

Heritage Overlay	095
Citation No.:	252
Place:	Former Robinson House Tank, The Bullock Track

Other Names of Place:	N/A
Location:	122-142 The Bullock Track, Melton West
Critical Dates:	Construction: unknown (likely c.1888)
Existing Heritage Listings:	None
Recommended Level of Significance:	LOCAL



Statement of Significance:

The underground tank at 122-142 The Bullock Track, Melton West is significant as a rare surviving relic of the pockets of small farms that established in Melton West from the time of Crown land sales in the 1850s, as a vestige of the domestic water management that was particularly important on the dry Melton Plains, and for its association with the Robinson family.

The underground tank at 122-142 The Bullock Track, Melton West is historically significant at a LOCAL level (AHC A4, B2, H1). It and another similar underground tank nearby constitute the only substantial physical evidence of the pockets of farming that established in the West Melton area from the mid nineteenth century. It demonstrates the early provision of domestic

water supply, a water storage practice no longer in use, and the critical importance of water management in the dry Melton Plains district. Its final destruction by bushfire is also indicative of a major theme in the Shire's history.

It is also historically significant for its association with three generations of the Robinson family, which was prominent in the history of the Shire of Melton, and after whom a major road is named. The family is credited with developing commercial hay farming on the Melton Plains, previously thought too dry for such, in the late nineteenth century. The family thus pioneered a major twentieth century Melton rural industry, and paved the way for Melton's nationally famous chaff production. The Robinson Brothers also played a leading role in the local chaff milling industry through their ownership of chaff mills at Diggers Rest and Melton South. The family has also been prominent in civic affairs, a member of the family being a Shire Councillor for most of the twentieth century. GE Robinson's family donated the President's Seat – the carved chair used by Melton Shire Presidents since 1966.

The underground tank at 122-142 The Bullock Track, Melton West is scientifically significant at a LOCAL level (AHC C2). It has the potential, with other tanks, to contribute to an understanding of the evolution of tank construction, water management, and domestic lifestyles in the dry Melton Plains area.

Overall, the underground tank at 122-142 The Bullock Track, Melton West is of LOCAL significance.

Description:

The underground tank is situated at 122-142 The Bullock Track, on the north side. It is situated where the road bends slightly south, meaning that the tank is directly in front of vehicles travelling west along The Bullock Track, and is thus one of the most prominent underground tank in the Shire.

Although commonly called 'wells', such structures are almost always underground tanks, or cisterns, used to store water run off from the roofs of a nearby house or farm outbuildings. The water in this tank came from the original stone and brick building that was situated just to its north. The place comprises a concrete dome with concrete lid, over a brick tank, with a concrete render. This is a typical type of underground tank in the Shire, probably dating from the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Unusually, it had no hand or powered pump: the cold water was pulled up in a bucket tied to a rope. Currently it is overgrown with a flowering prostrate plant, and wild grass. A cast horse's head placed on top of the tank gives it a certain prominence, but detracts a little from its integrity. Its segmental dome is consistent with it having been constructed in the late nineteenth century.

History:

William Robinson and his wife Ann set sail for Australia immediately after their marriage in Durham, England in 1852.¹ After 2 years on the goldfields they began farming in Werribee. In 1872, in addition to their 'Mt Pleasant' farm in Wyndham, they purchased 832 acres in the south-east corner of Melton (between Mt Cottrell and Tarneit), adjacent to what is now Robinsons Road, the main north-south access road and gateway to the Shire. This was a very large farm by the standards of the day. Robinson had been a stonemason, and built a house on the land which does not survive.

¹ Unless otherwise cited, the Robinson family history comes from both Starr, J, *Melton: Plains of Promise* (Shire of Melton, nd, c.1985), pp. 232-235, 265, 269

In 1884 he moved to ‘Deep Creek’ (an early alternative name for Djerriwarrh Creek) in Melton West, with four of his sons. One of the sons, William, married Catherine Raleigh. Another brother, Isaac, married a sister of Catherine, Henrietta. These were the daughters of neighbour Henry Raleigh and his wife Catherine, nee McDonald, of Toolern Vale. Raleigh had been a Norwegian sailor who jumped ship in the goldrush, and anglicized his name from Hans Christian Reiersen.

