

Heritage Overlay **094**
Citation No.: **251**
Place: **John Campbell Miles Farmhouse Site**

Other Names of Place: Miles family homestead site
Location: Shamrock Place, Melton West (Allot. A1 Sec. 6 Parish of Djerriwarrh)
Critical Dates: Establishment pre 1892; Association with JC Miles: until at least 1930s; House survived until sometime between late 1930s and 1953.
Existing Heritage Listings: None
Recommended Level of Significance: LOCAL



Statement of Significance:

The John Campbell Miles farmhouse site in Melton West is significant as a rare surviving relic of the small farms that established in Melton West from the time of Crown land sales in the 1850s; and for its association with John Campbell Miles, the founder and namer of the Mount Isa mining field.

The place consists of the land around the former Miles cottage, extending down to the gullies and flats of Djerriwarrh Creek. The site of the former cottage includes all ruinous fabric and

detritus associated with the cottage, and potential archaeological evidence. It includes the small grove of peppercorn trees characteristically associated with early farmhouses, and other remnant plantings, such as prickly pear and aloe, and, in the native scrub towards Djerriwarrh Creek, wild white irises. Evidence of an underground tank formerly used for domestic purposes is likely to survive. The place is also likely to retain evidence of gold prospecting undertaken by John Campbell Miles (including a shaft dug by him in his adult years).

The John Campbell Miles farmhouse site in Melton West is historically significant at a LOCAL level (AHC A4, B2, H1). The scant remains of the place are representative of the negligible remaining evidence of nineteenth century small farming in the area west of Melton, and particularly along the Djerriwarrh Creek; the only other more substantial remaining places being two underground water tanks on nearby properties. Its isolated setting, closer to the water source of Djerriwarrh Creek than nearby roads and neighbours, is scarce evidence of early small farming practice.

Its isolated rural setting is also evocative of the reclusive itinerant bushman and prospector, John Campbell Miles, who in 1923 discovered the Mount Isa copper, lead, zinc, silver mine. By the late twentieth century Mount Isa was one of the world's great mines, and a major contributor to the Australian economy. Miles was raised at the cottage and commenced his life of prospecting on the Djerriwarrh Creek which forms the western boundary of the property. As an adult, until at least the 1930s, he intermittently returned to the property, lodging at the then dilapidated and deserted cottage, and sunk a prospecting shaft on one of the gullies of the creek.

The property is expressive of the pervading significance of 1850s Victoria, which had provided ordinary people across the world with new opportunities for wealth, originally from alluvial gold and subsequently from the developing economy and access to rural farms, and which was the origin of a caste of single male prospectors whose lifestyle and achievements are etched into Australia's national folklore. While Thomas Miles, like the majority of diggers, was unsuccessful, the name of his son John Campbell Miles is now celebrated in one of the world's most important mining towns

The John Campbell Miles farmhouse site in Melton West is scientifically significant at a LOCAL level (AHC C2). It has the potential to contribute to an understanding of the small farming and domestic lifestyles in the dry Melton Plains area, and to the life of prospector John Campbell Miles.

Overall, the John Campbell Miles farmhouse site in Melton West is of LOCAL significance.

Description:

The place is the site of the former Miles family residence, situated on the plain near the escarpment of Djerriwarrh Creek, and west of a late twentieth century trotting track on Shamrock Place, Melton West.

The former house was a vertical slab cottage built in the nineteenth century. It survived, in a derelict state, until sometime between the late 1930s and 1953. The house had a timber shingle roof (under later corrugated iron), and hessian and paper internal walls.

The place today consists of a small grove of four pepper trees, and building materials, including handmade bricks (most likely from a former chimney), and twisted tin sheets. There is evidence of household detritus, such as bottles. An underground tank, probably filled in, is likely to survive near the house site. The place may retain evidence of cottage footings, and other archaeological evidence of the former occupation by the Miles family and John Campbell

Miles. There may be some archaeological evidence dating to the early farming occupation of the site (from 1856-57).

There is evidence of other former plantings, including prickly pear and aloe. On the scrubby Djerriwarrh Creek escarpment wild white Iris said to have been planted by Mrs Miles softens the landscape.

