

Heritage Overlay No.: 110
Citation No.: 359
Place: Kerr Farm Site, Boundary Road

Other Names of Place: Kerr Dairy Farm.
Location: 1780 – 1882 Boundary Rd, Mt Cottrell
Critical Dates: Property settlement c.1855.
Existing Heritage Listings: None.¹
Recommended Level of Significance: LOCAL



Statement of Significance:

The ruinous former Kerr dairy farm complex 1780 – 1882 Boundary Road, Mt Cottrell is significant as a substantial relic of small farming practices, construction and lifestyle in the dry Werribee Plains area, and for its association with the Kerr family.

The ruinous Kerr dairy farm complex is historically significant at a LOCAL level (AHC A4, B2, D2). It is expressive of a farming era and way of life that is no longer practised. The site includes the substantial ruin of a dwelling with walls approximately 1.5 metres high, a substantial complex of drystone wall stock yards, paddocks and boundary fences in various conditions, a shallow dam, the remains of a well or cistern, the remains of an unusual gatepost, a rock whose hollowed-out form appears to be the result of human action, and a cobbled area to

¹ Identified as ‘worthy of assessment’ in: ‘Western Region of Melbourne, Rural Heritage Study’, Context Pty Ltd, 1994, p.199

the northwest of the house which may be the remains of a garden area or shedding. The farm is also significant for its association with the deaths of seven of the Kerr children, one of whom drowned in the property dam, and the other six who died within the space of a few weeks as a result of diphtheria. This demonstrates the difficulties of life on isolated nineteenth century farms such as Mt Cottrell, and the susceptibility of children to diphtheria and other deadly diseases from sanitary and other contemporary problems, such as small draughty houses. The Melton community shared something of the trauma of the family's tragedy at a distressing multiple funeral. Two other of the children are reputed to be buried on the property in a location known to family descendents.

The ruinous Kerr dairy farm complex is of scientific significance at the LOCAL level (AHC C2) for its potential to provide evidence of nineteenth century small farming practices and lifestyle in the dry plains area. The construction and layout of the former dwelling, the drystone walls, the steps to the dairy/cistern, the gate and fence-posts, and the hollowed stone, have the potential to provide further research and significant information contributing to a wider understanding of the occupation of the Werribee Plains area. If the steps are to a cistern rather than a dairy it would be of particular interest in regard to information about nineteenth century water management in the dry plains area.

The ruinous Kerr dairy farm complex is also of social significance at the LOCAL level (AHC G1) for its interpretative and educative potential regarding the small farming lifestyle in nineteenth century plains area.

Overall, the ruinous Kerr dairy farm complex is of LOCAL significance.

Description:

The former Kerr Dairy Farm complex includes the ruins of a bluestone cottage, of interesting construction (split fieldstone) with and remnants of lime render. Some surviving sections of the rubble stone cottage are c.0.5 – 1.5 metres high. The original house was a three roomed rubble stone and mud (probably mortar) structure, with one large room, a large fireplace, and two small rooms.² By the time the building was vacated in 1916, it was described as being of four rooms. An early extension, or original addition (perhaps a pantry or store, or for animals), to the house is visible under the rubble around the walls.

Evidence of what was apparently a very crudely constructed cottage fence and gate survive, including a long rock, placed vertically, with a hole morticed apparently for a gate, and a very old timber post. The usual conventional underground tank was not sighted; it may be filled or buried under rubble of the cottage walls.

West of this house is a shallow excavated area, about the size of a small dam. It has about 5 bluestone steps entering into it, causing some speculation that it may have been a shallow cistern, or 'well'.³ Alternatively it may have been a part-underground dairy or cellar. While there is no obvious evidence of a former building, some of the area around it appears to have been quite disturbed. It is an interesting relic with the potential to reveal information about the operation of early small farming in the dry Werribee plains area.

² 'James Kerr', typescript held by MDHS (by Robert Kerr?), p.2

³ *ibid*

It is possible that it was shallow cistern constructed early in the settlement of the property as an alternative to the difficult work of sinking a tank through the basalt which is close to the surface in this region. (It is however likely that a conventional underground tank does also exist.)

The property also has several substantial dry stone stock yards remaining, as well as a complex of internal and boundary dry stone walls associated with a nineteenth century small farm. The wall on Boundary Road is approximately 800 metres long. The wall on the northern property boundary is approximately 250 metres long, and there are about 270 metres of internal walls. These walls were quite high (751-1000 mm), and the larger ones on the boundaries appear to have been professionally built (although unprofessionally repaired since). Many of the internal walls have been bulldozed by the current owner, but a substantial north south wall exists from the site of the cistern or well to halfway across the paddock where it joins an east-west running wall.