In 1888, William junior built the bluestone dwelling that had been associated with this place, in which he and Catherine raised nine children. William senior died in 1890. Ratebooks show that by 1902 William junior had apportioned his 573 acres amongst sons George, Isaac and Thomas. This land comprised allotment 6D (the homestead allotment) and 2A (further south near the highway).² William junior was elected to Council and became Shire President in 1900.

In 1910 he was kicked by a horse and died, leaving his wife with a family the youngest of whom was four months. However the eldest was 20 years of age, and Catherine and the children carried on the farm. After William’s death Catherine retained possession of the 312 acres ‘and buildings’ of allotment 6D. In 1914 Catherine was able to purchase the large house *Kippenross* on Bulmans Road (Place No.177). In 1921 allotment 6D was farmed by Thomas Leslie and George Errol, and by 1925 Thomas Leslie alone.³

An early (c.1960s) Melton history tells that William Robinson (senior) was the first to grow hay commercially in the district. His first experiment produced 25 hundredweight to the acre. Before this hay was not considered a likely commercial crop as it was thought the average rainfall was too low. ‘Since Robinson’s experiment in the early 1880s Melton has produced excellent hay in considerable quantity’, said Pollitt.⁴ Indeed, hay, and then chaff, became the major industry of the district in the early twentieth century. Melton chaff was known as the best in Australia.

The Robinson family quickly became prominent in Melton, not only in the pioneering of the local hay industry, but in the development of the associated chaff mill industry. The company ‘Shutt Barrie and Robinson’ (or ‘Robinson Bros’) operated at Diggers Rest from 1926 until its destruction by fire in 1939. This company diversified into flour milling, and closed about 1968. After the Second World War the Robinson Brothers also bought out one of the two Melton Chaff Mills, at the Melton South station. Nothing now remains of Melton’s chaff mills.

The family was also very active in civic affairs. William junior’s brother George Errol (‘Eb’) Robinson served as Shire President 1938-39, 1941-42, 1947-48, 1956-57. After he died returning from a Council meeting his son-in-law was elected in his stead. His family donated the President’s Seat – the carved chair used by Shire Presidents since 1966. From 1900 until 1985 there were only three years when the name Robinson, or another member of the family, was not represented on the Melton Council.⁵

One of William and Catherine’s children, Thomas Leslie (Les) married Grace Burston and, after complicated swaps of land amongst his siblings, inherited his parents’ original home (the subject site). He replaced the original bluestone with concrete he made himself with gravel

² Shire of Melton, *Ratebooks*, 1902-15

³ Shire of Melton, *Ratebooks*, 1916-21.

⁴ Pollitt, John H, *An Historical Record of Melton* (Shire of Melton, nd), p.36

⁵ Starr, *op cit*, pp.232, 265, 269.

from the Djerriwarrh Creek (accessed by what became known as the ‘Skeleton Track’, after an old skeleton found on it), leaving the original brick portion.⁶

Grace Robinson lived on in the house after her husband’s death, but moved out in the 1960s. It became derelict, and was eventually used by her son Jeff as a hayshed. In 1984 a fire swept through West and South Melton, destroying 13 houses. The derelict house was also destroyed. The *Age* front page featured a photograph of Jeff and Rita Robinsons’ hay stack (not this house) on fire. The fire recalled another described by small farmer John Chandler, the ‘Black Monday’ fire of February 1865: ‘We could see the flames coming across the plain leaping and rushing on like an army.’ House were destroyed and families ruined.⁷

Jeff and son Peter continued to operate the farm until in the 1980s Peter moved away from the encroaching urbanisation to Nagambie. A Shire history written around this time features his experiments with a hay compactor that would deliver better quality hay to chaff mills, and facilitate handling by farmers.⁸

The underground tank is thought to have been built by prominent Melton tank maker Tom Collins, though it is not known whether this was in his grandfather’s (c.1890) or father’s time (c.WW1). It was well established from the time Jeff Robinson (born 1922) could remember; he repaired it often.⁹

