History

John, James and William Anderson left New Cumnock in Ayrshire Scotland in June 1851. They took advantage of assisted passages for agricultural labourers and country tradesmen, then much in demand in South Australia and the Port Phillip district. They landed at Adelaide but by early 1852 they had joined the rush for gold at the Mt Alexander diggings in Victoria. The Andersons dug at Castlemaine, Mt Korong and Bendigo and, it seems, made a good deal of money. With this capital they retired to Collingwood and set up as building contractors.

In April 1854 their mother Sarah sailed from Scotland for Melbourne with her younger sons Thomas, Robert and David. These three appear to have carried on the building business for a time while their older brothers moved to Dean near Creswick abandoning gold digging for timber milling, a new enterprise to supply the mining and building industries of Ballarat. Within 10 years the Andersons became the biggest saw millers in the Bulla road forest with mills at Dean, Barkstead and Adekate Creek. By 1866 they had constructed eight miles of timber tramway with numerous bridges, cuttings and culverts at a cost of £9,000 and employed 60 men building tramways and felling timber in the forest and at the mill. 1

While this business was developing the brothers had earlier (in 1856) purchased agricultural land at the first land sales in the Smeaton District north of Creswick and became well establish in the local community there. In the 1850s a flour mill had been built south of Smeaton by Captain Hepburn. Following his death his executors leased it to a Ballarat firm which angered local farmers by then offering a very low price for their grain. John Anderson was among those who took a leading role at a public meeting of farmers in February 1861 where Smeaton’s farmers agreed to float their own “Farmers Joint Stock Flour Mill”. When plans for this mill fell through in June 1861, the Andersons announced that they would build their own flour and oat mill; Anderson’s Mill.

Between them the brothers were well skilled to construct and operate a mill. John had been apprenticed as a millwright in Scotland; a trade requiring the combined abilities of an engineer, wheelwright and miller. He is believed to have designed the mill and probably prepared the original set of drawings for the flour mill which are now in the Latrobe Library.

The structure was substantially built of local materials. Bluestone or basalt came from a Creswick quarry and the great timbers for the beams, columns and the hardwood for the floors, most probably came from Andersons own saw mill at Barkstead. By April 1862 the Creswick Advertiser was able to report that “the....building is full of flour and wheat and the whole although only recently completed presents already a very business like and busy appearance. The large water wheel constructed at a cost of £1,500 works well”.2

In September 1862 the Advertiser announced that the brothers intended “to shortly erect machinery for the manufacture of oatmeal making an addition to their extensive mill by erecting a building 40 foot by 35 foot”.3

In addition the Andersons erected a bluestone oat drying kiln.

Around the date that the mill was erected John Anderson constructed a nine room family house and a carpenters shop and dwelling. During the mid 1860s a detached timber grain store was built behind the mill. The bluestone manager’s office was constructed in front of the mill in 1869. There were also two timber stables on the site by the mid 1870s.

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But despite its impressive beginnings the prosperity of Anderson’s mill was short lived. The railways by-passed Smeaton and the centre of wheat production gradually shifted north and west. The Anderson brothers did not keep up with new roller milling technology but sought to revive their failing fortunes by investing in the local Berry Deep Lead gold mines with disastrous results. When John died in 1895 his estate was heavily mortgaged and the firm of Anderson Bros. had to be wound up. The mill was transferred to David Anderson’s children, David and Lillias, whose inheritance had been lost when the company had declined.

Young David Anderson refitted the mill with the latest roller equipment in 1896 and it ran fairly successfully until his death in 1929. In spite of cut-throat competition from the more heavily capitalized Melbourne mills, David’s widow kept the mill going mainly on the strength of its oat products, pearl barley and split peas, flour milling then being only a small part of the operation. There was a minor burst of activity after World War Two producing rice, a rice substitute (which was really only polished wheat) but it was a loosening battle and David Anderson and Co went out of business in 1959. Anderson’s mill finally closed and much of the machinery was removed and sold for scrap, or for grain cleaning, to local farmers.

**Purchase**

In 1979 a report by the National Parks Service recommended purchase of the mill by the Government so that the site could be managed by the service.

The objectives of the purchase were to conserve the important historic structures, provide opportunities for education and interpretation of the site, grain milling and the agricultural history of the region. It was also envisaged that it would provide opportunities for recreation as an enjoyable place to visit and as a picnic destination.

Negotiations and planning continued for many years but it was the Bicentennial which eventually enabled the project to proceed with financial support from the Bicentennial Authority and the State Government. The mill was purchased from Lyn Anderson and Shirley Meulan in 1987 by the then Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands.

**Research**

Since that time research into the history of the Anderson family and the mill has been undertaken by various members of the Historic Environment VIII 3&4 (1991)
Places Branch of the Department of Conservation and Environment.