Evidence of the 40 feet deep gold prospecting shaft dug by John Campbell Miles in one of the gullies is likely to survive. Any such remains of prospecting in the gullies of the creek would constitute significant evidence of a major theme in Australia's history.

There is a small dam nearby that may or may not have been associated with the Miles occupation.

History:

Section 6A, Parish of Djerriwarrh in the Nineteenth Century

The site is situated on part of Section 6A, Parish of Djerriwarrh, which was purchased from the Crown by John Coleman on 20th August 1856.¹ This allotment extended from Harkness Road on the east to the Djerriwarrh Creek on the west. The subject site then comprised less than half of the original 285 acres and 24 perches of 6A.

In late 1856 John Coleman was described as 'of Djerriwarrh, farmer'. It is likely that in late 1856 or early 1857 he had built a house and was living on the property with his wife (and perhaps a family).² Before the Colemans left for England in 1857 he sold the property to GR Slater 'of Richmond, baker'. Slater and his family also appear to have lived on the property, as in August 1871, he was described as being 'of Deep Creek near Bacchus Marsh, farmer'.³

When he purchased the property in early 1857 Slater had taken out a mortgage of £150. In August 1871 he increased the mortgage to £260, apparently in an attempt to keep the farm afloat, but by November the following year he had defaulted on the loan, and the property was sold by the mortgagees, for a low price (less than the value of the capital and interest due).

These were difficult years for farming. The early 1860s had been a turning point in the district. During 1861-64 especially, and also over the following decades, there was an exodus of impoverished small farmers from the district. The boom prices of the gold-rush had collapsed, the good early yields had quickly exhausted the poor soils, the crops were infested with rust and caterpillars, and pastures 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.⁴

¹ Parish Plan, Parish of Djerriwarrh

² Unless otherwise cited, information regarding the property and its owners is from Torrens Application 58159 (VPRS 460/P2/634).

³ Deep Creek was an alternative name for Djerriwarrh Creek in the nineteenth century.

⁴ The peak acreage under crop in the district from Bacchus Marsh to Craigieburn (including Melton), occurred in 1859. About 250 people per annum had arrived in the north west region of Melbourne 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. The number of land holdings fell by 30% in the district between 1860-81. Peel, L, *Rural Industry in the Port Phillip Region, 1835-1880*, (MUP, 1974), pp.80, 90, 127-135.

The reports of the West Bourke agricultural inspectors during the 1860s refer to ‘the blight’ affecting hay and potato crops, the devastation caused to nearly every farm in the district by ‘rust and the caterpillar’, and the ‘dreadful disease, pleuro pneumonia’. Farmers couldn’t afford to buy seed, and homesteads were ‘generally very much neglected.’ The exceptional drought which continued through the 1865-66 season was ‘... most disastrously felt over the whole line of the plain country, extending from Essendon to the Djerriwarrh Creek.’

There was also fire. Local farmer John Chandler described the ‘Black Monday’ fire of February 1865 in the Djerriwarrh Parish: ‘We could see the flames coming across the plain leaping and rushing on like an army.’ Neighbours tried to save one another’s properties with wet blankets, but houses, were destroyed, and the produce of farms consumed.⁵ Families who survived contributed what they could to a subscription to help those who had been ruined.

In 1873 the property of GR Slater ‘late of Djerriwarrh, farmer, now of ... Richmond’, was sold by the mortgagees to Mr William Brown ‘of Epping, farmer’. Brown appears not to have lived on the property. In 1878 he was leasing the ‘farm and premises’ to Paul Shellard of Keilor, and by 1885 he was farming in Tasmania.

In February 1885 Brown sold the property to Thomas Miles ‘of Wellington Street, Richmond, compositor’, for £450. Miles brought his family, including baby John Campbell Miles, to live on the property. Ratebooks show Thomas Miles ‘farmer’, as the owner of ‘142 acres land and house’ at Djerriwarrh through the 1880s and 90s. An 1892 map also shows the allotment in the ownership of ‘Miles’.⁶

John Campbell Miles

‘John Campbell Miles was one of those jacks of all trades who wandered in the outback. ... He was wiry, quiet, and temperate, loved horses, and quiet campfires and did not stay long in the noisy towns.’⁷

Miles had been born on 5th May 1883, eighth of nine children of Thomas Miles and his wife Fanny (nee Chancellor).⁸ His father had arrived too late at most goldrushes in the 1850s, after which he worked as a compositor and sometime goldminer.

