

Heritage Overlay No.: 063
Citation No.: 151
Place: Plumpton Dam

Other Names of Place: Plumpton Park
Location: 412-518 Plumpton Road, Diggers Rest
Critical Dates: Construction: unknown (likely 1850s – 1880s).
Existing Heritage Listings: Identified in Western Region, Rural Heritage Study, as being of ‘at least Regional’ significance.¹
Recommended Level of Significance: STATE



Statement of Significance:

The Plumpton Dam at 412-518 Plumpton Road Diggers Rest is significant as a rare, and the second largest known, drystone wall private pastoral dam in Victoria. It is also the second largest of a series of at least four large and medium sized drystone dams built on the former WJT Clarke *Rockbank* station in the Shire of Melton. The Plumpton Dam on Plumpton Road Diggers Rest is almost completely intact.

The Plumpton Dam at 412-518 Plumpton Road Diggers Rest is structurally and aesthetically significant at the STATE level. (AHC D2, E1, F1) It is a very substantial and impressive

¹ ‘Rural Heritage Study, Western Region of Melbourne’ (Context Pty Ltd, Western Region Commission, 1994), pp.161, 163-64

structure, approximately 140 metres long, which continues to operate as a dam. It is a finely constructed bluestone structure, employing an unusual construction technique of ‘dry’ construction, without mortar. Unlike the similar *Rockbank* Headstation Dam, all of its stones are roughly worked or squared. Its wall is roughly coursed, each course using similar sized stones. The massive coping stones, of uniform size and well laid, make a significant contribution to the unique aesthetic value of the place. The dam wall contains an angle towards its centre. The earth embankment behind the wall appears to have retained its shape and original form to a unique degree. The excellent integrity and condition of the drystone wall face contribute to the dam’s very high aesthetic value, as does its intact rural context. The dam also retains intact return abutment walls at both ends. Together with other similar dams built on the Clarke *Rockbank* estate, it represents an innovative design solution to local climatic and geographical challenges. The former Plumpton Dam at 412-518 Plumpton Road Diggers Rest is historically significant at the STATE level. (AHC B2, H1) It is the second-largest of a series of at least four large and medium sized drystone dams to have been built on the Clarkes’ *Rockbank* station in the Shire of Melton. No comparable structure or group of structures, comprising long stone dam walls over wide shallow gullies, is known elsewhere in Victoria. This grand scheme was a local response to the particularly low rainfall of the plains area, the difficulty of sinking ‘tank’ dams in the shallow bedrock of the area, and the local availability of bluestone. Smaller Melton pastoralists and farmers constructed much smaller and more makeshift dams which were also variations on the same principle. The dam is also significant for its association with Australia’s mid nineteenth century pastoral giant WJT Clarke, and his son Sir WJT Clarke, Victoria’s leading citizen in the late nineteenth century, and Australia’s first baronet. The dam is expressive of the strategic and inherent importance of the 40,000 acre *Rockbank* property to the Clarke pastoral empire, especially in relation to the fattening and delivery of sheep for the Newmarket meat trade. The massive structure also conveys a sense of the scale of the *Rockbank* station, whose domination of the Melton Shire was an increasingly acute grievance to local farmers, culminating in the break-up of the estate in the early twentieth century. It is a major relic of the era of large pastoral estates close to Melbourne.

The dam is also significant for its associations with Australia’s first ‘Plumpton’ greyhound coursing enclosure, built by Sir WJ Clarke immediately adjacent to the dam in 1882-83, from which its name derives; and with Harry Houdini’s 1910 flight, one of the claimants to the first powered flights in Australia, which occurred on the same paddock.

Overall, the Plumpton Dam at 412-518 Plumpton Road Diggers Rest is of STATE significance.

