

The Whitehorse Historical Society Newsletter



Series 21 no. 3 – May–June 2013

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LIVING WITH CLAY

by Yvonne Fitzmaurice

Anyone who has ever lived in the Nunawading area will have experienced the difficulty of trying to make a productive garden in the clay soil. Therefore, it is relatively easy to imagine the dismay our first settlers would have felt when their agricultural efforts were not adequately rewarded. Fortunately, not all were despondent and departed for easier climes; those who stayed had European farming backgrounds and were able to survive. Amongst these remaining few were some hardy souls who recognised the soil as being suitable clay for pottery, and a fledgling industry was born.

The earliest effort at forming a brick industry was supported by local people, who in one way or another financed it. However, when another outside group of 'Melbourne gentlemen' took charge there was a great deal of understandable anger and disappointment amongst those who had staked their all in the hope that they would prosper in the future. It was not to be, as only so many shares were legally allocated, resulting in a number of the early supporters missing out.

In the early days the clay was taken out with pick and shovel and moved by horse and dray. In the Springfield quarries it would be dug out in the early afternoon

and about an hour later made into pipes.

Before a better and more efficient cooling system for the kilns was invented, the pots had to be removed manually while still hot for a turnaround that had to be as quick as possible. This was known as 'drawing out the pots'. At the Commonwealth Pottery, this dangerous work was done by two men – out of the twenty employed. The only protection they had for entering the hot kiln was a wet sack over their heads. Before the bags caught fire, and often with singed hair and eyebrows, they were able to drag out only a few items. The men accepted the problems connected with working in such extreme circumstances because the pottery owners did not have the money to improve their conditions. According to one of the retired employees, it was a 'ramshackle sort of show'.

For all this effort, the wages book of the day shows these men were paid £3/11/01 for a 44-hour week that included four hours on a Saturday morning. After World War II the unions pressed their case but the workforce remained loyal, though subsequently they became union members.

(continued page 3)



Next meeting: Saturday, 8 June
1.30 p.m.

GENERAL MEETING

Speaker: Elizabeth Banham,
"History of Handkerchiefs"

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FROM THE PRESIDENT – VICKI JONES-EVANS

Dear Members,

Jim Connor, President of Eltham Historical Society, gave a very interesting talk at our April meeting on buildings made from earth. Some of us in the audience had heard and viewed his talk at the last Association of Eastern Historical Societies (AEHS) conference two years ago, and we found his presentation just as informative and entertaining the second time round. Jim stayed for afternoon tea and said how impressed he was with our facilities.

At the same meeting we launched our latest publication, *What They Did*, edited by Yvonne Fitzmaurice. The book is selling well and if you would like a copy it is only \$5 at the Local History Room or Museum, or \$7 including post and packing.

Also in April we hosted a meeting of the AEHS, which was a great success. Barbara Rogalski gave a very entertaining talk on 'An Artist's Impression of Schwerkolt Cottage' and very kindly donated a painting for the raffle. Many members of the other historical societies were impressed with our rooms and our Visitor Centre. It was reported at the meeting that Montrose Historical Society has been dissolved and Lilydale Historical Society has taken over its records.

Our working bee in April was a dismal failure with just three attending, so we were able to clean only the Local History Room and neither the Museum nor the Cottage. We do not hold a working bee in July as it is too cold, but please try to come to the one on Saturday, 14 September. Cleaning is important for our accreditation with Museums Victoria Museums Accreditation Program as well as for presenting a nice experience for visitors.

On Sunday, 26 May, Peter Simmenauer and Bob Gardiner represented the Society at the Healesville Free-way Reservation Group Community Day. As well as providing information on Strathdon House, Peter and Bob were there to collect any information on the area for our records.

The biennial AEHS conference will be taking place at the Karralyka Centre in Ringwood on Saturday, 29 June. Cost for the all-day conference, including morning and afternoon tea, lunch and speakers, will be \$55 per ticket. If you are interested, please contact Rachael and we will see if there are any available places.