According to folklore Miles panned his first pennyweight of gold at the age of 7 on the family’s farm beside the Djerriwarrh Creek at Melton, and at 12 he ran away to work with a Melbourne bootmaker. By 18 he was a farm hand at Stawell. In 1907, lured by higher wages he moved to Broken Hill and worked underground for several months. When in 1908 news of a rush to the Oaks alluvial goldfield in North Queensland reached Broken Hill Miles he and a mate bought bikes and rode 2500 kilometres to the strike, swag strapped to frames and punctured tyres stuffed with grass. They arrived too late. ‘He was always patient and leisurely, liked to watch the billy boil and the sun rise.’⁹

⁵ Chandler, *John, Forty Years in the Wilderness* (Loch Haven, Arthur’s Ridge, 1990), pp.173-75; also VPP, 1864-65, p.89

⁶ Shire Map Series (1892): Djerriwarrh

⁷ Blainey, Geoffrey, *The Rush that Never Ended: A History of Australian Mining* (MUP, Carlton, 1981), p.324

⁸ Kennedy, KH, ‘John Campbell Miles’, in Nairn, B, Serle, G (eds), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, (MUP, Carlton, 1986), Vol.10p.501

⁹ Blainey, *loc cit.*

He spent most of his years travelling and taking casual farming and mining work in eastern Australia: ploughing wheatlands and driving a haycarts in Victoria, carting sugarcane and repairing fences and windmills and shooting wild pigs in Queensland. After the Oaks he worked as a farm labourer in the Wimmera and then returned to Queensland ‘where he spent years drifting from station to station, probably supplementing his wages with fossicking.’¹⁰

After a brief visit to Melbourne in 1921 he returned to a sheep station in Queensland and decided next year to go to the Northern Territory ‘and maybe prospect for gold’, which an elderly boundary rider had reported on the Murrniji Track.¹¹ Next year, with his stallion Hard Times, two mares and three packhorses, he began his slow travels through Hughenden and Mount Elliott. The country was in drought and he moved cautiously, camping long at each waterhole, waiting for his mares to foal or his packhorses to rest. He had been on the track for a year when, on a hot morning in February 1923, he led his horses along the dry riverbed of the Leichhardt River looking for a camping place. A packhorse smelled water and ran down the watercourse to the wet sand by a small waterhole. Miles followed her and made camp. He liked to prospect when in mineralised country so about midday he took his farrier’s hammer and rode to the low ranges nearby. Here he found a lump of honeycombed and unusually heavy black rock. In several places he then noticed parallel bands of the same ore crossing the rock.

The Camooweal mailman passed along the road and took ten specimens of Miles’ ore to the government assayer in Cloncurry, who noted that the samples contained up to 78% lead and silver content of up to 71 ounces per ton. Four local cattlemen and copper gougers helped Miles to bag 16 tons of the ore, and two carriers lent wagons to take the bags to the nearest railway station.

He got a good cheque for the ore, and men came from copper mines and cattle stations to peg out leases at 10s an acre. Miles called the field Mount Isa. He invited Bill Simpson to join him, and together they pegged three areas, totalling 18 hectares, around the original outcrops, soon known as the Black Star and Racecourse leases.¹² Slowly, due to its isolation, but more rapidly after Queensland government geologist EC Saint-Smith reported that Mount Isa was perhaps the Commonwealth’s most important mineral discovery of the decade, a few mining promoters came. William H Corbould, who got option to buy 400 acres from the prospectors, floated Mount Isa Mines Limited in Sydney in 1924. Randolph Bedford, and then William Orr, other mining businessmen with experience in Broken Hill, also bought up options and floated companies. But Australian mining was so pessimistic at the time that little was subscribed, and Corbould’s company soon owned the whole field.