Description:

The Plumpton Dam is a very substantial and impressive structure, approximately 140 metres long, which continues to hold water and be used as a dam. It is a very finely built dry-stone structure, using a range of different sized rocks. Unlike the similar *Rockbank* Headstation Dam, which utilises a more random rubble construction, the Plumpton Dam is roughly coursed, using different sized stone in each course. Unlike the *Rockbank* Homestation Dam, all of its stones are roughly worked or squared. The massive coping stones, of uniform size and well laid, make a significant contribution to the unique aesthetic value of the place. Like the *Rockbank* Homestation Dam the dam wall has an angle towards its centre.

The wall face has a very high level of integrity, and this and its excellent condition contribute to the wall’s very high aesthetic value. The intact rural context of the site also contributes to its aesthetic, and to some extent to its historic, values. The fact that it is still used as a dam contributes to its integrity and appearance.

The earth embankment behind the wall appears to have retained its shape and original form to a very high degree. However the embankment behind the wall is riddled with rabbit burrows, which would appear to present a long-term threat to the stability of the whole structure.

Unlike the other Clarke dams it has 10-15 metre returns, or abutment walls at each end which are probably to control overflow outlets, as well as contain the earth embankment behind and provide an attractive finish to the structure.

The Rural Heritage Study assessed this site to be of ‘at least regional significance as a fine structure demonstrating a substantial pastoral enterprise, and interestingly, one of two equal examples in the region, both associated with WJT Clarke properties (although it cannot be confirmed that they date from his ownership)’.² The other structure referred to is the *Rockbank Headstation Dam*. (Site No.443)

History:

Clarke’s Rockbank Estate

On 24 August 1850 WJT (‘Big’) Clarke threw the administration of Port Phillip into turmoil by applying to purchase 20,000 acres of Sunbury land under a previously unused provision of an 1842 Imperial Land Act. Despite the strongest protests by existing squatters (including Rockbank pastoralist WC Yuille) he succeeded in purchasing 31,317 acres of this prime land. Clarke’s consequent entitlement to lease three times that area of lands that adjoined this freehold (his ‘grass-right’) ‘spelt disaster’ for the existing pastoralists.³

Clarke’s grass-right entitlement didn’t last long as during the 1850s most of the leased land was put up for auction by the Crown. However most former pastoralists could not afford to purchase sizeable holdings, and their reduced holdings (often just a 640 acre pre-emptive right) were too small to graze profitably. Former Melton squatters such as Yuille, Pinkerton and Pyke were squeezed out, some ruined. Those pastoralists who had accumulated capital - Clarke, the Chirnsides, and Staughton - soon dominated the whole Port Phillip district.⁴ In Melton other substantial pastoral properties were the *Green Hills* station at Toolern Vale, and William Taylor’s 10,000 acre Keilor estate *Overnewton* (which included much of the area between Mt Kororoit and Sydenham).

So during the 1850s Big Clarke bought thousands of acres of cheap Crown land to extend his Sunbury Special Survey south-westwards towards Melton, Derrimut, and the Werribee River.⁵ He purchased vast tracts of plains land (around Mt Cotterell, Rockbank, and Truganina), and also much smaller and more strategically located pockets along Kororoit Creek.

The Plumpton Dam is situated on one of these allotments:- Section 6, Crown Allotment 2, Parish of Holden, of 318 acres 2 roods and 33 perches, purchased on 13th August 1857.⁶

² *ibid*

³ Clarke, Michael, ‘*Big*’ Clarke (Queensberry Hill, Carlton, 1980), pp.103-5; Batey, Isaac, RHSV manuscript (1910), p.4.

⁴ Peel, Lynette, *Rural Industry in the Port Phillip Region 1835 – 1880* (MUP, Melbourne, 1974), pp.56, 129-131,133.

⁵ Clarke, Michael, *Clarke of Rupertswood, 1831-1897: The Life and Times of William John Turner Clarke, First Baronet of Rupertswood* (Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, 1995), p.31

⁶ Parish Plan, Parish of Holden

Allotments immediately to its north, south, east and west had also been purchased by Clarke at Crown Land sales in the years 1852 to 1857.