The sources for this research have been extensive. The various branches of the Anderson family hold rich collections of photographs, letters, documents and records. Melbourne University Archives hold a valuable collection of business records from the 1860s through to the 1950s, particularly the David Anderson and Co. letter books from 1896 to 1910.

One of the most rewarding avenues of research has been the contacts made with mill hands who were employed during 1920s, 30s and 40s. One man in particular, Mr Martin Richards of Blampied, who worked at the mill as a boy from 1934 to 1943 still retains vivid and accurate memories of virtually every detail of the mills operation and the various processes.

All this research, together with detailed study of the buildings themselves, has formed the basis for the conservation works which have been undertaken.

**Initial Works**

As a Bicentennial project it was necessary for the mill to be opened to the public during 1988. Working within the budget available the initial works which could be undertaken had to be limited to the most structurally urgent and those which were necessary to allow safe public access to at least the front verandah and ground floor. To enable the water wheel to be operational, conservation works to it, and the wrought iron flume, were given a high priority.

**Waterwheel and Flume**

Early in the project, with the aid of a National Estate Grant, the Historic Places Branch commissioned Dr Peter Milner to prepare a conservation analysis of the mills power system including the iron water wheel and flume, the turbine, the drive system within the mill and an investigation of the missing steam engine and boiler. Dr Milner’s research established the significance of these various elements. The water wheel was found to be significant because:

1. It was a product of the Hunt and Opie Victoria Foundry in Ballarat at its most active period.
2. It provides a clear demonstration of the manufacturing capability and levels of craftsmanship attained by this foundry no more than 5 years after it started and

3. The wooden patterns from which the major cast components were made have survived so that it is possible to illustrate the way in which the wheel was manufactured.

An assessment of the condition of the wheel revealed that its components were in various stages of corrosion. The heavy cast elements were sound with only superficial corrosion in places. The sheet wrought iron components, the sole plates and bucket sheets were however seriously corroded, with holes having formed in many places and only about one third of the buckets were able to hold water in the way they were designed to do.

After considerable research and on site testing Dr Milner recommended that the wheel be lightly sand blasted to remove loose rust and the residual paint and bituminous coatings. The objective of the light blasting only was to minimise the abrasion of the iron and leave some corrosion products in place to allow treatment with a rust passivating agent. A water based chemical based on tannin from the Mimosa Tree called Feronite was chosen for this purpose for its ability to penetrate into seams and joints, its low toxicity, and its repeatability. Holes in the buckets were successfully patched with pieces of woven fibreglass matting bedded in and sealed with a brushable reinforced bitumen base water proofing compound. The water wheel was then coated with a bitumen based paint as it had been originally.

The wrought iron flume was treated in a similar way although fortunately it contained very few holes.
The condition of the timber trestles supporting the flume was a serious concern. Apart from two trestles in good condition which had been protected by the buildings they all had to be replaced: a difficult operation involving jacking and propping the flume above to get the new trestles in place. New timber tie members across the top of the flume and matching the original rotted ties completed the structural integrity of the flume and allowed it to carry water again.

Early in the project it was expected that some form of recirculating pump system would be needed to supply the necessary quantity of water to turn the wheel. However, once the buckets were repaired and the bearings greased it was found that only a very small amount of water was required and this could be achieved by pumping water from Birch Creek, storing it in the flume and releasing it very slowly through the last sluice gate.

**Mill Verandah**

From the initial construction of the mill the front verandah has been an important architectural and functional structure. It was enclosed by a carefully devised system of removable timber panels and was used for receiving, weighing and despatching all goods. By 1987 however, the condition of most of the timber structure had deteriorated to the extent that much of it had to be replaced.

Prior to the verandah sub-structure being disturbed archaeologists from the Victoria Archaeological Survey dug several test pits along the verandah to determine whether or not this area was of archaeological interest. In particular the original drawings of the flour mill seemed to indicate that provision may have been made for the installation of an auxiliary steam engine in a pit at about the centre of the verandah. The test pits, however, were not particularly productive and dismantling of the verandah was able to proceed.

Where possible sections of the original timbers were retained and spliced onto new timbers. Two bays of original removeable panels and the existing sheets of corrugated iron wall cladding were able to be repaired and re-used.

**Ground Floor**

The mill ground floor suffered similar problems to the verandah floor with virtually every joist extensively damaged by rot and termites due to contact with the ground, excessive moisture and lack of ventilation. Most of the flooring was also damaged and, more seriously, most of the bases of the ground floor columns had begun to rot. The bases of the columns were able to be repaired (fortunately most were below floor level) and treated with a timber preservative. The ground level under the building was lowered and the sub floor ventilation increased by providing a series of new vents concealed under the verandah. The sub-floor structure and most of the flooring was replaced.

These works were completed by November 1988 and the mill was opened to the public by the then Minister for Conservation, Forests and Lands, Ms Kay Setches.