Miles and the other prospectors who had quickly sold their leases to the companies received shares or cash. Tens of thousands of pounds were splurged famously, and tragically in the case of Miles’ partner Bill Simpson, who after having taken a taxi from Duchess to Melbourne, was run over by a car while on a spree. Miles and his partner Simpson had each received 500 Mount Isa Mines shares worth nearly £30,000. John Campbell Miles continued his wandering life, prospecting, and gradually divesting himself of his shares at depressed prices: by 1933 he no longer had any financial interest in MIM.¹³

The field, in the ownership of the single company, Mount Isa Mines (MIM), struggled for years. It was neither as massive nor as rich as first predicted, and struggled with lack of

¹⁰ Mining Hall of Fame Database: John Campbell Miles 1883-1965 (www.mininghall.com)

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² Kennedy, *loc cit*.

¹³ Mining Hall of Fame Database *op cit*. It is also believed locally that some of this money also contributed to establishing the Melton farm of his sibling Stephen.

infrastructure, including water for employees, and access to the railway. Finally Corbould attracted the Anglo-American Corporation of South Africa, and then financier John Leslie Urquhart. Four years after its discovery Mount Isa at last had promise of the essential capital. With money from London the company created a town for its employees, the first attempt to plant a model town in tropical Australia. With millions of pounds having been sunk into it, the depression threatening, and Mount Isa's future in the balance, the Guggenheims' American Smelting and Refining Company became a partner. In 1931 the treatment plant was running, but losses continued, and still more capital was required. Even when it began to make a profit in the late 1930s the money went to repay debts, and shareholders got nothing from the intractable lead-zinc ore. Its future was far from secure when large deposits of copper were found in 1942, particularly in Miles' original Black Star lead, and Mount Isa became Australia's largest copper mine. Although it had been the country's largest underground mine for a decade, Mount Isa's debts had increased over this period. The suddenly after the war the price of lead nearly quadrupled, and the Korean War added to demand. The mine, investors, and town boomed. The mine had capital for exploration and discovered further huge reserves of lead and copper, and planned to double and treble output. Its exported ore was soon one of Australia's major income earners.

'Campbell Miles, frugal and abstemious, vanished into obscurity, returning a generation later to find the field he had founded and named one of the worlds greatest'.¹⁴ In 1957 MIM discovered his whereabouts and invited him to inspect his mine. He refused offers of a flight, and the company bought him a small station wagon, which he drove north from Melbourne, camping out on the way. He made his last visit to one of the world's riches copper, silver, lead and zinc ore bodies in 1962.

Miles never married, and claimed never to have witnessed a wedding. He died in Melbourne on 4th December 1965 and was cremated. His ashes were taken to Mount Isa in 1968 and buried under a memorial clock tower in Miles Street.

Section 6A, Parish of Djerriwarrh in the Twentieth Century

In 1903 Thomas Miles obtained a mortgage of £300 from the State Bank of Victoria. He died in 1912, and his widow Fanny Louisa Miles moved to 49 Wellington Street Richmond. By 1915, when the State Bank granted her a mortgage of £1195 on the farm her address was again given as 'Melton'. This may not have been on the Allotment 6A Djerriwarrh farm, as at least one of her children obtained another farm in the district.¹⁵ Mrs Miles died in February 1942 at East Malvern, having previously lived at Heatherton.

In the early decades of the twentieth century there were still a few small settlers farms scattered along Djerriwarrh Creek (including McCullough, Bulter, and Were). All had orchards on the creek, with apples, pears, peaches, plums, Kentish cherries (for tarts).¹⁶

The Miles house does not appear on the 1916 Army Ordnance survey, but mapping of the Djerriwarrh Creek area was rudimentary in this map, and this is likely to have been a mistake. By the time of the 1938 survey, the creek, tracks and houses are provided in much better detail, and the Miles cottage is shown.¹⁷

¹⁴ Blainey, *op cit*, p.326

¹⁵ Several of JC Miles sisters lived at Melton South, and the son of the eldest Miles' son Stephen, lived on a farm at Exford until his death in February 2006.

¹⁶ Mr Jeff Robinson, personal conversation, 23/5/2002

¹⁷ Army Ordnance Maps 'Sunbury': 1916, 1938.

