

Plenty Gorge Park dig – May 2015

On 23 May Heritage Victoria had an open day at their archaeological dig on the site of the Thomas Mill on the Plenty River, constructed by prominent figure Moses Thomas in 1855. We were shown around the site by senior Heritage Victoria archaeologist Jeremy Smith.

The three storey flour mill was built from locally quarried stone and only operated for eight years. It was closed in 1863 after a flood destroyed the weir he had built to try and keep the mill operating after most of the water flow of the Plenty River had been diverted into the new Yan Yean Reservoir to guarantee Melbourne's water supply.



Thomas Mill dig - Jeremy Smith explaining mill operation. As can be seen, little of the mill remains. The miller's cottage is in the background to the right of the photo.

Near the mill building was the site of what appeared to be the single storey miller's cottage. It was so tiny that Jeremy speculated that if the miller's family lived there they probably slept in hammocks as there was no floor space for beds.



Thomas Mill dig - Jeremy Smith explaining miller's cottage, standing on its brick front porch.



Thomas Mill dig - Jeremy Smith showing the day's finds in the miller's cottage, including buttons and various metal, glass, crockery and pipe stem fragments.

Over 1,000 finds had been recovered during the dig. A great many of the largest items came from the wheel house pit of the mill, where it seems broken household and other items were discarded. Many smaller fragments were found in the cottage.



Thomas Mill dig - Kath examining find trays.



Thomas Mill dig - more find trays.



Thomas Mill dig - an ornate clay pipe bowl showing a soldier.

It was clear that after the mill closed the stone blocks of its walls were over time removed for use in other local structures. The cottage however had continued to be occupied, as some of the items found dated from much later in the 1800s and the cottage appears in the background of an 1878 photograph.



Thomas Mill dig – archaeologist in the tiny miller's house and the 1878 photo.



Thomas Mill dig - Perry Wandin explaining Wurundjeri heritage to site visitors.

Moses Thomas was a busy man. Among his many other projects were two wives who between them bore him 18 children!

John Gibson