INTRODUCTION

The foundations of mines which operated last century and earlier this century (Figures 1 and 2) are a common sight on the goldfields of Victoria. Despite this proliferation, most people are ignorant of the significance of these relics. To dispel this ignorance, a representative site should be cleared, conserved and explained.

The North British Mines site at Maldon, in north central Victoria, has an appropriate set of foundations to be presented and interpreted. They are located near a town which attracts tourists interested in historical features and they are opposite Maldon's tourist mine, Carmen's Tunnel. Even in its uncleared state, the site was regularly visited. Most of the structures normally present on mining sites are there, as well as a few that are not so common. As mine foundations the relics are fairly complete and aesthetically they are superior to most. The history of the mine is important to Maldon and typical of the gold mining industry in Victoria, giving the site local and national significance.

Figure 1: The North British Mine, seen from the south west before the fire of 1891. The kils, which are still partially extant, can be seen in operation behind the centre chimney. The Independent Mine, in the background, was worked in conjunction with the North British. (Photo: Department of Minerals and Energy)
THE NORTH BRITISH MINE SITE

The mine was sold up in 1929 and all the equipment was removed from the site in the 1930s. The site would have been left in a disorganised and unsafe condition and so at some stage the Mines Department used a bulldozer to level much of it. Local people found the slate in the kilns excellent for pavement and fireplaces and being so conveniently located, parts of the kilns began to disappear. In recent years, ease of access to some of the structures has also hastened deterioration.

Peppercorn trees grew about the site and these have most destructive root systems which have destabilized some of the structures. During a recent bushfire the timber in the shaft and one of the battery sites caught fire, causing some further destabilization. The shaft, which has not been propery capped, is fenced with chain mesh. But for all this destruction, the site is comparatively well preserved and even has some of the timber engine bearers still in place (Figure 3).

The work program for the site has four aspects:
- historical research
- archaeological investigation
- site conservation
- presentation

HISTORICAL RESEARCH

Historical research is essential if the mine site is to be understood and reliably interpreted. The local newspaper, the Tarrengower Times began in 1856, two years after the discovery of Parkin's Reef, on which the mine was located, and two years before the formation of the Parkin's Reef Quartz Mining Company in 1864 which became the New British Mine. Each week it carried a report on local mines. New equipment used in the Maldon mines was often reported in detail in the Tarrengower Times and so the newspaper is the most useful source for the site's history. There was general community interest last century in new mechanical devices used in industry, not unlike the interest today in electronic equipment.
Mines Department reports also began at the same time and provide helpful information until 1890. Dickers Mining Record, the Argus, the Mount Alexander Times, reports on Royal Commissions into the Goldfields, company records after 1913 - when the mine became a public company - and family records have also helped. The most useful documentation was the 1929 Sale at Auction Catalogue which listed all equipment on the mine together with duties and dimensions. Unfortunately lease document information which would have included site plans does not seem to have survived.

Brief local histories and oral tradition have not been found very reliable. An exception to this is a local man, 'Motor' Leach, now in his eighties, who worked at the mine during its last six years. His mind is very clear about what was obviously a great adventure for a teenager and he has provided a substantial amount of information. During his time at the mine he knew the mine engineer, Bill Faulkner. Faulkner had worked on the mine since the 1880s and he passed on a number of stories about those times to Mr Leach.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION

The archaeological investigation proceeded in parallel with the historical investigation. This is not ideal but was necessary in the circumstances which saw a CEP scheme already well advanced.

The archaeological work was conducted under the following principles:-

Figure 3: View of the rear of the boiler house and the pump foundations in the background. This style of masonry is typical of foundations at the site. The oregon engine bearers remain fairly complete.
When completed there had to be a coherent set of relics to present. Time and resources limited the amount of excavation that could be completed; the last stage of the mine was most accessible and in itself forms a coherent whole, so it was the primary area for clearance.

Excavated areas had to be completed and left in a stable condition. With an unclear supervisory situation after completion of the excavations, it was important that no areas were left half finished and in a state where visitors to the site could cause damage.

These principles may seem to miss the point of site investigation. However, the excavators already understood how the site worked in general terms and the excavation work entailed mainly the clearance of debris to answer questions of detail and to make it suitable for tourists.

Workers included those employed on a CEP scheme, volunteers and one contractor with a backhoe. The CEP workers required close supervision. They were not interested in precise excavation but could be used on other more general work. A small backhoe was hired and they used it to clear debris from the boiler foundations and some other confined locations. Individuals in the crew could be left to complete work which they enjoyed, such as building stone walls and revetments, or timber barricades.