Over the next 20 years Clarke vigorously bought up small farms whose owners had fallen on hard times.⁷ Melton local Alexander Cameron explained that there was ‘a very dry season with no feed or water and small farmers were forced to sell out, their properties being added to the Rockbank estate.’⁸ For example, while Clarke had easily obtained many thousand acres of stony dry land at Crown sales, he initially had been much less successful in buying the rich land adjoining the Kororoit Creek. Yet by 1892 he owned almost all of it. The few exceptions were mostly in the hands of other pastoral estates (*Overnewton* and *Mt Aitken*), or owned by small pastoralists, the Moylan and Beaty families.⁹

Clarke apportioned this vast estate into different stations including *Bollinda Vale*, *Red Rock* (both north of Sunbury, and including *Rupertswood*) and *Rockbank* (which extended south of Sunbury to near Werribee, mostly from Diggers Rest to Tarneit). The *Rockbank* station had originally been established in the early 1840s; the headstation of its previous owner, WC Yuille, had been at the Beatty’s Road crossing of Kororoit Creek, the location of the former Rockbank Inn.

Upon Big Clarke’s death in 1874 his son WJ Clarke (later to become Australia’s first baronet) inherited his Victorian estate, including 136,310 acres in the Melbourne vicinity, stretching in an arc from about Sunshine, Tarneit, Balliang, Rockbank, Diggers Rest, Sunbury, Bolinda Vale and across to the Hume Highway.¹⁰

The Development of Rockbank Station

Once freehold tenure to their runs had been obtained, pastoralists’ major investment was in land and improvements and no longer in livestock. Building fences and securing water points were the two first priorities, together with sheds, sheep-washing facilities and, more slowly, when finances allowed, building comfortable homesteads.¹¹

With the appointment of William Francis Watson as manager, by the early 1860s work had begun on fencing, and drainage channels on the swampy ground around the *Rockbank* headstation. In 1864 disaster struck *Rockbank* when a fire destroyed many of the improvements. WJ Clarke, who was managing the estate for his father at this stage, was forced to build a new managers residence, new workmen’s cottages, and a new 22-stand shearing shed.¹² The bluestone shearing shed, built 1864, with additions in 1884, by architects Reed and Barnes, is today one of the oldest woolsheds in Victoria, and included in the Victorian Heritage Register.

Apart from managers and workers cottages, there was no homestead built on *Rockbank* at this time. WJ Clarke lived at Sunbury, but although Big Clarke lived in the city, he spent a lot of time at *Rockbank*. Once a fortnight he drove the few miles out there with his stock agent’s two leading salesmen, William Hudson and John Murray Peck. ‘At Rockbank, Clarke was

⁷ Peel, *op cit*

⁸ Cameron, Alexander, ‘Melton Memoirs’ (MDHS), p.16. (This would have been in the dry seasons of 1861-65, which concluded with a destructive flood in 1865.)

⁹ SLV Houghton, Plan I 29 (15/5/1854); Parish Plan: Kororoit; ‘Shire Map Series’ plans, SLV, 821.1A (1892)

¹⁰ Peel, *op.cit.*, pp.130-1; Clarke (1980), *op cit*, opposite p.247

¹¹ Peel, *op cit*, p.62

¹² Clarke, 1995, *op cit*, p.36

accustomed to make a personal selection of the fat sheep that were to be walked to Newmarket.’¹³

JM Peck’s young son Harry, later to become a legendary Newmarket stock agent, used to ride out with the men, and. His memoirs carry high praise for the Clarke stock, bred under the ‘genius’ of the Clarke’s overall manager Robert Clarke (no relation). They also suggest the significance of the *Rockbank* property:

‘For many years the wethers and cast-for-age-ewes of English Leicester-Merino crosses from the Clarke stations travelled in on the hoof in mobs of 500-1000, week after week, right through the winters, and topped Newmarket for quality and price. Never since have we seen the like in such numbers for evenness of type and quality combined. Subdivision of the Clarke properties resulting in the dispersal of these flocks was a distinct loss to the pastoral community.’¹⁴