There is very little remaining of the history of the Harkness Road pioneering era. One of the traces of the history of the area that fascinated Jeff Robinson was the evidence of early bullock tracks across his property, and early crossing places on the creek. The ground on an old track in a north easterly direction across his paddocks was so hard that it couldn’t be ploughed until the advent of the chisel plough, after which it was only evident in the much weaker crop growing on that land. Through local oral history Robinson understands that tracks across the property linked Ballarat with Bendigo, and were also associated with the first road between Melton and Bacchus Marsh, which was situated in a more northerly location than the Western Highway to avoid swampy land in the vicinity of Bulmans Road. Historical maps confirm that there were very early roads ‘to Pattersons on the Toolam Toolern’ (ie *Greenhills*, and from there to Gisborne and beyond via the Breakneck) in 1841, and, in 1847 the same track was marked as ‘To the Green Hills’.¹⁰ Both plans also show the more northerly route east-west route converging across the south eastern corner of Section 6 to the present Djerriwarrh crossing. This route also avoided the thick box gum forest that was not only a physical impediment, but which harboured bushrangers especially in the alluvial gold period. When Robinson subdivided part of the farm, he commemorated these relics of the role of the locality in transport by naming a new road ‘The Bullock Track’.

It is significant to note these relics of the Melton West area, because so little remains of places associated with its nineteenth century farming history. Other than that the Djerriwarrh Bridge (Place No.257), unconfirmed archaeological remains of various bullock tracks and creek crossings, and the possible archaeological remains of the Ben Nevis hotel (a depression from which bottles have been retrieved and may have been a cellar), almost no early heritage remains in West Melton. All that appears to remain of the ‘first farming’ era of the area west of Melton

⁶ Mr Jeff Robinson, personal conversation, 19/5/2002.

⁷ Chandler, *John, Forty Years in the Wilderness* (Loch Haven, Arthur’s Ridge, 1990), pp.173-75

⁸ Starr, *op cit*, pp. 217, 223,

⁹ Robinson, *op cit*, 12/2/2006; Tom Collins left memoirs, part of which were reproduced in the M&DSH Newsletter of December 2000.

¹⁰ Land Victoria, D/60A ‘Plan of the lands in the Weariby District’ (1841); and Historic Map: ‘RS 12’ and ‘RS 12(b)’ (1847)

is this underground tank, and the underground tank of the former Raleigh house on Harkness Road (Place No.205).

History of Underground Tanks

Underground tanks were a typical component of nineteenth century rural properties in Victoria, and illustrate a form of water collection and infrastructure no longer practised.

Provision of a domestic water supply was critical to the establishment of any rural property that was not beside a permanent supply of water. ‘The first essential was to secure a reliable water supply. Unless the farm bordered a permanent creek ... the selector had to dig a dam for his animals and a well [sic] for the household supply.’¹¹ Especially in low-rainfall Melton, domestic water storage was critical, and relics of these systems is a key part of the heritage of the Shire. Many underground domestic ‘wells’ (as they are usually called) around Melton are in fact ‘tanks’ which, rather than tapping groundwater, were sealed cisterns for the storage of water from the roofs of buildings.

Underground tanks became only generally necessary in Australia from the 1850s, when increased population and Crown land sales ensured that many dwellings were unable to locate beside a stream. At the same time, as a result of the goldrushes, the mass introduction into Australia of the new product ‘corrugated iron’ made it feasible for ordinary people to be able to channel water into the underground tanks from roofs and guttering.¹² Underground tanks on small properties generally seem to have been located at the rear of the house; this might have enabled the roof runoff from dairy and other nearby farm outbuildings to also feed the tank.

The construction of wells goes back thousands of years, and designs for underground wells and tanks, such as contained in JC Loudon’s *Encyclopaedia of Agriculture*, had been available to English farmers since at least the early nineteenth century.¹³ These generally advocated cigar shaped cross-sections, with the domed top being mostly underground. This shape was also used in Australia, but on Melton rural properties they do not appear to have been used on early farms. Instead, the early tanks had vertical walls, and no domed covers. Most appear to have been constructed of local stone rather than brick, and without a low wall (as in romantic images of European wells) to ensure safety. Isolation and cost probably meant that they may have been sunk by the property-owners, at least in the case of early small farms. Examples of such tanks on small farms are the former Scarborough and Moloney properties on Mount Cottrell Road (Place Nos.293 and 292) which were constructed of bluestone in the 1850s and 1871, and for which no evidence of a cover remains. In terms of larger early (1850s) properties, *Glen Elgin* (Place No.39) has a low timber-framed gabled roof, clad in corrugated iron; and the tanks of *Tibbermore* (Place No.392), Mount Ida (Place No.002) and the Diggers Rest Hotel (Place No.067) both have flat corrugated iron covers on raised stone sides. (These covers, and sides, might have been added later, as gradual modernisation of the tanks was common.)