However by the early 1930s at least the cottage was not permanently occupied:- in the early to mid 1930s the Miles cottage is remembered as ‘a wreck’ that had begun to fall down. It was a vertical slab building, with hessian wallpaper inside; shingles were visible under a later corrugated iron roof.¹⁸

It was to this cottage that John Campbell Miles returned from time to time. In the early to mid 1930s, Jeff Robinson, living on the neighbouring property, visited the ‘old fellow’ when he camped there for stints of 2-3 weeks. Robinson found the drover, prospector and rural labourer a ‘really nice bloke’, prepared to put up with a 12-14 year old boy hanging around asking questions. ‘Cam’ didn’t drink, but Robinson found some of his rural bachelor ways surprising. For example, to control mice and rats he laid strychnine on the card table at which he ate his meals. No doubt inspired by his childhood finds of gold panning in the Djerriwarrh Creek, he dug a 40 feet deep prospecting shaft in a gully off the creek.¹⁹

Soon after Mrs Fanny Miles death in 1943 the property was sold, subject to an existing tenancy held by May Masterson, to Margaret Cowan of Bacchus Marsh. The Miles cottage did not survive by 1953 when neighbours Jeff and Rita married.²⁰ The property passed to her son Donald Gilbert Cowan, a Bacchus Marsh dairy farmer, after her death in 1960. In 1981 it was purchased by Daniel and Anna Theresa Mullan.²¹ A later subdivision of the property created Shamrock Road.

Thematic Context / Comparative Analysis:

Melton Historical Themes:

‘Community’; ‘Farming’; ‘Other Industries’ (Gold)

Known Comparable Example in Melton Shires:

There is no other site in the Shire of Melton associated with the discoverer of a major Australian mining field.

Virtually nothing remaining of the small farms established west of Melton as a result of the nineteenth century Crown land sales. All that appears to remain of the ‘first farming’ era of the area west of Melton are the two underground tanks associated with the former Raleigh (Place No.205) and Robinson (Place No.252) farms. Both the farmhouses associated with these places were lost to fire and, apart from the relics and trees, there is apparently nothing remaining of the following former small mid-nineteenth century farming families:

- Harkness (all that remains of the house are a few kitchen flagstones salvaged by Jeff Robinson);
- Hollis (house marked by big yellow gum);
- McCulloch (house marked by two fruit trees);
- Masterson (house gone);
- Ware (remnant of a foundation, and fruit trees).

¹⁸ Mr Jeff Robinson, 23/5/2002.

¹⁹ Mr Jeff Robinson, personal conversations, 19/5/2002, 23/5/2002, 14/2/2006

²⁰ Jeff and Rita Robinson, 15/2/2006

²¹ Torrens Application 58159.

The current house of the Hardy/Coburn/Dunbar/Thompson dairy farm on Hardy's Road (Place No.203) would appear to be c.1920s in date.²²

The other old houses that remain west of Melton are two turn of the century weatherboard farm dwellings on Bulmans Road associated with the break-up of the *Melton Park* Estate (Place Nos.174, 175), and the lavish brick villa *Kippenross* (Place No.177) of the same turn of the century era and origin. The major late nineteenth century *Melton Park* homestead (Place No.8), and the turn of the century *Melton Park* manager's dwelling (*Braemar*, Place No.7) are not associated with nineteenth century small-farming west of Melton. Other than that there may be a few relics of houses associated with the later (early-mid twentieth century) Soldier Settlement Scheme in the Porteous Road area (although no such places were identified in the Heritage Study). There is no longer any trace even of the stables and outbuildings of *Brooklyn*, the grand Staughton mansion that had once entertained royalty, in this area.

Even much further afield, to the north and south, there are only a few very late nineteenth century west-of-Melton dwellings surviving. These include the Hickey House and Dairy (Place No.288) on the Exford Estate south of the Melton Reservoir, and the large *Gnotuk Park* in the north of the Shire.

Condition:

The remnants of buildings are Ruinous / Archaeological in nature. The associated pepper trees appear to be in good condition.

Integrity:

Damaged/Disturbed.

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>Yes</i> (pepper trees)
Outbuildings and/or Fences:	<i>No</i>

Other Recommendations:

- It is recommended that at some stage in the future the place (the house site, and gullies on which evidence of gold prospecting are likely to survive) be subject to archaeological survey. Consideration might also be given to including the house site and any other significant evidence of the Miles occupation in a waterway reserve.

²² Robinson, *op cit*, 12/2/2006