As was evident by Big Clarke’s personal control of *Rockbank*, the station was a major part of the Clarke’s operations, providing fattening for the stock, which could then arrive at Newmarket in good condition. Melton’s Alexander Cameron also elaborated on *Rockbank*’s two-fold advantages in his memoirs. Firstly, ‘the grass on the Keilor plains was sweet, and the property specialised in fattening wethers and barren ewes for the Newmarket sales.’ Secondly, *Rockbank*, ‘being so close to Melbourne market’ allowed the drovers to ‘start with the sheep in the evening and be at the market in the morning.’¹⁵

In 1873, when WJ Clarke was the President of Melton Shire, he was also bestowing considerable personal attention on the nearby *Rockbank* estate, rebuilding a number of its cottages.¹⁶ Again in October and November 1876 Clarke was reported to be improving conditions for his shepherds ... ‘the huts are being pulled down on *Rockbank* and nice houses are being erected.’¹⁷ The other bluestone cottages that remain today at *Rockbank* date from the 1870s.

Big Clarke died in 1874 and WJ Clarke inherited his Victorian pastoral estates. Whereas Big Clarke was notorious for his parsimony, WJ Clarke was progressive and prepared to invest. While no references have been found to the construction of any of the *Rockbank* dams, it would be consistent with WJ Clarke’s general approach to property if they were built in his era.

Before leaving on his 1874-75 Grand Tour of Europe, Clarke took great pains to organise the running of his huge estates during his absence. ‘Each manager and agent was given a program to follow and told to submit monthly reports to him by mail.’ ‘Frequent letters also went to Robert Clarke, the manager of Bolinda Vale, and to WF Watson, in charge of *Rockbank*.’ He sent them specific instructions regarding sheep, cattle, improved grasses and the preservation of the hares.¹⁸

A report on the property by the *Australasian*’s ‘Travelling Reporter’ in 1876 advised that *Rockbank* sheep station was 40,000 acres in extent, and carried some 33,000 to 36,000 sheep (depending on the season), and some 800 head of cattle. The land was ‘all open plains, with

¹³ *ibid*, p.241

¹⁴ Peck, HH *Memoirs of a Stockman*, fourth edition (Stock & Land Publishing Co, Melbourne, 1972), p.97

¹⁵ Cameron, *op cit*, p.16; Clarke (1980), *op cit*, p.241

¹⁶ *ibid*, p.56

¹⁷ The *Melton Express*, 21/10/1876; 14/11/1876

¹⁸ Clarke, 1995, *op cit*, p.85

scarcely any shelter for the stock'. The station homestead comprised buildings of 'the ordinary description', with the exception of 'a fine roomy woolshed built of stone with a galvanized iron roof, fitted up with all the necessary conveniences'. No mention is made of the distinctive Clarke dams.¹⁹

In 1879 the local paper advertised: 'Stonewallers wanted on Rockbank Station. Apply the Manager.' Again in 1880 the paper carried an advertisement:- 'Wanted. Stonewallers on Rockbank Station. Apply The Raglan Hotel or Monmouthshire Hotel.'²⁰ It is possible that the project was the large drystone dams that remain on the property today. If not, these advertisements at least add to the evidence - of the cottage building, and extensions to the shearing shed - that the 1870s was a time of considerable redevelopment on the property.

The Rockbank Station Dams

Pastoralists' first 'permanent improvements' after obtaining security of tenure were erecting fences and sinking waterholes.²¹ Provision of water was particularly problematic in the Shire of Melton as the plains area, situated in a rainshadow, has a significantly lower rainfall than the rest of the Port Phillip region.