Most walls are in the typically deteriorated condition of the dry stone walls in the Shire, although some are more substantial and there are a few quite good sections of wall, some retaining coping stones. The boundary fences are generally well-built and variable condition, with some reasonably intact sections, most fair, and some poor. Some walls are constructed with split fieldstones (perhaps roughly repaired in the twentieth century) and others of natural fieldstone. Despite the destruction of some of the walls in the twentieth century it nevertheless remains a precinct with a considerable number and variety of walls, including boundary and paddock fences, and stock yards, with a high potential to provide information about early farming practices in the region.

There are two small old dams, which include a few courses of drystone beeching. It may have been in one of these one of the Kerr children drowned.

An unusual hollowed-out fieldstone has the appearance of an Aboriginal water storage and drinking depression.

There are mature plantings of sugar gums that were probably planted to provide shelter for stock in the early twentieth century.

Descendents of the Kerrs are said to know the location on the site of graves containing the remains of two of the Kerr children. These were not identified during the site visit.

History:

James Kerr, born in Ayrshire Scotland arrived in Melbourne in 1851, married Helen Steele also from Ayrshire in 1852, and with his brother John became a general carter on the Melbourne to Werribee route.⁴ He appears in 1856 as a 'farmer' holding 91 acres of freehold at Mount Cottrell.⁵ This would have been the allotment on which his home was constructed: Crown Allotment 6, Section 3, Parish of Phyweitjorrk, of 91 acres and 10 perches.⁶ He appears on the early (1863) Braybrook ratebooks, and by 1866 was renting an additional 33 acres from LL Smith, and later purchased an additional 43 acres from Bottomley, no doubt part of the adjoining allotment to the north.

⁴ The *Melton Express*, 28/10/1916.

⁵ Application for inclusion in the Voters Roll, Assembly, Keilor A Division.

⁶ Parish Plan, Parish of Phyweitjorrk. The allotment had been purchased by S Bottomley in the 1854 Crown sales.

The 'Mt Cotterell' area in which the property was located appears to have had a minor growth spurt in the 1860s and 70s, probably aided by the Selection Acts. In June 1865 a grant was given to open the Mt Cotterell School No.804, to be held in a bluestone Wesleyan chapel / school house and teachers residence.⁷ This school was on Boundary Road, south of Mt Cotterell. In 1866 a post-office also opened in Mt Cotterell.

Yet the neighbourhood remained 'a tiny group of farms dwarfed by Clarke's 8,678 acres'. These small farmers confronted 'two basic inequalities – access to water and access to good roads'.⁸ The only legally sanctioned water access available to local farmers for stock on the dry Werribee Plains was the Moloney's Water Reserve. Kerr's obituary notes that 'while he followed farming pursuits, he was badly affected by lack of water before the well and dam were secured.'⁹

The second problem faced by local farmers was isolation. It was a small community remote from the nearest railway (Melbourne-Geelong), and cut off further by closed roads on pastoral estates. There were 23 miles of enclosed roads, mainly on land owned by Clarke, severely restricting access in all directions. The 'main links between the residents of the Mt Cotterell district and the rest of the world' were the southern boundary road, and the Mt Cotterell and Mt Atkinson Roads. 'Of all the families in Braybrook Shire those at Mt Cotterell were the most isolated.'¹⁰

Very few small farmers were able to remain on the land in the Mt Cotterell area during the late nineteenth century. While there were more small farmers in the nearby Shire of Werribee, by the end of the century the Kerrs apparently had only had a few neighbours in the Shire of Melton, including:- Scarborough, Moloney and Moss, all on Mt Cottrell Road, and Valentine next door.¹¹ The difficulties of small farming in this relatively remote plains area become clear in the declining population figures evident in the number of ratepayers in the Parish of Phyweijorrk. The number of farmers declined dramatically, from 14 in 1871, to 7 in 1881, and 5 in 1891. Small farmers were by far the most vulnerable:- of the 8 farmers with less than 100 acres of land in 1871, only 2 remained in 1881. Much of their land was taken over by WJT 'Big' Clarke (and later his son Sir WJ Clarke).¹²

While James Kerr had about 100 acres, like many other small farmers who survived, he also rented as much land again from neighbours, including LL Smith, and Clarke.¹³ He may have also been able to draw some extra income through his original employment as a geneal carter. By 1892 he is shown as being in the possession (although he may not have had freehold title to all of it) of Crown Allotments 1, 4 and 6 of Section 3, a total of nearly 300 acres.

