

VICTORIA'S HERITAGE

TOWER HILL RESERVE – HISTORY AND HERITAGE

Tower Hill is a major natural landmark on the Princes Highway between Warrnambool and Port Fairy in south-western Victoria, and many people visit it to enjoy a picnic or walk, to see its wildlife or to study its geology. As a giant maar or volcanic explosion crater it is of national geological significance.

Aboriginal people have lived in this area for many thousands of years, and their descendants retain close links with it. Today the Worn Gundidj Aboriginal Cooperative manages the reserve's Information Centre.

In the early years of European settlement much of Tower Hill's natural vegetation was cleared and the land was used for farming and quarrying. In 1892 it became Victoria's first national park in recognition of its unique features, but destructive uses continued.

In 1961 it became a State Game Reserve, and under the then Fisheries and Game Department a major revegetation program began, largely guided by an 1855 painting by Eugene von Guerard. Today you can see the results of this work in the restored natural vegetation and the birds and other wildlife that have returned.

TOWER HILL – THE CREATION OF A LANDSCAPE

A violent volcanic explosion 30,000 years ago created the funnel-shaped crater (later filled



Crater of Mt Eccles. By Eugene von Guerard, courtesy of State Library Victoria.

with water to form a lake), islands and volcanic cone we now call Tower Hill. The way in which the volcano was formed is of great interest to geologists and it is for this reason that the site is listed on the Australian Register of the National Estate (place ID 15250).

Archaeological surveys of the area have uncovered axe heads and other artefacts in the volcanic ash layers and local Aboriginal people would undoubtedly have witnessed the eruptions. The area was a rich source of food for the Koroitgundij people whose descendants retain special links with it today. Aboriginal people today manage the Visitor Centre and interpretation of the reserve.

Ongoing use of the land at Tower Hill has left evidence in the landscape which we can study to gain valuable information about the way people lived and worked in the past.

Over the decades of European settlement, Tower Hill's land and resources were exploited

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and developed as its rich soil was used for farming and grazing. It was not until the 1960s that any concerted effort was made to halt the decline and an ambitious project to re-vegetate the denuded landscape began, using clues in the landscape itself and from an old painting.

THE FIRST SIGHTINGS BY EUROPEANS

Tower Hill is close to the coast, and easily seen from the sea. The first confirmed sighting by Europeans was by French explorers aboard the ship *Geographe* in 1802.

Also in 1802, Matthew Flinders on a coastal voyage aboard the *Investigator* noticed the volcanic peak. Visibility was reduced by rain squalls and cloud, and as a result he could not map parts of the coastline. However, the following entry appears on his charts close to the actual site of Tower Hill: 'Peaked Hill Position uncertain ... Lady Jul.Percy's Is. ... Moderately high sandy land, seen imperfectly in the intervals of thick squalls ...uncer.obs. ... Apr. 20. 1802'

EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT AND INTENSIVE CULTIVATION

European settlers came to the area in the late 1830s, attracted by a good water supply and fertile soils. Settlers cleared and farmed the land, grazing cattle and growing grain. By the 1850s blocks of land were being leased and sold right down to the edge of the lake and land use became more intensive. The steeper slopes of the volcano were cleared and planted with crops as land clearance accelerated to increase available pastures. Remaining timber was cut down and used for fuel.

In 1866 some areas of Tower Hill were reserved as public land and the government appointed the Tower Hill Acclimatisation Society to manage the reserve. However, in order to raise funds the Society allowed timber extraction, grazing and clearing, and let people live on parts of the reserve, further contributing to the degradation of the vegetation. In pursuit of their ideals they also

planted exotic trees and introduced rabbits, goats and other animals.

A letter from Colin Fletcher to the President of the Board of Lands and Survey in 1868 gives a good description of the agricultural activities of the time, including zealous land clearance to make way for stock pastures.

Mr Fletcher's letter concerns a plea to re-instate a labourer and caretaker summarily dismissed from his job by his employers James Jellie of Belfast (Port Fairy) and Sam McGregor, auctioneer, of Warrnabool. Part of the letter outlines the labourer's duties:

"...burning off all the underwood at convenient times, to care [for]...stock...to keep persons from trespassing and to care [sic] any foreign beasts and fowls that might be placed on the reserve." Fletcher describes the impact of these duties, tellingly mentioning that "...the burning...from time to time killed the larger trees..." He also had to weed and hoe 9 acres of mangolds. Animals in the labourer's care are listed by Fletcher as 60 head of cattle, 15 angora goats which he notes "...effectively crop down all the young gum tree plants", 9 jungle fowl, 3 pheasants (eaten by hawks), and, surprisingly, only two rabbits (a male and a female).