**Upper Floor Repairs**

Since the pressures of the Bicentennial opening have passed work at the mill has proceeded at a considerably slower rate with a smaller works crew of just two carpenters, who are now very experienced in the requirements of conservation work. One of the very important tasks now nearly complete is the repair of the upper floors; a difficult job which has required very careful attention to detail. Some areas of the floors had been damaged, by water leaking through the roof until it was repaired in the early 1980s.

The dilemma has been how to repair these areas and yet retain the value of the floors as a record of the past use of the building. The floors are a chequer board of holes, patches and past repairs all evidence of previous alterations to the machinery and processes. It was felt that this record was too valuable to be lost and this has led to an approach which aims to retain the significance of holes or patches.

Where boards have to be replaced the location of the various holes or patches are recorded and put back in the new boards. Very small holes are covered with a piece of galvanized sheet metal in the same way that the Andersons repaired small holes. Larger significant holes which perhaps reveal the previous location of a belt, an elevator or even a set of
scales are covered with a piece of galvanized steel mesh which protects visitors but allows them to look through and understand the original purpose of the hole. The mesh is an obviously modern piece of fabric and is not confused with the historic features of the building yet it is surprisingly unobtrusive, and it is able to be readily bent and cut so that the historic features on the floor are not damaged.

Other work on the upper floors has included the repair of the guard rails around the bag hoist openings. Some had been damaged by water and borers but where necessary new bases have now been carefully spliced onto the bottom of the posts so that as much as possible of the original fabric could be retained.

**Internal Wall Finishes**

As sections of the exterior of the buildings have been repaired they have been repainted where the timber and structure requires the protection of paint.

Internally however, no repainting or re-white washing has been done in order to maintain the building’s patina of age. This is particularly important in preserving graffiti and the historical record of how the buildings were used. On various walls and columns, particularly near scales, one can find penciled dates and tally’s of bags and weights of grain and mill products. It took some time in the early stages of the project to make sure that the carpenters understood that they should refrain from writing their measurements and drawing sketch details on the walls.

On the back of the oat kiln door it seems mill hands had time to carve their marks in between stoking the furnace. For graffiti it is equalled only by the back of the toilet door.

**Future Works**

Further structural problems within the buildings are currently being investigated by structural engineer David Beauchamp of Beauchamp Hamilton MacLeod. When the

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*Oat Mill, 4th Floor with mesh covered holes*  
*DC£*
details of these works are resolved it is hoped that the repairs can be carried out later this year. This will include the repair or replacement of a rotted 3 storey tall timber column up the side of the wheat cleaning building and the repair or reinforcement of rotted floor beam ends to some of the upper floors. Based on a museum floor loading the building as originally designed would only be stressed to about one third of its structural capacity so the present extent of deterioration in some of these members may not be serious.

Obtaining seasoned timber to undertake repairs to members of this size remains a problem. When the Anderson's built the mill they had the pick of the best trees in the Bullaroook forest; a luxury not available today. At the rate of 25 mm thickness per year new timber of this size (up to 300 mm x 300 mm) might take 12 years to season. Second hand timbers remain the best source of large seasoned sections but it is difficult to find saw millers prepared to risk damaging their saws on the hidden pieces of metal such timber might contain.

Fire and Egress
At present only the ground and first floors of the mill are available to visitors. As a five storey building with timber internal floors it clearly does not comply with the requirements of the Victorian Building Regulations regarding fire ratings. Also while the existing stairs may have been fine for mill hands on the night shift to run up and down with hurricane lamps they do not comply with current regulations for public access.

Before the public can safely be admitted to the upper floors the Department needs to obtain a variation from the building referees which will probably involve the construction of a safe means of escape (an external fire stair) and providing sprinklers, hydrants and hose reels throughout the building.

The provision of a fire protection system is expected to be complex and costly as at present it does not appear that the local water board can supply a sufficiently reliable water supply.

Future Management
The Historic Places Section will this year publish a history of the Anderson Family, complete a conservation analysis of the buildings and prepare a management plan for the site and adjoining Crown land.

Future management of the mill presents an exciting challenge. From the industrial history viewpoint the State owned mill is a heritage asset of the highest significance. Conservation of its fabric, setting and remaining machinery is the primary management objective, but it was acquired by the State so that the general public could have access to it and learn about its function.

This conservation and education role could be achieved by several different means; by managing the mill complex as a Smeaton campus of the metropolitan Museum of Victoria, by managing it as an independent museum or historic site, by managing it as an off-campus site of a regional museum such as Sovereign Hill or by managing it as a park unit of the Department of Conservation and Environment. Capital is still required to finish the restoration works and then it is anticipated that visitor entry fees, book sales and a small annual grant would cover operating costs.

The mill is open to the public every Sunday afternoon.

Footnotes
2 Creswick Advertiser 29 April 1862.
3 Creswick Advertiser 2 September 1862.