Vicki Jones-Evans

**'Springtime'
Schwerkolt Cottage
by Barbara Rogalski
Donated by the artist and proudly on display
in the Local History Room**



Cataloguing Statistics

Photographs	-	3955
Artefacts	-	4534
Documents	-	6501
Visitors to Museum March/April	-	379

New Members

*We hope they will enjoy
their time with us.*

*A warm welcome back
to returning members:*

*Anne, Dan and Kate
Jones*

Rachael Cottle

Membership Officer

LIVING WITH CLAY *(continued from page 1)*

The Second World War saw changes due to the manpower shortage. Some potteries that closed did not reopen. One, Vitclay (as it was to be known in its last renaissance), rose again from a blackberry-infested ruin and became a very productive factory. This pottery closed down in 1942 and remained shut for four years, during which time the family to whom the foreman's cottage was let had a cow living in one of the kilns and 'chooks were everywhere'. Following their war service, four or five of the ex-employees returned only to find a ruined pottery. After the weeds and brambles were removed, they found that all the firebrick floors and fire holes of the kilns were ruined by water and all the machinery was rusty.

By the end of 1946 they had the pottery working again and ready for the burst in production caused by the huge upsurge in post-war housing. Before reaching this stage of production, the specific clay had to be found and tested.

Long experience with acute observation was thought to be the quickest and easiest method. For example, someone with an experienced eye would look at the type of clay in the subsoil during the excavation of a dam or when holes were dug for telegraph poles, or by studying the little mounds of dirt brought up by ants. The two materials required for pottery making were the plastic clays, usually found anywhere from three or six feet to 20 feet down, and the 435-million-year-old Silurian sedimentary reefs that were just below.

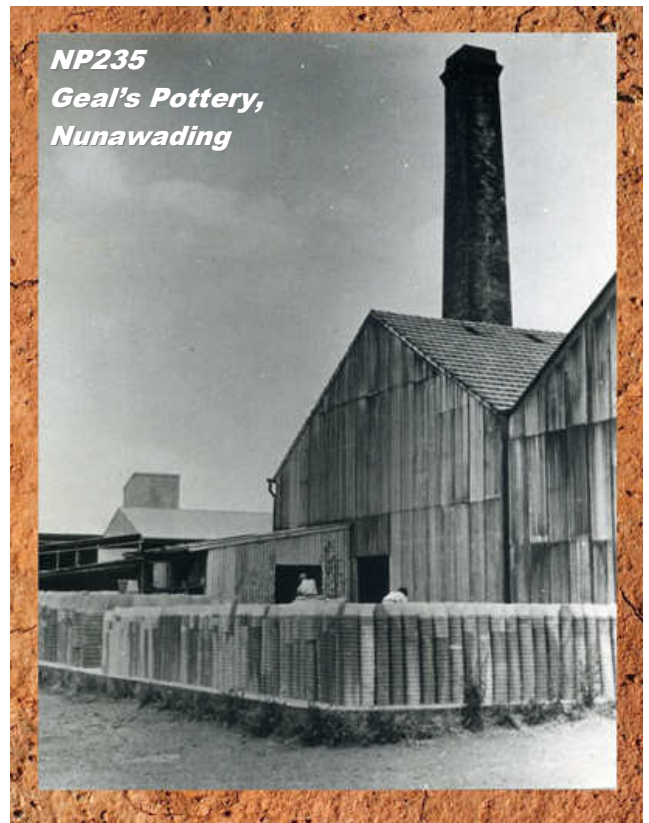
To test their findings, two methods have been described. One was explained in this way. 'We would wet the clay and put a small piece between our fingers and we could tell the plasticity of the clay by the way it would pull the skin away.'

Another more basic and probably earlier method was to cut a piece of clay off with a penknife and chew it. It was reported that the amount of silica in the clay could be detected, suggesting the possibility that it was a plastic clay. Its 'flavour' – or any other 'secret' – has not been explained.

On the whole, the many potteries were accepted as a necessary part of Nunawading life, but some caused more angst than others.

For years residents had been complaining in the local paper about the Geal Bros tile works in Nunawading. Every Monday morning the furnaces were fired up ready for the week. If the wind was blowing in the wrong direction, the smuts landed on the neighbourhood's washing. They complained not only about the smuts and the smoke, but also about the noise and the smell of sulphur dioxide associated with the manufacturing of clay products. An example of the extreme

problems local people faced happened when a girl who lived in a street just south of Springfield Road was getting married on a Saturday. During the night before, the pottery 'threw some soot out' as usual. Unfortunately, on this particular night the wind was coming from the



north. Next afternoon, when dressed in her wedding frock and leaving her home, she backed out of the wire door before noticing it had been covered with soot from the previous night. The factory owners were very sympathetic, but said 'there was nothing we could do about it'.

