

Heritage Overlay No.: 097
Citation No.: 256
Place Djerriwarrh Early Crossing Place

Other Names of Place: Deep Creek
Location: On old Ballarat Road (disused route), across Djerriwarrh Creek.
Critical Dates: Pre-1858-59
Existing Heritage Listings: VHI
Recommended Level of Significance: LOCAL

Statement of Significance:

The old Ballarat Road crossing place over the Djerriwarrh Creek west of Melton, is significant as a rare and highly intact example of a crossing built to accommodate gold-rush traffic. It is also part of a pre gold-rush era crossing place of which evidence of gold-rush era development remains, including a sandstone quarry, tracks, fords, and archaeological evidence that could relate to gold-era shanties and hotels, or a later toll house or school.

The Djerriwarrh crossing place is historically significant at a Local Level (AHC A4, B2, D2) for its association with the internationally significant Victorian goldrush, and as a rare surviving example of a place built to accommodate 1850s gold-rush traffic. Its context of earlier tracks and fords associated with the original Portland Road has significance as rare evidence of pre gold-era transport in Victoria.

The Djerriwarrh Bridge(1858-9) and its cultural landscape context is scientifically significant at a STATE Level (AHC C2). The bridge retains tool marks associated with its quarrying. The

related quarry, below the present bridge, early fords and tracks, and archaeological evidence of nearby wayside places also have high potential to provide information relating to the ephemeral gold-era transport, construction practices, and the way of life.

The Djerriwarrh Bridge and its cultural landscape context is socially significant at a STATE Level (AHC G1). The bridge quarry, early fords, wagon ruts, tracks, cut and fill of an early road, and archaeological evidence of wayside places have special educational value through their potential to interpret the bridge and the era.

Description:

The early crossing place consists of a quarry for the 1858 bridge, an early ford, remains of wagon ruts and archaeological evidence of wayside places retained around the 1858 Djerriwarrh bridge, and below the new bridge which now spans the creek.

History:

The first main road to the Ballarat diggings was the ‘Portland Road’, which was roughly the line of the present Melton Highway from Keilor, which passed just north of Pykes Station (later Melton), approximately along the line of Centenary Avenue, and after skirting north of a heavy box forest came down to the present crossing of Djerriwarrh Creek (or Deep Creek as it was often called).

Shortly after the 1851 announcement of the discovery of gold at Ballarat, John Chandler set off with his party. They crossed the ‘very rickety bridge’ (with toll) at Keilor: ‘We were evidently among some of the first parties, for there was not much track to be seen...’. They became lost on the Keilor Plains, arriving at ‘Staughton’s’, who showed them the way. Arriving at the steep Djerriwarrh Creek crossing they:

‘...tied a rope to the back of the dray, and all hands hung on with all their might to keep the dray from overpowering the horse. We saw several carts that had come to grief, quite smashed up at the bottom of the hill.’¹

A few years later (c.1857) - just before the bridge was constructed – Irish barrister and writer William Kelly wrote an account of a coach trip at this crossing point. There had been a little improvement, but it remained a dangerous crossing:-

‘...nor did they [the coach horses] break their stride until we came close upon the precipitous banks of Deep Creek. This is a deep water-worn gash, intersecting the great plains, very wide at the surface, and eaten down to a narrow channel, at a depth, in many places exceeding two hundred feet ... In some localities, where the banks are more shelving from the falling in of the upper strata, magnificent timber has arisen with clumps of shrubs and brushwood flourishing under their shade, which render it charming to the lovers of natural scenery. The point at which we crossed quite answered to this description – a sort of titanic Dargle, wanting only the exercise of some landscape gardening skill to rival that sweet Wicklow retreat.

¹ Chandler, John, *Forty Years in the Wilderness* (edited, Michael Canon), Loch Haven, Main Ridge, 1990, pp.37-39

We were obliged to walk – or more properly scramble – down the quick slopes, and as Johnathon² kept his seat, he looked as if he had his feet planted against the horse's breeches, with the coach on his head, like a huge shako.

There were snug cabins, with trim little gardens, on a small plateau just above the level of the winter floods, seemingly occupied by sawyers and their families, but who, as we ascertained, drove a retiring trade in liquid refreshments, prescribed as necessary before encountering the ascent on the opposite side'.³

Incidences of destroyed wagons and horse teams continued until the time the bridge was built.⁴

A study undertaken for VicRoads in 1994 identified two historical archaeological sites in the area, on the west side of the creek: a 'Wayside Inn' beside the 'old coach road' (which is clearly visible from the eastern side of the creek), and a house site.⁵ The whole Djerriwarrh Creek valley was public land, later designated a 'farmers common'.⁶

Local belief is that the original ford crossing, the 'old bullock track' (after which a nearby road has recently been named) was situated approximately 400 metres upstream of the present (old) bridge, over a stone ford.⁷ An early map, predating the goldrush, shows the crossing as a track fording the stream three times at a horseshoe bend. Vines estimates that the original line approaching the stream followed a spur just south of the existing highway, turned north at the final drop to the first of the fords (now disturbed) which was situated between the old and the new bridges. The second ford was just upstream of the 1858-59 bridge, from which the track headed north-west to the third ford 'which is still visible in its original position, marked by flanking red gum trees'. Having crossed the creek the road then followed an easy gradient up the south side of a gully, the tracks of which are known locally as the 'old coach road'.⁸

On the Melton side of the creek history has recorded two sites. The Ben Nevis Hotel was erected by Ewen McKinnon⁹ atop the escarpment. A toll gate was erected on the Melton side of the bridge in April 1861; the house and gate were burnt down in 1870.¹⁰ Archaeological evidence at the top of the escarpment – a scatter of handmade bricks and a hollow where some bottles were found – may be related to one of these sites, more likely the hotel.¹¹

Land to the north of bridge once used for the growing of vines, which are thought to have failed through the lack of water. Land to the south of bridge was at one stage used as cherry orchards.¹²

² The taciturn American coach driver.

