

Heritage Overlay No.: 075
Citation No.: 208
Place: Former Melton Reservoir

Other Names of Place: Hannah Watts Park (Pond).
Location: Hannah Watts Park, High Street, Melton
Critical Dates: c.1879-1882
Existing Heritage Listings: None
Recommended Level of Significance: LOCAL



Statement of Significance:

The former Melton Reservoir, now an ornamental duck pond in the Hannah Watts Park, High Street, Melton, comprises the excavated earth tank or reservoir, and a small bluestone structure on the Toolern Creek that was part of an inlet portal to the Reservoir.

The former Melton Reservoir, Hannah Watts Park, High Street, Melton, is historically significant at the LOCAL level (AHC D2, B2, H1) as Melton's major nineteenth century attempt to address its vulnerability to the particularly low rainfall of the district and provide a dependable supply of healthy drinking water in the town. Like every other early public work scheme attempted, the success of the Reservoir in achieving its objectives was limited, and the town was essentially dependent on bore and tank water until the provision of reticulated water from the Djerrivarrh Dam in 1963.

The former Reservoir was also used as a town swimming pool in the mid nineteenth century. In recent decades it was developed into Melton's most prominent passive recreation park, at the gateway of the Melbourne approach to the town. Its pre-eminent position in the town is highlighted by its being named after honoured resident Hannah Watts, the midwife of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Melton. Since the demolition of her former homes, *Lynch's Cottage*, and *Rosebank*, the former reservoir reserve has also acquired significance as the prime monument to a woman who was venerated in her time for her contribution to the local community.

Overall, the former Melton Reservoir on High Street Melton is of LOCAL heritage significance.

Description:

The original Reservoir is now a pond, set among indigenous river red gums, and the centrepiece of a picnic ground that, with the golf links opposite, constitutes a distinctive and beautiful natural landscape gateway to the town. A bluestone structure thought to be associated with the inlet portal of a channel or pipe to the reservoir also survives on the west bank of Toolern Creek, just downstream of the bridge.

In the absence of photographs or other documentation it is not possible to know how intact the reservoir is. The dimensions of the dam are generally intact, although it is likely to be shallower.

A bluestone structure on the creek is all that survives of the inlet device, which originally consisted of a brick wall / dam on the creek, which during flood times provided a head of water to supply the gravity fed pipe to the reservoir.

History:

Since the 1960s Melton has been amply supplied with water. In c.1963 reticulated water was provided from the Djerriwarrh Creek Reservoir. In the early 1960s the Melton Weir on the Werribee River became popular for speedboat and water ski sports. It is now hard to imagine the difficulties associated with procuring this basic commodity in Melton prior to these relatively recent times.

Melton Shire is a very dry place. The 'Melton Mallee' woodland near the Djerriwarrh Creek is the only place where mallee vegetation is found south of the Dividing Range.¹ The area from about Bacchus Marsh - Diggers Rest to the Bay and towards Geelong has the lowest average rainfall in the Port Phillip district, about 22 inches (56 cm). The area between Melton and Werribee has the lowest rainfall of all, less than 18 inches (46 cm).²

Places associated with the provision of domestic and stock water supply - above-ground domestic water tanks, bores and pumps, domestic water dams, stock water reserves, rural and of course town dams - are therefore of particular significance in Melton Shire.

¹ National Trust of Australia (Victoria) Landscape Classification Report. Also *Ballarat Courier*, 11/6/1983

² Peel, L, *Rural Industry in the Port Phillip Region, 1835-1880* (MUP, Melbourne, 1974), p.9

In 1867 the West Bourke Agricultural Inspector described Melton as ‘a pretty, though parched up township’.³ Although this was a period of general drought in Victoria, Melton was clearly a notably dry place.

Both rural and townspeople were forced to walk distances for this basic commodity. Hjorth recollected the township in its very early days:

‘The water supply was very deficient, a few had iron tanks, and some under-ground ones. After a lengthy spell of dry weather, the creek had to be depended on, and that supply often got exhausted near the village, but a mile to the south of it, there was generally a good supply to be got in the creek.’

These stories have survived through generations of local family lore. Jeff Robinson’s great grandmother Mrs Raleigh carried water in buckets from a stream ‘at least a mile away’ to their Harkness Road house in dry periods. This is clearly an event that was burdensome enough to have lived on in story, and yet the Robinson family was more fortunate than many in living relatively close to the Djerriwarrh Creek. Together with the Werribee River it would have been one of the more reliable streams in the area.