While domes were advocated in early British architectural literature, they appears to have only begun to be built in Australia in the 1860s. At that time there was a growing realisation of the dangers of uncovered wells and tanks in terms of sanitation, as well as safety. Unclean water

¹¹ Cannon, Michael, *Life in the Country: Australia in the Victorian Age: 2* (Nelson, West Melbourne, 1978), p.149

¹² Hughes, Trueman, Ludlow, ‘Wells and Underground Tanks’, prepared for the Heritage Council of NSW (nd), *passim*; Cannon, *op cit*, p.150

¹³ J.C. Loudon, *Encyclopaedia of Agriculture*, Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green & Longman, London, 1826.

could wash into uncovered tanks from dairies, and sometimes from cesspits, and vermin also obtained easy access:

‘The typical countrywoman of the early days hardly moved a step from her threshold “to cast away indescribable filth”. The contents of chamber pots, vegetable peelings, grease-laden water – all festered around the hut and blended with the nearby latrine to create a “peculiarly offensive” odour which attracted swarms of flies. Sometimes the fluids soaked through the soil into the well [sic], so that the family suffered from an intermittent “low typhoid” fever whose cause they did not suspect.’¹⁴

In 1885 *Martins Home and Farm* described uncovered underground tanks and wells as ‘the family rat-trap’.¹⁵ ‘Common infections of the nineteenth century, such as typhoid, scarlet fever, diphtheria (which was known to have proved tragically fatal in the case of Melton’s Kerr, Moloney and Wood families), tuberculosis and gastro-enteritis, spread rapidly in many country towns Efficient disposal of human excreta was a major problem.’¹⁶ The connection between water pollution and public health, in particular diseases like dysentery, typhoid and even cholera were beginning to be appreciated.¹⁷

At the same time, technology was contributing to better health. As long as a bucket was necessary to draw water, it was not possible to cover the tops of tanks, or at best only to provide a rudimentary cover. Once a small and reasonably priced pump became available there was no further need for an open tank. The availability of domestic hand-pumps grew in the 1850s, and by 1860 NSW public buildings (schools and railway stations) specified domes as the standard form of construction for tanks.¹⁸ It is also highly likely that the increasing access to good quality bricks, professional bricklaying skills, and cement, over the course of the late nineteenth century contributed to the proliferation of covered tanks in places like Melton.

The new tanks were still circular in plan, but constructed of brick, with approximately 9 inches of clay puddle behind the brick wall to keep the tank water-tight. The hemispherical dome, or segment of a dome, was also constructed with bricks. Both the interior of the tank, and the exterior of the dome, were cement rendered according to recommended practice.¹⁹ Without internal inspection it is not known whether the cross-section of the tanks typically remained vertical, or cigar-shaped, which were both described in textbooks. Numerous domes in Melton appear to be segmental spheres, rather than hemispheres, and may have spread underneath the surface to a wider diameter tank cylinder, as per the textbooks. The domes were provided with a manhole on top (covered with a concrete cover), of minimum width 16 inches, to provide access for cleaning. Mr Jeff Robinson of Melton West recalls entering the tank on the family farm to repair internal render.²⁰ The opening also enabled the cool water to be used for refrigeration: perishables and jellies (for setting) were lowered into the water in a bucket.²¹

The only known Australian heritage study of underground tanks (conducted in NSW), claims that they were only superseded by the familiar corrugated iron tanks (on tankstands to provide

¹⁴ Cannon, *op cit*, p.151

¹⁵ Cited in Hughes *et al*, *op cit*, p.19.

¹⁶ Cannon, *op cit*, pp.255-6

¹⁷ Hughes *et al*, *op cit*, pp.19-24

¹⁸ *ibid*, pp.32-33

¹⁹ Eg, Albrecht, CE, *Measurements and Dimensions of Tanks and Dams* (Melbourne, Arnell and Jackson [1885?]), pp.30-33

²⁰ Mr Jeff Robinson, personal conversation, 14/2/2006. This contradicts the Hughes *et al* survey of tanks in NSW, which found that internal render was rare in domestic tanks (pp.55-56).