The excavation of large 'tanks' (dams in paddocks or across 'dry' gullies rather than on watercourses) only began to come into general use in the 1870s,²² so it is possible that the dams pre-dated this later solution. However the excavation of 'tanks' in Melton's plains districts 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 Clarke solution seems to have been to construct earthen dams across depressions and gullies of the district, probably built with the shallow topsoil (likely scooped-up with the aid of horses or bullocks²³), which were then faced with a dry stone wall, built to different degrees of craftsmanship. Hence a series of at least four earthen dams with dry stone wall faces was built across the Clarke estate, mainly in the north around Diggers Rest, but also at the *Rockbank* headstation. (Two others may have been built on Clarke property outside of the Shire, one at Balliang²⁴, and another south of Doherty's Road.)

It is possible that idea for and the construction of the dams evolved over years. They could date to 1860s, when the the shearing shed was built, or even earlier; it is also possible that they were a part of the capital improvements that are known to have occurred in the late 1870s – early 1880s when Sir WJ Clarke assumed management of *Rockbank*. By the late 1880s and 1890s

¹⁹ *Australasian Travelling Reporter*, 28/10/1876

²⁰ *The Melton Express*, 10/5/1879; 6/3/1880.

²¹ Peel, *op cit*, pp.108-109; also Brown, PL (ed), *The Narrative of George Russell of Golf Hill* (OUP, London, 1935), pp.373-374

²² Hughes, Trueman, Ludlow, 'Wells and Underground Tanks', prepared for the Heritage Council of NSW (nd), pp.25-28; also Albrecht, CE, *Measurments and Drawings of Tanks and Dams*, Melbourne, Arnell & Jackson, [1885?]

²³ 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.)

²⁴ Context Pty Ltd, 'Rural Heritage Study, Western Region of Melbourne' (Melbourne Western Region Inc, 1994), p.200.

another source of stock water - windmills pumping groundwater – were becoming widespread in rural areas.²⁵

The dams are a major, distinctive, and perhaps unique legacy of the pastoral era in Victoria. They express the need for a permanent water supply within 3 or 4 miles of sheep pastures, and the major role of the *Rockbank* station in fattening sheep for the Newmarket saleyard.

The 'Plumpton'

The Plumpton Dam site (Section 6 of CA 2 Parish of Holden) also has other historical associations, with the origins of greyhound racing in Australia, and with one of the first flights in Australia, by world-famous escapologist Harry Houdini.

In 1882 this particular property became the focus of Sir WJ Clarke's leadership of the sport of greyhound coursing in Australia. At that time there were no tracks or enclosures and greyhounds pursued hares across country. The first officially recognised public coursing meeting held in Australia, in which hares were the game coursed, was held in 1873 on Clarke's *Rupertwood* property. On the 14th of August 1874, *Rupertwood* hosted Australia's inaugural 'Waterloo Cup', which became the nation's premier greyhound trophy. On 14th May 1874 the inaugural 'St Leger Stakes', another celebrated greyhound trophy, was held in Melton Shire, at Wallace's Paddock near Diggers Rest Railway Station. Diggers Rest had the advantages of finer grass and more level terrain, making the courses were easier to follow. The hares there were 'plentiful, large framed and stout runners', and the:

'ground was dry and firm, good going for the 400 spectators, who were quiet and orderly. The courses were easier to predict because the hares tended to run north, striving to escape into the rough ground bordering Jacksons Creek.'²⁶

Clarke later stated that the superior sport of the (four day) meeting 'was due to the five strong hares that had been released at Diggers Rest six years before.'²⁷ Another advantage of Diggers Rest was the nearby railway station, which made public access to the paddocks easy: 'The special train was waiting nearby and reached Melbourne before six o'clock.' Diggers Rest soon became the premier venue of the Victorian Coursing Club (of which Clarke was President). On 1st August 1881 the Victoria Coursing Club held the Waterloo Cup at Diggers Rest for the first time.²⁸

In 1882 Clarke built what appears to have been Australia's first greyhound Plumpton at Diggers Rest:

