

Heritage Overlay No.: 080
Citation No.: 214
Place: Walnut Tree, High Street Melton

Other Names of Place: N/A
Location: 222-230 High Street Melton, on lawn between Shire Chambers and Community Centre (Allotment 8 Section 1)
Critical Dates: 1930s.
Existing Heritage Listings: None
Recommended Level of Significance: LOCAL



Statement of Significance:

The Walnut Tree at 222-230 High Street Melton, planted by blacksmith Gordon Macdonald sometime between the 1930s and the early 1950s, is of heritage significance as the only remnant of the once-important blacksmith industry in Melton, and the site of the most historically important blacksmith in the Shire.

The Walnut Tree at 222-230 High Street Melton is historically significant at a LOCAL level (AHC A4, B2, H1). The tree was planted by Melton's longstanding and final blacksmith, Gordon Macdonald, who operated the old blacksmith for 39 years. It commemorates the important economic role of blacksmiths in the township. Being situated on a major Victorian

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highway (the first Portland Road, and then the main coach-road to the goldfields of Ballarat and beyond), the township owed its foundation, and much of its subsequent business, to wayside traffic. The site marks the location of one of the very early blacksmiths, established c.1854 during the goldrush, in an area where a number of other blacksmith shops subsequently established. It recalls the site of by far the longest running blacksmith in the Melton Shire, the site continuing in operation until 1961, its weatherboard building demolished c.1966. Both A Cameron and JB Whittington, prominent blacksmiths in the Shire, learnt their trades from A Blackwood at this site; the site was later associated with other prominent local blacksmiths W Whittington and G Macdonald. Blackwood and Cameron were also very prominent citizens, and leaders of numerous initiatives in the township.

The tree is also a healthy and prominent specimen of a species that is rare in the Shire. At an estimated at c.55 – 70 years of age, it is one of the oldest of the surviving exotic species in High Street.

The Walnut Tree at 222-230 High Street Melton is of social and aesthetic significance at a LOCAL level (AHC E1). The tree was identified as being a place valued by the local community at a heritage study forum.

Overall, the Walnut Tree at 222-230 High Street Melton is of LOCAL significance.

Description:

The tree is a c.60 year old specimen of a walnut tree (*Juglans regia*), sited on the lawn between the Shire Council Chamber and the Mechanics Institute. It recalls the site of an early blacksmith. Its health has suffered in the recent drought and the tree shows evidence of some dieback.

History:

The walnut tree in the south lawn Shire Council Chambers was planted by Gordon Macdonald, blacksmith, sometime in the 1930s to early 1950's according to his son Robert Macdonald of Sunshine. A large underground tank was located adjacent to the planting site.¹

Blacksmiths were a vital and ubiquitous industry in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In particular they were important in Melton which, being located on a principal road of the State (the original Melbourne to Portland Road, and the main road between Melbourne and Ballarat and other goldfields and towns beyond) owed much of its business to wayside traffic. This included daily coaching services (until the construction of the direct Melbourne to Ballarat Railway in the late 1880s). In addition to the constant demand to shoe travellers' (and locals') horses, blacksmiths services were especially in demand in the goldrush days, due to the abysmal condition of much of the road, and the great traffic thereon, creating a great need for repair of cart and dray axles, poles, wheels etc.

Historical records indicate that there was a blacksmith in the Melton area before 1850. In 1872 three blacksmith's - Messrs Blackwood, J McPherson and A Cameron - were operating in Melton. Other blacksmiths in the Shire included a Mr Quaile, who in 1871 had a smithy at Rockbank, while in 1880 Mr JB Whittington advertised that he had commenced business as a

¹ Robert A Macdonald, personal conversations: D Moloney 7/9/2001; J Bilszta.

blacksmith in Toolern Vale.² It is known that there had been two blacksmiths at Toolern Vale, and another two at Rockbank.³

In c.1854 Mr Alexander Blackwood came from the junction of the Castlemaine and Keilor roads to start his business as a blacksmith behind the [old] Shire Hall, a site later occupied by the sheepyards, and now the Council car park. His first dwelling house was next to the smithy, approximately on the north-west corner of High and Yuille Streets. The building was sited directly on the ground, without stumps or foundations. Its oregon timbers were said to be as sound when it was demolished as when it was erected. Another memoir states that at some stage Blackwood re-established on the opposite side of the road, next to the Golden Fleece Hotel.⁴