³ William Kelly, *Life in Victoria, or Victoria in 1853 and Victoria in 1858* (Lowden, Kilmore, 1977), p.138-139

⁴ Cameron, *op cit*, pp. 14, 17

⁵ Vines, G, 'The Djerriwarrh Survey: Western Freeway – Melton to Bacchus Marsh section Heritage and Archaeological Survey' (Living Museum of the West, December 1994), pp.62-64

⁶ *ibid*, p.29

⁷ Jeff Robinson, pers.conv. 19/5/2002; Judith Bilszta, research notes.

⁸ Vines, *op cit*, p.31, and Figure 9 (CPO Map K1: 'Plan of the Proposed Line of Road from the Kororoit Creek to the Pentland Hills, 1847')

⁹ National Trust File – Melton and District Historical Society. The property was later bought by Harkness from McKinnon's estate.

¹⁰ *Bacchus Marsh and Melton Express* 1870 (M&DHS record)

¹¹ This is Site No.258 of Stage One of the present Melton Heritage Study.

¹² Geoffrey Camm (compiler) *Bacchus Marsh: An Anecdotal History* (Hargreen Publishing, 1986)

The whole area of the road crossing has been designated as a site of historical and archaeological significance.¹³

As traffic on the Ballarat Road increased, and roads deteriorated under the wheels of drays and bullock wagons, road and bridge construction became essential. The Djerriwarrh Creek crossing was a particular hazard because of the steep descents. As a result it is one of only very few gold-era bridges to have been constructed in Victoria, and one of even fewer to survive.

A contract for bridge was let on the 20th October 1858 by newly created Department of Roads and Bridges of the Board of Lands and Works. The contract price was £2,583, and the successful contractor Robert Barbour.¹⁴ Sandstone for construction of the bridge was quarried on site; the quarry hole was on the western side of the creek. Workers camped in tents beside site in bed of the creek. The bridge was completed on 31 March 1859.¹⁵

While the opening of the Geelong to Ballarat railway c.1862 would have decreased traffic on the road, the route was still well patronised, and in 1873 Cobb & Co. line put on a new coach to carry 25 passengers, to complement its massive ‘Leviathan’ coach of 1860, with a capacity of 100 passengers.¹⁶ At least until the opening of the direct Melbourne to Ballarat railway in 1889 the bridge provided a vital link on the busy coach road between Ballarat and the railway station at ‘Keilor Road’ (Sydenham). Hotels in the Melton Shire benefited from the through traffic, providing stabling and victuals.

In 1960 the bridge was by-passed by a reinforced concrete bridge. In 1963 it was restored by the Country Roads Board.¹⁷

The bridge’s Djerriwarrh Creek setting is also of natural significance. There is an interesting mix of native plants – including Fragrant Saltbush, Saloop and Scrubby Saltbush found in the area. Bull Mallee growing along the creek is part of the former Long Forest,¹⁸ now protected under the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act and on Register of National Estate. The road cutting on the north side of the highway east of the bridge is significant because it gives clear exposure of bedrocks that underlie the volcanic plain:- it exposes shales overlain by Werribee Formation sediments and newer volcanic basalts.¹⁹

Thematic Context / Comparative Analysis:

Melton Historical Themes: Transport.

Known comparable examples:

Melton is crossed by a number of steep creek valleys and therefore a number of crossing places exist. One notable crossing was on Kororoit creek which was a continuation of the Melbourne to Portland Road. The old route can still be seen a few hundred metres upstream, with wheel tracks and earthworks on the gully above the ford which is black scoria.

¹³ Vines, *op cit*, Figure 35.

¹⁴ Government Gazette 1858

¹⁵ Geoffrey Camm (compiler), *Bacchus Marsh – An Anecdotal History*, 1986

¹⁶ Macdonald, *op cit*, p.6; Pollitt, *op cit*, pp.56-58

¹⁷ Vines, *op cit*, p.39

¹⁸ Bacchus Marsh Heritage Guide 2003

¹⁹ *loc cit*

The Rockbank Inn on Beattys Road is included on the VHR (H1933). Rockbank Inn was a wayside inn on a creek crossing which was used during the gold-rush.

Another crossing is evident across Toolern Creek near the junction with the Werribee River. This crossing passes close to the archaeological remains of a bluestone out-station building, and remnant plantings of almond trees.

Condition:

Good/Fair

Integrity:

SubstantiallyIntact

Recommendations:

Recommended for inclusion in the Melton Planning Scheme Heritage Overlay. (The place is already included in the Victorian Heritage Inventory).

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:

- A Conservation Management Plan for the whole crossing area, including fords, quarry, and archaeological sites, would assist the preservation of this important gold-rush road place.