"The Waterloo Cup meeting of 1st August 1882 introduced an entirely new element into field coursing. The VCC decided to construct a Plumpton enclosure. The word Plumpton came from a village in Sussex, and WJ Clarke sent details back to Australia after his visit there. The enclosed new oval was hurriedly constructed a mile west of Diggers Rest and was first used for the final two days of the Waterloo Cup. It drew a very large crowd to view the most successful meeting yet held. The innovation met with almost universal approval ... there was much less fatigue than that caused by tramping over hundreds of boulder-strewn acres to follow 20 courses in a day. In a confined space, Banner's expert slipping could be fully appreciated

²⁵ Hughes *et al*, *op cit*, pp.68-70; Pepys Wood, *op cit*

²⁶ Clarke, 1995, *op cit*, pp. 74-75

²⁷ *ibid*, pp.74-75

²⁸ *ibid*, p.157

and the reasons leading to the judge's decisions were more apparent. The meeting ended with hearty cheers for the absent Hon. WJ Clarke.²⁹

Clarke also set aside a couple of securely fenced paddocks a few miles west of Diggers Rest for breeding hares in semi-captivity. A number could be transported to the Plumpton Oval for a coursing meeting, so that there was always plenty of game hidden among the long grass of the enclosure. For the 1883 season Will erected stands, a ladies' enclosure and other improvements, so that the VCC Plumpton was a much superior affair...³⁰ It was said that 'none of the most renowned coursing grounds in England equalled the new set-up at Diggers Rest, where the best dog was sure to win.'³¹

The introduction of greyhound racing in the early 1890s caused the demise of Plumpton coursing. In 1894 the VCC closed 'the Oval'. The special fencing and other improvements were sold and Clarke's 20 year reign as the coursing king of Victoria came to an end.

An 1892 map shows the 'Plumpton Oval' located on Sections 5 & 6 of CA 2, the land immediately south-west of the Plumpton Dam.³² A 1908 map marks the 'Coursing Ground' on the southern area of Section 5. It shows two parallel fences in a 'U' shape, which may have been the remains of the southern part of the course.³³

It is unlikely that anything other than the site of the Plumpton Oval remains, together with the names 'Plumpton Road', 'Plumpton Park' (the property on which the dam is situated) and 'Plumpton Dam'. Apart from that, there is only a little evidence of two of Clarke's three hare enclosures remaining, on another property.

On 18th March 1910 famous escapologist Harold Houdini made a three kilometre controlled circuit of the paddock adjacent to this dam (which would have been the by now disused Plumpton Oval) at an altitude of up to 30 metres, staking his claim to the first powered flight in Australia.³⁴ His party pitched their tents beside the dam.³⁵

The Break-up of Rockbank Pastoral Station.

By the end of the nineteenth century historical changes were afoot. The view that the Clarke and other local sheep-runs were holding back development had been long-held amongst many of the Melton population, and became widely popular around the turn of the century. At this time political pressure increased on the owners of pastoral landowners in Melton, and around the country, to 'break-up' their huge estates. Some of the Melton pastoralists – Sir RTH Clarke of *Rupertswood* and Samuel Staughton of *Eynesbury* – were also local parliamentary representatives in this period, and happy to maintain their family reputations as benevolent local squires. In 1897 Sir Rupert Turner Havelock Clarke Bart, the new inheritor of the Clarke empire, 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 himself keen not to 'disappoint public expectations.'³⁶ The Victorian Municipal Directory

²⁹ *ibid*, p.110

³⁰ *ibid*, p.110. (Superior to the Chirnsides' *Werribee Park* copy)

³¹ *ibid*, p.292

³² SLV Map 821.1A (1892), Parish of Holden. (This may be more accurate information than an oral tradition that the Plumpton was to the north-west of the homestead.)