Finally, residents arranged with Geal Bros pottery a meeting that was reported in the local newspaper. It was fortunate that a sensible approach was taken by all concerned. The owners and managers were requested to alter their ways and they agreed to several conditions that were imposed upon them.

Some of the other potteries did not escape unscathed. One had a story circulating about a suicide. A young married woman (who will remain unnamed) hanged herself in a kiln. The story that has survived according to either actual sightings or fevered imaginations claims that she haunted the establishment. A housing estate has been built on this site and so far there have not been any reports about anything untoward. Perhaps she is happy now the kiln has gone?

Another pottery in Middleborough Road had a happier story. At Nubrik it has been said that in winter the drivers often slept overnight in the warm kilns and next day cooked their breakfasts on hot bricks. This seems to have been a normal and frequent event because there have been no further comments, one way or another. ✕

From the

Blackburn & Mitcham Reporter

Friday, 28 May 1937

Whitehorse Historical Society
presents

A new "snapshot"
of how we used to live...

Price \$5.00
(plus \$2.00 p & p)

Available from
Schwerkolt Cottage and Museum Complex
Dovey Creek Road, Mitcham
or contact Whitehorse Historical Society
Phone: 9873 4946
Email: whitehorsehistory@hotmail.com



Whitehorse Historical Society Dates for your Diary

Meetings are held at the Local History Room,
Schwerkolt Cottage and Museum Complex.

Saturday, 8 June 2013, 1.30pm

General Meeting

Speaker: Elizabeth Banham

'History of Handkerchiefs'

Saturday, 10 August 2013, 1.30pm

Annual General Meeting

Speaker: Gerry Kennedy

'History of Cinema'

Saturday, 12 October, 1.30pm

General Meeting

Speaker: T.B.A.

Working Bees 2013

Please make a diary note and join us
on the day.

Working Bees commence at 9.30am and finish
around 12 noon with a great morning tea.

Saturday, 14 September

Saturday, 9 November

Please come and help even if you can only
offer an hour of your time.

HEAD TEACHER'S TRAVELS.

Shortly before becoming the head teacher at Templestowe this year, Mr. Rathbone, accompanied by his wife, was an exchange teacher to London, where he taught in 37 different schools. They also travelled extensively on the Continent, visiting Germany, Italy, France, Belgium, Switzerland. Also they had the honour of attending the late King George V's garden party at Buckingham Palace.

EMPIRE DAY CEREMONY.

On Friday last Empire Day was celebrated at the local school. Members of the School Committee, the Mothers' Club and district residents attended. Mr. W. H. Everard, M.L.A., and Mr. Russell Clarke, M.L.C., gave interesting addresses. The shire president (Cr. R. G. Hillhouse) thanked the speakers for their addresses and messages to the children. He was supported by Mr. Johnston (secretary of the school committee.) The members of the Mothers' Club, of which Mrs. Chivers is president, gave the gathering morning tea.

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Here on display at our museum are two particular tiles attributed to Emma Scott, an artist and designer employed by the Australian Tessellated Tile Company. Emma, who designed and painted 'The Morning Angel' and 'The E'ening Angel', was a Vermont girl. She had studied painting at the art school run by the National Gallery in Melbourne before working in the studio at Walker's pottery.



The Morning Angel

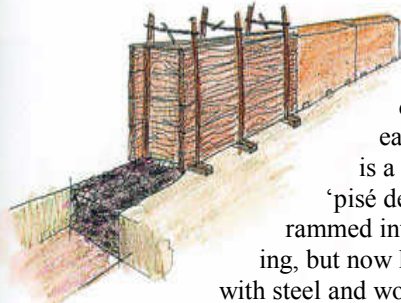


The E'ening Angel

FROM THE COLLECTION

April Meeting: 'Earth Building'

Guest speaker for 13 April 2013 was Jim Connor, President of the Eltham and District Historical Society. He is a former councillor, and has lived in the district for 35 years. His topic was 'Earth Building: A Muddy History'.