The Toolam Toolern Creek, like most southern Australian creeks, was temperamental, prone to major floods, but often puny. When it dried up, or was too far away, the alternative was to purchase water, the price for this scarce commodity in the 1860s being 2 shillings per 50 gallon cask.⁴ On the road across Keilor Plains in the goldrush times John Chandler and his companion, ‘nearly famished’, had paid 10 shillings for five buckets of water, which they shared with their horses.⁵

The problem was a constant topic of discussion within the town in the 1860s. Surveys were prepared for expensive water supply schemes with capacity of a million gallons, costing thousands, sometimes tens of thousands, of pounds which, it was hoped, ‘would claim the attention of government’. In June 1868 a meeting held ‘for the purpose of providing Melton with water and for supervision of the town reserve’ appointed a committee of nine men, (including Mr A Shebler, who was still promoting the cause 30 years later).⁶

Builder Mr Shebler, a well known Melton identity, apparently tired quickly of committees, as in 1869 he is reported to have erected, at his own cost, ‘a dam at the eastern end of the township where the Toolern Creek crosses the main road ... Mr Shebler claims it will hold ½ million gallons.’ For his trouble the Council fined him £1 for cutting down trees during its construction.⁷ It is likely that this was literally a dam across the creek, rather than the ‘tank’ (as paddock dams were generally referred to in those days) that is the reservoir in the Hannah Watts Park today.

‘The reservoir’ is reported by one Melton memorialist as having been constructed during the term of a Mr James Meek Nicholson as Shire Secretary, the overseer being Mr Peter Atley, who later became a Shire councillor.⁸ The *Melton Express* reports that the first sod of the ‘water reservoir’ was turned in September 1879.

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

⁴ Bob Macdonald, ‘History of Melton’, unpublished typescript, MDHS, c.1969, p.6

⁵ Chandler, John (Michael Cannon, ed) *Forty Years in the Wilderness* (Loch Haven, Arthurs Seat, 1990), p.78. Ten shillings was a very good days wage at the time.

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ *The Melton Express*, 16/10/1869

⁸ Alex Cameron, ‘Melton Memoirs’ typescript, MDHS, p.12/

There are conflicting accounts of the date of construction of the reservoir, ranging from 1876 to 1882; works of one sort or another were probably carried on over a number of years. One of the first local historians described it as having been an earth reservoir built in 1877, ‘adjacent to the creek’, providing for water to be carried manually for domestic use.⁹ A different, more detailed and probably more accurate reference from the same author states that ‘the reservoir’ was completed in 1882. It was thought that ‘with the considerable amount spent’, it would not only be ‘a work of great local importance’, but a ‘benefit for the travelling public.’¹⁰

There may have been a number of water schemes engineered around the Toolern Creek at the east end of town. The ultimate outcome of it all was the present earth ‘tank’, which is the duckpond in the present Hannah Watts Park. An 1892 map marks the site of the present Hannah Watts Park, on which this dam is situated, as ‘Reservoir’.¹¹ This reservoir was fed by a gravity pipe from a brick dam on Toolern Creek, just downstream of the bridge, the water flowing to the tank/reservoir in times of flood. All that survives of this is a bluestone structure that probably housed the inlet pipe.¹²

Within a few years of its construction however the water was said to have been rendered unsuitable for human consumption by ‘sludge’ coming down the creek, the cleaning out of which Council set aside annual budgets during 1884-1890.¹³ Farmers used it to fill up troughs and tanks for animals. As a town reservoir it was clearly not an immediate or unqualified success: the water problem continued to occupy the minds of the townspeople and councillors. On the 18th January 1884 Mr A Blackwood, blacksmith, led a delegation that:

‘begged that the Council would do all in their power to get a supply of water into the township, and let it cost what it may, the people should have water, if it was possible to obtain it, as the Reservoir did not seem to be likely to meet the demand’.¹⁴

Despite its problems the reservoir met at least part of the demand for water. In August 1905 the local paper reported contentedly that ‘the township reservoir is now full, and it makes a very nice sheet of water.’¹⁵

In the late 1880s a ratepayers meeting organised a deputation to inquire whether the boring plant being used to build the Melton Railway Viaduct might be used to bore for water. A geologists report thought that water could be found at 500 feet depth, and the government offered to pay half the cost.¹⁶ Within a few years another public meeting heard of three proposals for a Melton water supply: boring; pumping water from the Werribee River; and constructing a large reservoir on MI Brown’s property (*Green Hills*) and piping it into the town, which, it was considered, would be the cheapest and most reliable.¹⁷

Still nothing eventuated. In 1892 Harvey Patterson of the *Melton Park Estate* had brought the government diamond drill to the district to look for gold. Cameron explains:

⁹ Robert Macdonald, ‘A History of Melton’, typescript held by MDHS, c.1969

¹⁰ Bob Macdonald, ‘History of Melton, October 1969, typescript held by MDHS, p.11

¹¹ Shire Map Series, Map No.25, 1892

¹² Mr Ray Radford, personal conversation, 7/11/2005

¹³ Council *Minutes*, 1884-1890.