In response to advertisements in newsletters of the Victoria Archaeological Survey and the Archaeological and Anthropological Society of Victoria, a number of people volunteered to assist. Although living conditions were good and free, there was not an enthusiastic response. Those who came did all that could be asked of them although they were not really excited by industrial relics. Those with archaeological experience were all prehistorians and their patience was excellent for careful excavation work like the floor of the engineering workshop, but the bulk of the work required picks and shovels. What seems to be lacking in Victoria at present is a tradition of industrial archaeologists; people with the observation and recording skills of the prehistorian, but with interest in industrial relics and the ability to remove large volumes of material without destroying any evidence.

The greater portion of debris was moved by a Case 580B backhoe. The machine spent five days at the site. It was used for clearing debris down to the old land surface from in front of the kilns, removing debris from around some of the foundations, removing stumps, constructing drains and spreading crushed rock. The operator was highly skilled and interested in the work. He could position the bucket to within five centimetres without undue delay and manoeuvre the machine through constricted areas without causing any damage. While someone nearly always stood near the bucket to help with a shovel or trowel and to remove any artifacts exposed, in their absence the operator always climbed down to pick out any iron or timber relics. Debris was dumped in piles depending on where it came from for future sorting to obtain bricks and stones.

The backhoe was a success because it was used where vertical control was not very important; that is in those places where there was no more than one recognisable level which was compacted so that the operator knew when the bucket had reached it. The relics in the debris, predominantly made from iron, were virtually indestructible.

SITE CONSERVATION

A few measures are required to make the historic structures stable so that they will not collapse if climbed on or present a hazard to visitors. The most difficult operation was the removal of stumps. Excavation made some eucalypts unsafe and they had to be removed. Even those in close proximity to structures were removed by the backhoe without causing any structural movement.

The peppercorns were not so easily dealt with by the backhoe which resulted in widespread movement so that all those near structures had to be lopped off, poisoned and repoisoned. Once dead and brittle, they
may be pulled out, set alight or most probably cut away with an axe.

The brickwork in the kilns, boiler foundations (Figure 4) and flues contained very little mortar and so they are easily destroyed once the structure starts to break down. These structures require either a strong cap course to be placed over them or else to be fenced off. As the latter would destroy the character of the site, as well as being expensive and needing maintenance, the former action is being taken. Some walls have become unstable through the deterioration of mortar and these require rebuilding with original material.

Some of the foundations still have their Oregon engine bearers in place and these are to be treated with Creosote to preserve them a little longer. The land surface originally associated with the relics drained water away from the buildings but as the old ground level can not be totally exposed, drains have been established to complete the task of removing water from the site.

It is ultimately hoped that the shaft can be capped and the chain mesh fence removed. The cap will be in the form of a grate and the shaft timber will be rebuilt from bedrock to the surface so that it will be possible to look down the shaft. All visitors to the site ask about the location of the shaft. This is a correct approach to understanding the site as the entire mine revolves around the shaft and so it is important that this focal point remains obvious.

Figure 4: A view of the boiler foundations with the winder foundations behind. Crushed rock has been spread around the perimeter of the buildings.
Figure 5: Site plan, showing the main features now evident.
SITE PRESENTATION

The aim of the present work was to facilitate inspection of the site in a safe, convenient and meaningful way. To understand the operation of the site it is helpful to allow movement about the area as would have been the case when the mine worked. Crushed rock was placed over the site to lay the dust and present an even surface approximately at the level which it was during the mine's operation. The crushed rock is made from the local slate so it has a grey colour which is appropriate for the site. (Figure 4)

A set of steps was constructed by the kilns to allow access to the top of them and the rear of the main battery, from where a good view of the area is obtained. The location of the steps is approximately that of timber steps which once gave access to the rear of the battery and the tramway from the shaft brace.

The engineering workshop area could not reasonably be presented after its floor of beaten chipped quartz was excavated so the area will be backfilled with sand. The area around the compressor foundations was cleared and required stabilizing. Three sides were completed with batters of crushed rock compacted with a vibrator and the other side requires a revetment.

In order to explain the site (Figure 5), a pamphlet, a booklet and a book are being prepared. A static display consisting of relics found during the excavation, photographs and a model is being put together to attempt to give the site some life.

The foundations of slate and red brick certainly are impressive but they give no idea of what the site was like as an operating mine. When visiting the mine site recently Mr Leach, the worker at the mine in the 1920s, said he thought the large depression to the east which was once a dam, appeared to be the only real part of the mine left.

While there are major limitations in trying to convey the historic traditions of the mining industry by means of relics, sites and static displays, we can at least commemorate the achievements of our forebears. The relics which remain may arouse people's curiosity and prompt them to delve into the past and to discover some of Victoria's gold mining history. An understanding of the development of gold mining in Victoria is interesting in itself and provides us with an example of venture and hard work which is worthy of emulation.