Blackwood was a prominent member of the local community, for example, leading a delegation to Council in 1884 in relation to a water supply, and in 1885 as a member of the original committee to plant trees at 222-230 High Street. He found some quartz reefs in the vicinity of Green Hills and organised a public meeting which formed a company to test the reef further.⁵

He also taught the blacksmith trade to Alexander Cameron who established blacksmith shops at 222-230 High Street, the first behind the former Youngs Garage, on the south-east corner of Smith Street, and the second on the north-west corner of Alexandra Street. 'Alec' Cameron became a very prominent Melton citizen, holding many public positions, including Registrar of Births Deaths and Marriages, electoral registrar, collected census returns, and correspondent for the Melton school committee. He was active with the Council and also a friend of Alfred Deakin, who he organised to speak at the Mechanics Institute. His 'Melton Memoirs' have become the source of much Shire history.⁶

On January 30 1900 Blackwood sold his blacksmith business and property at 8 High Street to JB Whittington. Whittington's son William conducted the business while his father continued to operate at Toolern Vale. Photos show that as well as being very prominently located between the Mechanics Institute and the Shire Hall, this was a busy business and of considerable proportions physically.⁷

In 1910 the Melton Express carried an obituary for JB Whittington who had started a blacksmith's business at Toolern Vale 'some 29 years ago'. 'Previously he had worked for Mr Cameron and the late Alexander Blackwood in Melton'.⁸ William Whittington married Polly Radford and their three children attended Melton State School. The family left the district in 1921 when they moved to Essendon.⁹

The next owner of the original Blackwood business, for a short period, was Acland Falconer. He was succeeded by Gordon Macdonald who purchased the business in September 1924.

² Bob Macdonald, 'History of Melton' (unpublished typescript, 1969, held by MDHS), p.11

³ Leo Tarleton, personal conversation, 27/12/2001

⁴ Bilszta, J (ed), 'Old Melton Times':Articles written for the Melton Express October November 1905, author unknown, 1982

⁵ Bob Macdonald, *op cit*, p.9

⁶ Preface to Alexander Cameron, 'Melton Memoirs' (MDHS, unpublished typescript) ; also Tom Collins, 'Melton' (typescript, MDHS, 22/7/1969)

⁷ Starr, J, *Melton: Plains of Promise* (Shire of Melton, nd, c.1985), p.145

⁸ *Melton Express*, 19/2/1910

⁹ Melton District Historical Society records

Macdonald, from Mortlake, married and raised a family of three children in Melton. He operated the smith for 39 years before retiring and moving to Sunshine to live with his son, Robert, in 1961.¹⁰ Sometime c.1930s-early 1950s Macdonald planted the walnut tree beside an underground tank (since filled).¹¹

Gordon's son Robert was also a local historian, compiling a substantial unpublished 'History of Melton'.¹²

The sale of household goods, blacksmith's tools etc took place on 16th June 1962.¹³ The property was purchased by Eric Rogers on 30th June 1962. There are differing reports of the fate of the smith which may not be contradictory. One is that it was burnt down; another that it was condemned and demolished in 1966.¹⁴

The walnut tree is valued by the local community as a relic of the once-important blacksmith industry in Melton, and the Mr Gordon Macdonald, the last blacksmith. It was identified in the Community Workshop undertaken as part of Stage One the Melton Heritage Study as a place of historical significance in the community.¹⁵

Thematic Context / Comparative Analysis:

Melton Historical Themes: 'Community'

Known comparable examples: none known.

Condition:

Fair

Integrity:

Substantially Intact

Recommendations:

Recommended for inclusion in the Melton Planning Scheme Heritage Overlay

¹⁰ Collins, *op cit*.

¹¹ Robert Macdonald, personal conversations with D Moloney and J Bilszta.

¹² Bob Macdonald, *op cit*

¹³ The Melton *Express*, 13/6/1962

¹⁴ Community Workshop, 7/9/2001; J Bilszta.

¹⁵ Held at the Willows Historical Park, 7/9/2001.

Recommended Heritage Overlay Schedule Controls:

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

Other recommendations:

- That an interpretive plaque be installed near the tree to explain its significance
- The fairy lights are to be removed to prevent branches being broken.



Whittington's Blacksmith and Wheelwright (early twentieth century)
The aproned blacksmith on the right is thought to be Gordon Macdonald, who planted the Walnut Tree. (Starr, p.145)