¹⁴ MDHS

¹⁵ *The Express*, 19/8/1905

¹⁶ Macdonald, *op cit*, p.12

¹⁷ *ibid*, p.13

‘While the diamond drill was in the district, a meeting of ratepayers was held, the Shire Council being approached to put down two or three bores to see if we could get water. The Council passed a rate of three pence in the pound and I collected about £70. One bore was put down in McCorkell’s Lane in the north riding, one on the Toolern Road and one near the Wesleyan Church also one near the Toolern Creek which was got through Mr ST Staughton our local member. ... A ratepayers meeting was called to see if we could collect some funds to put a pump and a windmill on the latter one...’

Over £7 was collected, and Braybrook Shire contributed £5, which was more than enough to construct the pump. ‘It being good mineral water, the cattle and horses would run to the trough to get a drink’.¹⁸ In 1899 a ‘Water Supply Reserve’, not quite 2 acres in area, was gazetted in Melton, on the west bank of Toolern Creek, on the north side of High Street.¹⁹ In 1898 the ‘Melton Water Supply Committee’ wrote asking for Council’s assistance with the windmill and bore, and Council took over the site that year. The facility appears only to have been used in dry times, and maintenance was soon a problem. A local editorial in 1905 conceded that the windmill was not a proposition to repair, but encouraged the Council to maintain the ‘stand and pipe’, and apply to the Water Supply Department for a small oil engine as a pump.²⁰ Years later when the Council decided to sell the windmill and tank there was disappointment in the community, some of whom apparently appreciated its historic significance.²¹

In the end the town had had to resort to the same windmill and dam (‘tank’) solution that sustained the rural parts of the Shire. Maps in 1916 and 1938 showed the locations of many scores of ‘waterhole’ (presumably a small dam) and associated ‘windmill’ in the Shire.²² In this environment, the small township was able to support three ‘tank makers’ – Messrs Cecil Shebler and Collins.²³

The struggle to find a better solution to the problem continued however. The McKenzie Street ‘weir and ford’ (1890), would serve the dual purpose of a bridge and a water supply, damming up water which would then be channelled into the reservoir, about half a kilometre upstream.²⁴ This structure is still standing and used as a road, and a substantial tribute to the problem of water in Melton, and a local attempted resolution of the problem (Site Report No.227). However its success in regard to providing a useful water storage again appear to have been equivocal.

In 1895 a correspondent to the local newspaper noted that the water in the reservoir ‘is going down fast and but a few inches remain. The reservoir ought to be condemned. It is 19 years since it was constructed and it ought to be a good reservoir.’²⁵

In April 1898 it was necessary for yet another ‘water committee’ to be formed ‘to investigate the provision of water for the town’.²⁶ In December it was reported that a meeting at J Robinson’s house at Toolern had endorsed a proposal to sink ‘a shaft on the Toolern to Melton Road close to the bore that was put down some time ago’. (This would have been in 1892.) The meeting enthusiastically resolved to collect money to enable the bore, which it was hoped

¹⁸ Cameron, *op cit*, pp.24-25

¹⁹ ‘Township of Melton, Parish of Djerriwarrah’

²⁰ *The Bacchus Marsh Express*, 19/8/1905.

²¹ Cameron, *op cit*, p.25

²² Commonwealth Department of Defence 1 inch to 1 mile maps: ‘Sunbury 1916’; ‘Sunbury 1938’

²³ Collins, *op cit*.

²⁴ MDHS Notes.

²⁵ *The Melton Express*, 2/4/1895

²⁶ *The Melton Express*, 6/4/1898

would ‘supply the district with a good supply of water’.²⁷ In 1909 when Premier Murray visited the Shire he was asked if the ‘boring plant’ could be kept in the district.²⁸

A 1954 promotional screed on the town stated: ‘We have no water supply, residents being dependent on tanks and wells. There is however, artesian and bore water available in many parts of the Shire.’²⁹ The townspeople were still primarily dependent on bore and tank water when reticulated water arrived in the 1960s.

The reservoir is remembered as having been a ‘large sheet of water enclosed by a high fence’ in the early twentieth century. In the mid twentieth century it was ringed with pine trees. It had a big hand pump, and tank stand from which farmers would pump water into a watercart for their stock. Several bores (with associated tank stands and tanks) ‘on the flat’ nearby were also used in this manner, but were in need of repair.³⁰

In summer the reservoir was used as a swimming pool by the local children, before a rough change-shed was built at the nearby swimming hole, ‘The Point’ (no evidence of which survives). Although the area has been affected by filling, it is thought that the present duck pond constitutes the general dimensions of the original reservoir area.³¹

Hannah Watts Park

The provision of a modern water supply in Melton is reflected in the official change in the purpose of the site of the Reservoir. Half of the site was gazetted for a ‘Public Purposes Reserve’ in 1955, with the balance of the site similarly reserved in 1963.³² The reservoir is now an ornamental pond, the centrepiece of a new passive recreation use of the site. The new park was given a new name: the Hannah Watts Park.