²¹ Hughes *et al*, *op cit*, pp.32-80.

water pressure) in the 1890s, when ‘the galvanised above-ground tank was in widespread use.’²² In Victoria however Miles Lewis claims that ‘*the corrugated iron rainwater tank was manufactured in Melbourne by the later 1850s, and spread very rapidly despite claims that the zinc coating would poison the water.*’²³ Anders Hjorth’s recollections of Melton in the 1860s state that: ‘*The water supply was very deficient; a few had iron tanks, and some under-ground ones.*’²⁴ He may however have been referring to the square plate-metal ‘ships tanks’ (shipping containers, usually for foodstuffs, that were designed in Britain for recycling in this manner) that are most usually found these days on larger properties, rather than the larger corrugated steel version that became more common. A survey of remaining underground tanks on nineteenth century Melton properties might reveal the extent to which galvanised iron (or steel) header tanks were used as an alternative. We know that underground tanks continued to be built in the early twentieth century, and that today there are many properties that have both underground tanks (most not in use) and corrugated steel header tanks. As access to hand, petroleum or electric pumps permitted, they may have been used in conjunction.

While domes probably became widespread from the 1860s for domestic use, it cannot be categorically inferred that the absence of a dome means that the tank was built before that time. On the other hand, the presence of a dome does not necessarily mean that the tank was built after this time, as apparently the building of a dome over a tank often took place many years after the original construction.²⁵ The best assumption that can be made in terms of dating tanks is that, water being essential to habitation, they were built at or very soon after the construction of the original dwelling on a site.

So in the case of this property, it is most likely that the tank was built c.1888.

Tankbuilders known to have operated in Melton in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries include WA Cecil, Tom Collins (c.1890-1913), and Augustus Schebler (‘known for his workmanship’ according to Collins).²⁶

Thematic Context / Comparative Analysis:

Melton Historical Themes: ‘Farming’, ‘Water’, ‘Community’

Known Comparable Example in Melton Shires:

All that appears to remain of the ‘first farming’ era of the area west of Melton is this underground tank, and the underground tank of the former Raleigh house on Harkness Road (Place No.205). The Robinson and Raleigh farmhouses associated with these places were both lost to bushfire, and there is virtually no trace remaining of the following former small mid nineteenth century farms remembered by Jeff Robinson:- 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); Miles (house marked by a pepper trees and detritus); Masterson (house gone); Ware (remnant of a foundation, and fruit trees); and the Hardy/Coburn/Dunbar/Thompson dairy farm (Place No.203: the current house is

²² Hughes *et al*, *op cit*. (Austral Archaeology also conducted a study of early Chinese wells on the Koorong, South Australia.)

²³ Lewis, Miles, *Physical Investigation of a Building: National Trust Technical Bulletin 9.1* (National Trust of Australia, Victoria, 1989).

²⁴ Hjorth, Anders, ‘Recollections of Melton 1861-67’, in M&DHS Newsletter, February 2001.

²⁵ Hughes *et al*, *op cit*, p.3

²⁶ Robinson, *op cit*; also Tom Collins memoirs, part of which were reproduced in the M&DSH Newsletter of December 2000.

c.1920s).²⁷ The closest old houses that remain 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* of the same turn of the century era and origin. The lavish 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 the early small-farming pockets to the west of Melton. Other than that there may be a few relics of the early-mid twentieth century Soldier Settlement Scheme in the Porteous Road area (no sites identified in the Heritage Study). There is no longer any trace even of the stables and outbuildings of *Brooklyn*, the grand Staughton mansion that 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 places 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. Virtually nothing remaining of the small farms established in this area in the mid nineteenth century.

Domed and cement rendered underground tanks are amongst the more typical and enduring early farming places in the Shire. They differ in shape and design however; for example this compares with the higher but similar structure nearby (Place No.205), which does not have a neck and lid. They both differ from the level topped bluestone lined tanks, of different sizes and qualities of construction, in other early properties. Underground tanks were gradually replaced by iron tanks on trestle timber tank stands.

Condition:

Appears Fair from the road.

Integrity:

Substantially Intact.

Recommendations:

Recommended for inclusion in the Melton Planning Scheme.

Recommended Heritage Overlay Schedule Controls:

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

Other Recommendations

- A preliminary archaeological survey of the tank, with other similar tanks in the area, has the potential to provide further information and contribute to an understanding of the evolution of tank construction, water management, and domestic lifestyles in the dry Melton Plains area and is desirable.

²⁷ Robinson, *op cit*.