³³ Lands Victoria, Historic Plan: M/Def 94 (1908)

³⁴ Starr, J, *Melton: Plains of Promise* (Shire of Melton, nd), p.250

³⁵ Information from Historic Marker, Holden Road.

³⁶ *Sunbury News*: 31/7/1897, 7/8/1897, 4/9/1897.

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.³⁷

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.

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 Clarke, Taylor, and Staughton pastoral empires, and after the First World War, of smaller pastoral estates such as *Melton Park* and *Green Hills*. In 1905 the Closer Settlement Board purchased *Overnewton* and subdivided it into smaller farming allotments.

In about 1901-1909, and especially in the 1905-07 period, Sir RTH Clarke subdivided and sold the vast *Rockbank* estate, and most of *Rupertswood*, *Red Rock* and *Bolinda Vale* estates that had been so carefully acquired and tendered by his grandfather and father.³⁸ While he subdivided it for farming, the lots, especially in the plains areas, were larger than those sold in the area by the Closer Settlement Board, and many appear to have been purchased by established neighbouring farmers and smaller graziers. The first land sales of the *Rockbank* property, near Werribee, were held in 1901. In 1907 17,000 acres of the southern part of *Rockbank* were subdivided and sold. In 1909 it was reported that Clarke had sold all of the land in the *Rockbank* Estate around Digger's Rest.³⁹

William Angliss was one who bought part of the *Rockbank* property to agist cattle and sheep prior to their transport and sale at Newmarket (as the Clarks had done).

In 1909 the 2000 acre *Rockbank* homestead allotment was sold to John Richmond Smith of Mount Gambier, who established a Merino stud on the property, and renamed that part of the property *Deanside*.

By 1921 Sections 5 & 6 had been subdivided in an east west direction, with the ‘Sheahan Bros’ (farmers Thomas, James and Daniel) owning part, and farmer Edward Johnston the other, ‘north’, part, of 400 acres.⁴⁰ (He had just purchased this from the estate of the late J Cooke. This may have been the ‘John Cooke of Stanhope Street Malvern’ who is also credited with having purchased a large portion of Clarke’s *Rockbank* estate - some 1200 acres or 480 ha - at Mt Cotterill by May 1907.⁴¹) The present house was built on the now 400 acre property by Johnstone in the inter-war period. When purchased by Ned (?) Thomas in c.1957 the property

³⁷ *Victorian Municipal Directory*, 1898, and following years.

³⁸ Michael Clarke, ‘*Big’ Clarke* (Queensberry Hill Press, Melbourne, 1980), *passim*; Sir RTH Clarke Bart. sold the vast section of the Rockbank Estate that lay south of the Western Highway in November 1906; it would appear that he sold the northern portion about a year earlier. (PROV VPRS 560/P0 (35850); also CT Vol.3211 Fol.642206, pertaining to an 8000 acre portion south part of this estate; and also Shire of Melton Ratebooks from 1905-06 which record local farmers as owners of parts of the *Rockbank* estate.

³⁹ *The Sunbury News*, 24 July 1909, p.2.

⁴⁰ Shire of Melton Ratebook, 1921-22

⁴¹ Statutory Declaration by William Howat, Manager of Sir RTH Clarke’s business affairs, 13th May 1907 (PROV, VPRS 460/P0, 35850)

was all open paddocks. Since then many fences and outbuildings have been erected as part of the Plumpton Park horse stud, now owned by Ray and Sarah Thomas.⁴²

Thematic Context / Comparative Analysis:

Melton Historical Themes: ‘Water’: ‘Pastoralism’; ‘Horses, Hounds and Hares’; ‘Farming’.

Known comparable examples:

No other similar pastoral dams appear to have been identified in the Victorian Heritage Register, or the National Trust register. The VHR registration of the Western District pastoral property *Murndal* includes a ‘dams and lakes system’ that appears to be significant primarily for its designed landscape qualities rather than its pastoral utility (although one of the three listed dams is the ‘Woolshed Dam’). There is no description of the construction of the dams, or note of anything structurally unusual or significant about them. Similarly, the lake at *Rupertswood*, Sunbury, with bluestone channels and edging, is an ornamental feature of a landscape garden.