Hannah Watts, the illiterate woman after whom the park is named, is perhaps the most honored historical figure in the Shire. Joan Starr dedicated a chapter of her history of the Shire of Melton to Grannie Watts:- ‘No pioneer woman is better known or remembered with pride around Melton than Hannah Jane (Grannie) Watts.’³³

During her years as a midwife and matron of the village’s first hospital, she helped into the world most of the babies who are now Melton’s senior citizens. Always a self-reliant young woman, her midwife vocation began when she volunteered to help the ship’s doctor *en route* from Ireland to Australia: ‘The doctor was “much impressed” by her natural ability as a nurse’, and Watts ‘continued to serve the community as a midwife and “bush nurse” through her long and eventful life.’³⁴ ‘Many tales are told of her deeds, and many people have cause to thank her,’ relates Starr.

After many years of voluntary service, later in her life Watts established herself as a professional midwife. Her ‘Lynch Cottage’ (Lynch was her maiden name) became Melton’s first hospital, officially recognised as such in 1911. Until the development of Base Hospitals in regional towns, most small country towns had a private hospital established by a midwife. These were apparently the norm until after the Second World War. The midwifery

²⁷ The *Melton Express*, 10/12/1898

²⁸ The *Melton Express*, 27/3/1909

²⁹ MDHS

³⁰ Radford, *op cit*

³¹ Radford, *op cit*; Mrs Edna Barrie, personal conversation, Judith Bilstza, October 2005.

³² Parish Plan: ‘Township of Melton, Parish of Djerriwarrah’

³³ Starr, J, Melton: Plains of Promise (Melton Shire Council, c.1985), p.88

³⁴ *ibid*

profession, once widespread and crucial in rural society, is now effectively redundant, its former achievements largely forgotten and uncommemorated.

Although she could not write, signing all documents (including her 1919 will) with a cross, Granny Watts arranged to keep a meticulous record of her practice. Her 'book' in 1917 listed 290 births that she had attended since 1886, as well as surgical operations, and assistance to visiting doctors with preparations for burial. The last entry, of the birth of Thomas Watts Minns, was only two months before she died on 21st October 1921, at age 90. Granny's 'book' became famous locally as an impeccable genealogical reference in a time when births were not always officially registered.³⁵

Many of the Melton families that descend partly from Granny Watts also feature prominently in Melton history, including: the Hogg, Burns, O'Donnell, Kennedy, Jongebloed, Tarleton and Tolhurst families.³⁶ Hannah's Hogg grandchildren included William Hogg, Superintendent of the Victoria Police Force, and 'champion cyclist' Tom Hogg.³⁷

The *Gisborne Gazette* report of Hannah Watt's funeral in 1921 gives an indication of the regard in which she was held in the local community:

'On Friday 21st October passed away one of Melton's most interesting and honored residents in the person of Mrs Hannah Watts, familiarly and affectionately called Grannie Watts.

The deceased lady who had reached the patriarchal age of 90 years has been identified with the district for 63 years during which time she nursed several generations of Melton citizens, while in the absence of medical aid residents looked to Grannie as their doctor, philosopher and friend. Hundreds in fact we might say thousands of people held the deceased in veneration. In the hour of trouble, sickness or death the striking personality of Grannie was always to be found bringing comfort and consolation to the afflicted. A woman of great energy and determination combined with superior intelligence, Grannie conquered difficulties that would have made many falter...' ³⁸

The *Gazette* noted the immense (for tiny Melton) cortege that accompanied her remains to the Melton Cemetery. The 51 buggies plus horse riders were 'a testimony of the respect in which the deceased was held', it said, concluding that:

'Deep sorrow is felt throughout the district at the passing of Melton's grand old lady, and the death leaves a void which it will be hard to fill.'

Thematic Context / Comparative Analysis:

Melton Historical Themes: 'Water'

Known comparable examples:

³⁵ *ibid*, p.98

³⁶ *ibid*, pp. 89, 91-92, 93, 96.

³⁷ *ibid*, pp.165, 199

³⁸ *The Gisborne Gazette*, 28th October 1921. See also the *Melton Express*, 29th October 1921.

The McKenzie Street Weir/Ford is the only other surviving evidence of providing a town water supply prior to reticulated water from Djerriwarrh Dam in the mid 1960s. There is no obvious evidence of the bores that were sunk in High Street, and Palmerston Street Melton, or the windmill and tank that were erected on the High Street (Golf Course) site.

Condition:

Fair

Integrity:

Unknown.

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>No</i>



Stonework beside Toolern Creek, downstream of the bridge. This secured a pipe which supplied water to the reservoir from a small dam on the creek.