The Kerrs suffered tragedy in their time on their dairy farm. When the nearby Mt Cotterell school opened in 1865 five of his children were enrolled and in 1868 six Kerrs were enrolled (with exceptional attendance records). A few years later there was only one Kerr at the

⁷ Ford, Olwen, 'Voices From Below: Family, School and Community on the Braybrook Plains 1854-1892' (M.Ed Thesis, University of Melbourne, 1993), p.238.

⁸ Ford, *op cit*, p.237

⁹ The *Melton Express*, 28/10/1916.

¹⁰ *ibid*, pp.237-8

¹¹ Shire Map Series, 1892, 'No.29: Phyweijorrk'.

¹² *ibid*, p.239

¹³ Shire of Braybrook, *Ratebooks*, 1863; Ford, *op cit*, p.240.

school.¹⁴ Firstly, in 1868 James Kerr, aged 11 years, was drowned in a dam on the property.¹⁵ Then further tragedy struck. The newspaper of 1870 reported the story:

‘A very distressing case of that fatal disease diphtheria occurred this week between here and Wyndham when four children, being a majority of the family of a farmer named Kerr, fell victims to its remorseless claims. One of them was buried in Melton cemetery on Friday last and the other three on Tuesday, leaving an interval of only four days between the whole of their deaths. Their ages were respectively 16, 7, 5, 2½; two others of the same family were taken to the Melbourne Hospital dangerously ill from the same complaint, whereupon at their arrival, it was discovered that the father was also affected and he was detained to be treated with his children although having left his wife and an infant 3 weeks old on a bed of sickness at home. The family was attended by Dr Figg of Williamstown.’¹⁶

The four are buried in the Presbyterian section of the Melton cemetery. The day of the funeral the rain poured down and flooded into the grave. Less than two weeks later the paper carried another report on the fate of the family:

‘Two more of Mr Kerr’s unfortunate family have succumbed to the effects of diphtheria, being the infant who was only three weeks old and the boy who was taken to the Melbourne Hospital. The mother also, from sheer exhaustion and other complaints connected with the loss of her family, had to be taken to the above institution where now are lying the whole of the remaining members of a once prosperous and happy family who are now absent from home.’¹⁷

The newspaper reported that neighbouring families, Minns and Shaw, had gratuitously undertaken to manage the Kerr’s dairy, which was ‘by no means a limited one’.

The melancholy scene of the multiple funeral became part of the memory of the Melton community.¹⁸ Two children whose names do not appear on the Melton Cemetery grave are thought to be buried on the farm. A relative visited the property in the 1980’s and from family papers was able to identify the gravesite.¹⁹

Diphtheria was one of the most common causes of death in children in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is a highly contagious bacterial virus, most common in crowded areas with poor sanitation. Large families of young children, in small dwellings, would have been vulnerable once this highly contagious air-borne bacterial virus entered the house. A contaminated water supply, to which uncovered underground water tanks were particularly susceptible, and which probably existed at this farm, may also have contributed.²⁰ Locals blamed outbreaks on draughty conditions in schools without fireplaces.²¹ There were further cases, and deaths from diphtheria among Mount Cotterell families in 1875, including consecutive deaths of two children in each of the Moloney and Wood families.

¹⁴ Ford, *op cit*, p.240.

¹⁵ Melton Express, 7/3/1868

¹⁶ Melton Express 13-12-1870

¹⁷ Melton Express 24-12-1870

¹⁸ Recorded in Cameron’s memoirs, for example.

¹⁹ Judith Bilszta, Melton & District Historical Society.

²⁰ Hughes, Trueman, Ludlow, ‘Wells and Underground Tanks’, prepared for the Heritage Council of NSW (nd), pp.19-24

²¹ Bob Macdonald, ‘History of Melton’, unpublished typescript, MDHS, c.1969, p.6

In addition to the very limited understanding of the disease at the time, the isolation of the Mount Cotterell farmers from medical help appears to have been a component of the tragedies. A local explained later that it was not realised at the time how dangerous diphtheria was, and that as there was 'no doctor near' the Kerrs, they and other parents hoped that it would clear up.²² Further, a contemporary noted that there had been several cases in Mt Cotterell "where the medical men had refused, unless their fees were paid in advance, to attend patients who had subsequently died".²³

Helen Kerr died at the property in 1888 of a brain disease at aged 61. By the 1890s the Braybrook ratebooks noted that Kerr's property (listed only as the 91 acre property on which his home is situated) was 'all fenced'.²⁴ James Kerr lived in the small stone house until in 1916, aged 84, he died of 'senile decay'.²⁵ He had been a resident of Mt Cotterell for 65 years.²⁶ Seven of the 11 children of he and his wife had failed to reach adulthood. Daughters had married Cr Pitson of Rockbank, and George Cropley, of Truganina.