Pisé

From the early civilisations, man has built dwellings with rammed earth, known as 'pisé'. This is a French word, short for 'pisé de terre', describing soil rammed into a form. We still use ramming, but now have pneumatic equipment with steel and wooden form work, which can be used many times over.

Adobe

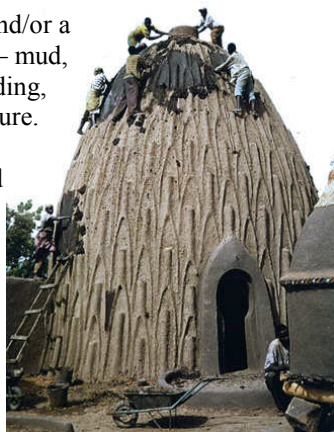
Mainly clay with some straw added to make bricks that are left to dry in the sun, this is very labour-intensive. In Africa, a machine can turn out 10 000 a day.

Wattle and daub

Here mud is pressed onto poles and/or a lattice of branches to form walls – mud, often mixed with dung to aid binding, is literally thrown on to the structure.

Cob

This is clay mixed with straw and water, built on stone foundations and trodden into the wall. It is called 'cobbing'. With it the Musgum people of Africa created tall, conical dwellings; the oldest were made over 10 000 years ago in Jericho. The Inca of South America used adobe on



stone bases. Then there is the Great Wall of China, constructed of rammed earth and stone, and a mosque in Yemen, 53 metres high, is built of mud brick and then rendered.

Earth building in Australia

In the 1860s, Aborigines in the Northern Territory were building mud huts. During the 1890s, European settlers started to use wattle and daub for their homes. Then came pisé – walled homes with iron roofing – one still standing in Goulburn, New South Wales. Earth surfaces can be very dusty, so need a good finish to seal them; today acrylic paint is sometimes used.

In Altona in the 1940s there were a number of straw-bale houses built with rendered finishing; this method creates thick, insulated walls.

Environmental building movement based around Eltham
Souter's Cottage was built in the 1860s, and the Montsalvat complex in the 1930s.



Montsalvat, Eltham

Alistair Knox started building post-World War II. An idealist, a philosopher, a dreamer, and father of the themed brick-building era, he was a fan of Frank Lloyd Wright, the American architect. Soon others followed.

Eltham Community & Reception Centre is a post-and-rammed earth building, as is the Eltham Library. Each is an exciting and outstanding design by Greg Burgess, and worth a visit if you have a few spare hours.

Valerie Marshall

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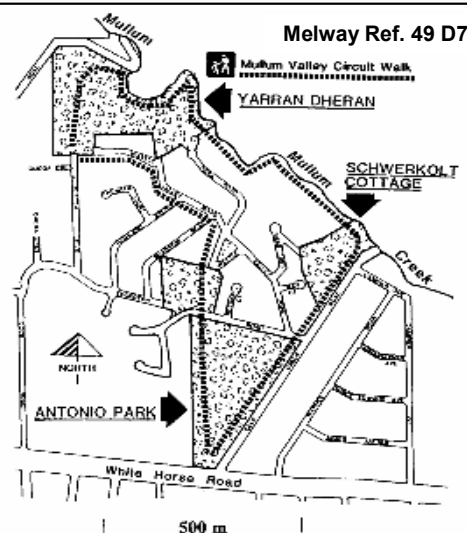
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Copy deadline for next WHS Newsletter: Wednesday, 10 July 2013



The Whitehorse Historical Society Inc.

Mission Statement

The purpose of the Society is to foster historical interest and knowledge.

To collect, document, research, preserve and exhibit items that show how people have lived and worked in the development of the Whitehorse area from human settlement to the present day.

POD

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*The Whitehorse
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support of the
City of Whitehorse.*



REMEMBER

**Whitehorse Historical Society
Local History Collection & Place of Deposit**
Open 10.30 a.m. to 2.30 p.m. Wednesdays.
Visitors welcome.

Ring 9873 4946 for an appointment at other times.

**Box Hill Cemetery Records & Nunawading
Gazette for 1964-1974**
available on microfiche for research.

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Deep Creek Road, Mitcham, VIC 3132
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