


Gold rush relic reborn: Inside Melbourne's Woodlea estate built around a restored 1850s inn



Built in the 1850s, The Rockbank Inn when it was still intact - the historic heritage site is now part of Woodlea Estate. Photo: Supplied

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It's a brand-new master-planned community that will eventually contain over 7000 new homes, but overlooking a bend in the old creek is a surprise showpiece that serves as a stark reminder of the site's history.

With walls built of honeyed bluestone, under the shade of ancient peppertrees, are the meticulously restored ruins of an historic 1850s inn where fortune-hunters stopped to rest on their way to take part in Victoria's goldrush.

British troops are also believed to have slept there, at the landmark Rockbank Inn west of Melbourne, as they rode to Ballarat during the famed Eureka Stockade uprising in 1854.

And now, as part of the new 711-hectare suburb of Woodlea within Aintree, the remains of the inn – one of the few formally excavated gold rush sites in Australia – is playing a novel starring role in helping create the modern community.



The heritage site is now being stored and now the heartland of Woodlea Estate. Photo: Supplie

“I think it's brilliant,” says cultural heritage planner Dr James Lesh, the founding director of the Heritage Workshop.

“Preserving state-significant ruins like the Rockbank Inn is a smart move for greenfield developments. These sites act as ‘cultural anchors’ which give new communities a sense of time and place that you can't manufacture from scratch.

“It’s encouraging to see this model of heritage-led placemaking being used to provide a tangible link to the 1850s gold rush.

“It gives the whole environment a feeling of permanency and grit at the same time as creating a focal point for the development. It’s a destination you can build a community around.”

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Woodlea, a joint venture between developers Mirvac and VIP Property Group, is located 30 kilometres from the Melbourne CBD and is expected to house around 20,000 residents by its completion in 2030.

At the same time, as part of the estate’s planning requirements, it was agreed to retain and restore the three crumbling heritage structures on the site – believed to have once housed the hotel, a store and a stable – as a reminder to all newcomers of the area’s tumultuous history.



The Rockbank Inn heritage site. Photo: Supplied

The two-room inn was built in the early 1850s by two liquor merchants as an overnight stop for gold miners, just off a busy main road from Melbourne to the Ballarat goldfields, close to the Kororoit Creek. Soldiers from the 12th and 40th regiments, on their way to the Eureka Stockade, camped in the inn's grounds.

Woodlea landscape manager Thomas Banham says physical work on the ruins has been ongoing for the past five years, and discussions on how to do it began at least two years earlier.

"I think preserving history is really important, given the fact that we're working with new communities," Banham says.

"Just because something is old, doesn't mean it doesn't have value.

"It shows how there was life here prior to this new development and also speaks beyond European settlement to Indigenous settlement and occupation, showing how this land was used for hundreds of years before, if not thousands.

"So while you're living as part of a new community, you can see the visual tells of people living here long before. It is quite an unusual and unique thing for a developer to do, but hopefully it will encourage others to also try to preserve history, too."

Previously an important meeting point for Aboriginal communities, it later housed the inn and served as a farm residence for almost a century before being abandoned in 1960.

A fire in 1984 destroyed many of the structures.



Aerial view of Woodlea Estate in Aintree. Photo: Supplied

The project to bring it back to life was undertaken by Woodlea, in partnership with Heritage Victoria, Melton City Council, Extent Heritage and Abode Restoration, with the aim of setting a benchmark for heritage inclusion in new masterplanned communities.

More than 4,000 artefacts were excavated from the site, the ruins were stabilised, stone by stone, and native plants were reintroduced to the landscape.

“Building a great community is not only about what you create from the ground up, but also what you choose to preserve,” says Jordan Lim, Woodlea’s head of strategy and initiatives.

“The Rockbank Inn has been part of this place for generations, and it’s important it remains part of its future.”

Bench seating, made from materials salvaged on-site, has been installed nearby, and educational signage has been positioned throughout the heritage park, which features a red river gum forest and wetlands. So far, around 17,000 people are living in the new community, with its heritage and walking trails leading to the ruins.

“It’s a hidden gem in the landscape,” says Banham. “It’s like a hidden folly that you come upon and which surprises you.

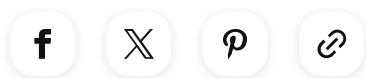
The ruins provided us with a great opportunity to celebrate history and demonstrate how it can be seen as an asset for developers, rather than a hindrance.”

Lesh agrees and hopes it will become a beacon for other developers building new communities across Australia.

“As Melbourne continues to expand, this site brings a sense of history and makes it a place where people can feel they belong,” he said.

“It’s an anchor, and renovating and restoring the ruins as part of a new housing development really is heritage at its best.”

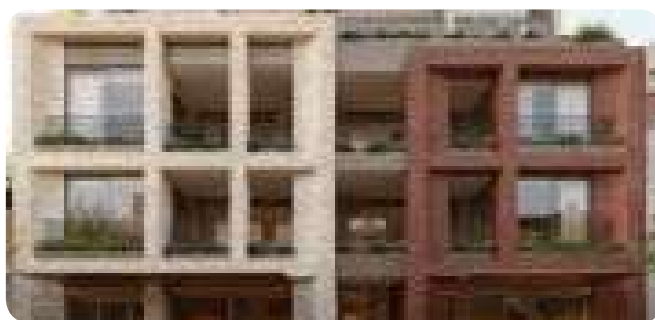
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