence.⁶⁸

Neighbour Mr Charlie Finch remembers some details of the Norton’s home in the early twentieth century:

The main room was large, of stone construction, with an open fire. Bars and chains held kettles and pans above the coals. An oven was situated to one side of the fireplace. This was the only stone room that is remembered by Mr Finch. Two timber rooms were added to the west side, with a verandah across the front, resembling an inverted

⁶² J Bilzta, M&DHS records.

⁶³ *Melton Express*, 18/1/1902

⁶⁴ Parish Plan, Parish of Kororoit: Allotment C: 271/49. (Place No.131. Only the concrete foundations and paths remain of the school buildings today. The mature eucalyptus shelter planting is a prominent relic of the school, which was situated on the north-west corner of the Melton Highway and Leakes Road.)

⁶⁵ Mr Charles Finch, personal conversation, 8/4/2005

⁶⁶ *Melton Express*, 21/8/1915

⁶⁷ *The Melton Express*, 6/3/1920, 27/3/1920

⁶⁸ Mr Jack Trethowan, personal conversation, 31/12/2001

‘L’ shape. The verandah was enclosed to the roof line on the south side probably with panels of netting.⁶⁹

The weatherboard rooms and verandah attached to the west and south sides of the stone building may have been part of the repair and renovations undertaken in the early Closer Settlement era to make the building habitable.

Thematic Context / Comparative Analysis:

Shire of Melton Historical Themes: ‘Farming’, ‘Pastoral’

Comparable Places in Shire of Melton:

This is one of the more substantial of the few remaining relics of the early farms that were established beside or very near to the streams in the Shire. The other known such places surviving on Toolern Creek are:

- Farm Complex, Toolern Vale (Place No.029): three generations of houses, the two weatherboard examples of which are intact and in excellent condition, but whose stone remnants of the first phase of occupation are minimal.
- *The Oaks* (Place No.34): substantial ruins of a large former stables on Minns’ / Newnham farm.
- *Hilton Brae* (Place No.57): moderate ruins of a small bluestone cottage possibly associated with the Greenhills pastoral lease.
- *Brookfield* (Place No.28): Ruins of Samuel Kitson’s farm, comprising mainly mature and impressive garden plantings, and the ruins of a part-underground dairy.

Known surviving early places beside or on the Kororoit Creek are all situated to the north of and reasonably close to the Norton Ruin:-

- Mt Kororoit Farm (Place No.146): a very intact complex of early weatherboard buildings and drystone walls built by the Moylan family on one of Melton’s larger historic farming properties.
- Place No.144: a substantially intact bluestone cottage, and a derelict weatherboard cottage on the opposite side of the creek, on land owned by the Moylans, but which could have been associated with an earlier small-farming endeavour.
- Place No.115: the scant remains of the Moylan family’s *View Monte*. This bluestone and brick ruin was substantially demolished c.1999. The site retains a number of mature specimens of conifers and other plants associated with its garden.
- Place No.111: scatter of handmade bricks, and a few plantings, associated with former weatherboard houses on the site.

The bluestone ‘addition’ on the ruinous building, while much more intact, appears to be similar to features on other early ruinous stone dwellings in the Shire:

⁶⁹ Finch, *op cit*.

- Place No.359, the former Kerr house, on the corner of Boundary Road and Downing Street;
- Place No.293, the former Scarborough house on Mount Cotterell Road.

Condition:

Ruinous

Integrity:

‘Damaged/Disturbed’ (*A substantial ruin*)

Recommendations:

Recommended for inclusion in the:-

- Melton Planning Scheme Heritage Overlay
- Victorian Heritage Inventory

Recommended Heritage Overlay Schedule Controls:

External Paint Controls:	<i>Yes</i>
Internal Alteration Controls:	<i>No</i>
Tree Controls:	<i>No</i>
Outbuildings and/or Fences:	<i>Yes</i> (drystone walls to north and west of the building)

Other Recommendations

- An archaeological survey of the place has the potential to provide further information regarding early farming lifestyles in the Shire of Melton, and is desirable.