It is not known when Helen Kerr died. In April of the following year a sale notice appeared for the property, of 144 acres, 10 perches, being 'Allotment 4, Section 3 Parish of Pywheitjorrk' in the local paper. This would have been the original Allotment 6 plus half of the Allotment 4, both purchased early on from S Bottomley. The improvements were described as: '4 room house, dairy and outbuildings, dam'.²⁷

By the 1924 the Kerr property was in the ownership of Alex Morton, who is said to have removed the roof of the house to avoid vagrants camping in it. He had taken this step after finding 'a tramp' had died there.²⁸ Alex eventually sold to his nephew, Robert Morton and Issac Little who had selected the allotments to the west (Crown Allotments 3 and 5, Section 3). Alex and Edith Margret Morton acquired the land from the R Morton and I Little. Edith Morton passed away in 1984 and current owner John Morton inherited the property after his mother's death.²⁹

The owner advises that some of the dry stone walls within the farm were removed in the twentieth century.

Thematic Context / Comparative Analysis:

Melton Historical Themes: 'Farming', 'Water', 'Community: Towns and People'

Known comparable examples:

There are numerous ruins of small farms in the Shire. The most comparable, in terms of their distinctive features, and dry plains contexts, are two in the Mt Cotterell area:

²² Alex Cameron, 'Melton Memoirs' (Melton & District Historical Society, unpublished typescript), p.8

²³ Ford, *op cit*, p.245

²⁴ Shire of Braybrook, *Ratebooks*, 1898-1907.

²⁵ James Kerr, *op cit*, p.4

²⁶ *Melton Express*, 28/10/1916. If accurate, this means that he had lived in the area (not necessarily the property) since 1851.

²⁷ *Melton Express*, 21/4/1917.

²⁸ Albert Evans, 'From the early settlers to the 1969 fires', Manuscript.

²⁹ John Morton, personal conversation, 22/2/2002

- *Mt Cottrell Farm* (Place No.293). This is a similar complex of drystone walls of different types, the ruin of a rubble stone dwelling, a large bluestone line underground tank, pepper trees, interesting configuration, and a dam (claimed by some to have been a sheep wash), and shelter eucalyptus boundary planting. The property also dates to the 1850s.
- *The Moloney Farm Site* (Place No.292). This comprises a small, neat roughly squared bluestone underground tank, pepper trees, boundary and paddock drystone walls, and the associated ‘Moloneys’ Water Reserve. It dates to the later Selection Act era, c.1872.

Other relatively intact farm complex sites in the area also retain different evidence of farming from the early era:

- *Rocklands* (Place No. 391) in Truganina. As a larger and more successful farm of Cr RD Hopkins, it is not directly comparable with the small Kerr farm. It retains a substantial bluestone homestead and associated features. It has an outstanding collection of drystone walls, and an important stone lined dam.
- *Tibbermore* (Place No. 392). Next to and very similar to *Rocklands*. It retains a larger house, and an extensive collection of drystone walls, including some excellent examples. Its small diameter underground tank stone-lined tank is also of interest.
- *Evansdale* (Place No. 327): Again, this Truganina property also dates to the 1850s, and remains in the hand of the original family. It contains small houses of three, or perhaps four eras, including early ones of rubble stone construction, in semi-ruinous condition. It also has some drystone wall stock yards and fences and pepper trees.

Other sites that might compare with the dairy, or cistern on the Kerr property are:

- The former Condon property (Place No.19) in the north of the Shire, which retains a stone outbuilding (recently repaired) with three stone steps at the entrance.
- Place No.12, said to have been associated with a Cobb & Co stable, may have been a dairy; it is also set one or two steps down.
- Place No.28: Brookville, the former Kitson house, which has a small building partially constructed in an embankment.

The bluestone ‘addition’ on the ruinous building (probably a house) appears to be similar to features on other early ruinous stone dwellings in the Shire:

- Place No.125, the Norton house, off Melton Highway. This is the most intact of the ruins, and the one in which the addition is best preserved;
- Place No.293, the former Scarborough house on Mount Cotterell Road.

The Moloney site is the only one that would appear to have comparable historical associations to the Kerr site in terms of the vulnerability of large families in small houses to diphtheria.

Condition:

Ruinous

Integrity:

Damaged/Disturbed

Recommendations:

Recommended for inclusion in the Melton Planning Scheme Heritage Overlay, and 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>Yes – Cistern remains, drystone wall perimeter and paddock fences, dam walls, and stockyards and cottage surrounds.</i>

Other Recommendations:

- It is recommended that an archaeological study be conducted of the place, in particular the features mentioned in this report, as well as the site of the putative family graves. The drystone walls should also be documented as part of an interpretation of the whole of the place as a nineteenth century farming on the Werribee plains.