In the Melton district there are numerous large former pastoral dams. This dam is the second-largest of a series of at least four large and medium sized drystone dams to have been built on the Clarke’s *Rockbank* station in the Shire of Melton. It is the most finely constructed, using roughly squared and coursed bluestone. Most of these other dams are the subjects of separate reports in this study:- the *Rockbank* Headstation Dam (Site No.443); the Coimadai - Diggers Rest Road Dam (Site No.082); the Diggers Rest Dam (Site No.077); and the Holden Road Dam (Site No.110). These five dams are all marked on the 1916 Sunbury Army Ordnance Map in the Shire of Melton.

Several other former Clarke property dams have recently been identified through historical maps, survey and aerial photographs. One of these sites, on Sections 32 and 33, Parish of Maribyrnong, on the north-east corner of the Melton Highway and Plumpton Road, as two dams. The larger one is smaller than both the *Rockbank* Headstation and Plumpton Dams, but may also be of drystone wall construction. They do not appear on the 1916 Ordnance Map, but this is not conclusive (the Beaty dam also does not show on this map). An inspection of these dams would be required to validate this information.

The other dam is situated to the west of Troups Road, on Crown Allotment 2, Section 4, Parish of Pywheittjorrk. It is constructed of fieldstone, and may date to the Clarke ownership.

It is also likely that there is another one of the *Rockbank* estate dams in the adjacent Shire of Wyndham. The 1938 plan shows a dam on a former Clarke property in the Shire of Werribee, south of Doherty’s Road (Crown Allotment 18, Parish of Tarneit). It is marked as ‘tank’. This may be the southernmost of the *Rockbank* estate drystone wall dams.

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.

The Western Region Rural Heritage Study also includes a dam (which it did not view or assess), described as the ‘WJT Clarke Dam, Ripleys Road, Balliang’.⁴³

⁴² Personal conversation with the owners, 26/2/2002.

⁴³ Context, *op cit*, Site W73, p.200

The other comparable drystone wall dam in the Shire is situated on the former property of the Beaty family (*Rocklands*) also in Coimadai - Diggers Rest Road (Site No.164). It is also the subject of a separate report in this study.

There are also several surviving former large pastoral dams in the area associated with William Taylor's *Overnewton* pastoral estate. One of these is in the City of Brimbank:- Taylors Dam, now the 'lake' of Taylor's Lake, on Chichester Drive, Taylors Lakes. It is described as:- 'Unlike the other large stone-walled dams associated with large pastoral runs [M19 (Deanside), and M34 (Plumpton Park Dam)] Taylors Dam has an earthen wall and stone and concrete overflow. Its size is comparable to the dam on the Colglenn property.'⁴⁴ This dam is not comparable to the *Rockbank* drystone wall dams.

Another former Taylor dam is situated in the Shire of Melton (Site 444), on a gully tributary to the Kororoit Creek, north of Taylors Road, and west of Gourlay Road. This site is interesting in that, unlike the *Rockbank* dams, it appears to have been provided with its own site in the subdivision of *Overnewton*, perhaps to enable all of the new farmers to access it. It is a large dam that still holds water. It is an earthen walled dam built across a gully, with a little fieldstone shoring. Structurally it is not comparable with the *Rockbank* drystone wall dams. Neither is it as high, or as extensive in its use of fieldstone in construction, as the similar *Rockbank* Holden Road dam (Site 110).

Condition:

Good

Integrity:

Substantially Intact

Recommendations:

Recommended for inclusion in the:

- Victorian Heritage Register
- 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>No</i>

Other Recommendations:

- The Dam structure is threatened by rabbit burrows. A Conservation Management Plan to deal with this and other threats is strongly recommended.

⁴⁴ *ibid*, Site K30, p.89