It is clear that this man was one of many labourers all doing the same thing and the impact on the landscape was dramatic. Commentators have identified at least six families living on the volcano's banks in 1883, and it is reasonable to assume that there were other absentee landowners such as Messrs Jellie and McGregor.

In 1878 the Borough of Koroit granted a licence to remove gravel, and by 1894 there were seven quarries within the Tower Hill reserve. Although the Board of Works had sacked the committee of management, this did not stop the environmental deterioration as land was cleared for pine plantations. By the early 1880s Tower Hill was in a state of neglect and the reserve was on its third

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committee of management. Attempts were made to make Tower Hill look 'better' by planting pines and cypress trees, privet hedge and elderberry.

Tower Hill was declared Victoria's first national park in 1892 but still the decline continued, and by the 1950s the once-lush vegetation had gone, replaced by bare hillsides. At this point, however, the local community started to draw attention to the poor state of the reserve and investigations started into its suitability as a wildlife reserve. Finally in 1961 Tower Hill was declared a State Game Reserve.

RE-VEGETATING THE RESERVE USING A PAINTING, EXPERTS AND VOLUNTEERS

1961 marked the beginning of a major effort to re-vegetate Tower Hill, using as a starting point an 1855 painting ('Outlook') by Viennese artist Eugene von Guerard, known for his attention to detail.

Von Guerard was commissioned in 1855 by James Dawson, owner of 'Kangatong', a pastoral property near Mount Eccles to the west, to show the vegetation "...as the Aborigines knew it and just before the Europeans were to ruin it." (Mary Ryllis Clark, *Discover Historic Victoria* 1996.)

On a visit to Tower Hill in 1891 Dawson was appalled at the condition of the place and is glad he had had the foresight to commission the painting:

"...fortunately for future generations, I commissioned a celebrated artist to paint the scene in oil on a large scale, and he carried out my wishes faithfully and beautifully. On visiting the scene later, I was amazed and disgusted to find everything altered, the fine trees on the cones, and in the craters of the island all gone excepting half a dozen or so." (cited in Ryllis Clark op.cit. 29)

(In 1966, Mrs E. Thornton, the grand-daughter of James Dawson, presented the painting to the Victorian Fisheries and Wildlife Division,

and since 1978 it has been on loan to the Warrnambool Art Gallery.)

The Fisheries and Wildlife Department developed a planting scheme using von Guerard's detailed painting as a reference. It shows grass and ferns on the island, and tea-trees, wattles, sheoaks, banksias and eucalypts on the cones with reeds and tussocks in the marshes (Brady, A. 1992:6). Contemporary accounts of the vegetation also describe a lush and varied landscape.

Botanists studied the painting to identify plants, and re-planting was based on species known or believed to have been indigenous to Tower Hill.

By 1981, around 25,000 trees and shrubs had been planted with the help of hundreds of school children and volunteers, along with herbs, grasses and rushes. As these plants became established, introduced plants and weeds were removed. More recently, pollen analysis at Tower Hill has helped identify other plants growing prior to European settlement.

Native wildlife also suffered through decades of clearing and removal of habitats. At Tower Hill rabbits and mice dominated until the 1970s. With improvement in vegetation, native animals have been successfully re-introduced. In 1960 surveys registered around 60 species of birds; by 1980 this had increased to 164. Other wildlife successfully returned includes koalas, echidnas, wombats, sugar gliders, grey kangaroos, brushtail and ringtail possums. Visitors have a good chance of seeing one or more of these animals from any of the walking tracks through the reserve.

The Natural History Centre on Main Island has displays on the geology, flora, fauna and human history of Tower Hill. The building, designed in the shape of a volcanic cone, was completed around 1970 and is significant as one of the most accessible and important buildings by Melbourne architect Robin Boyd, who played a major role in the development of

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architecture in Victoria from the 1940s to 1970s.

WHAT IS ACCLIMATISATION?

The Acclimatisation Society of Victoria (ASV) was formed in 1861 with the aim of introducing exotic plants and animals primarily for dispersion to suitable parts of the colony. Their philosophies did much to hasten the decline of the landscape at Tower Hill, as in the rest of Victoria and Australia.

WHY IS IT CALLED TOWER HILL?

Max Downes in his book *The History of Tower Hill to 1962* asserts that the name Tower Hill was first used in the 1840s because the land mass with its peak, lake and steep banks looked like a castle. Anita Brady, *A centenary history of Tower Hill* (1992) says "Another account credits Dougald Langtree, a sailor from Glasgow ... with naming the site after Tower Hill in Scotland" (p2).

REFERENCES:

Mary Ryllis Clark, *Discover Historic Victoria - 60 Heritage Places to visit*, Viking, Victoria, 1996

Brady, A. *A Centenary History of Tower Hill*, Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, 1992.