THE CONFERENCE : A SUMMARY

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Ladies and gentlemen, even though we have no further speakers this conference has not concluded. We still have this afternoon's activity which includes a tour of Ballarat Cultural Institutions and our official drinks and farewell at Craig's Royal Hotel to follow this afternoon. In closing I would like to offer thanks to all of you and in particular to ICOMOS chairperson Jane Lennon and Geoff Lawler of the Heritage Branch of the Ministry for Planning and Environment who conceived the conference and to Wendy Jacobs who was its tireless and diligent organiser.

This conference has been jointly sponsored by Australia ICOMOS and the Historic Buildings Council as a major activity to mark (if not exactly celebrate) the B-centennial year. Now that it is drawing to close we may reflect on what we have seen and heard. Over the course of five days we have traversed the central goldfields region of Victoria taking in large regional centres and small country towns, historic landscapes and mining relics and sites. Our speakers have come from all over and represented a wide variety of disciplinary backgrounds. Our travelling band has included academicians and professional conservation consultants, educationalists and officials of government. We have also heard from community representatives. Architects and architectural historians, social historians, mining historians and archaeologists and conservation planners have all been especially well presented. This activity has taken place in situ amid the significant environments of the central goldfields region of Victoria.

Not all discussion has been directly concerned with this part of the world but it has helped to focus many issues which are very pertinent to it - questions affecting the heritage of mining, for example. Our venues - places such as Bendigo, Maldon, Talbot, Clunes, Creswick and Ballarat - have contributed much to the conference. Their role has not just been to provide an exotic background for us visiting “experts” but to encourage a dialogue about the heritage of the region, a dialogue which we may expect will draw upon the local knowledge, professional skills and comparative awareness.

I think it is appropriate for me to say that, quite apart from whatever benefits we visitors may have derived, this conference has mainly been for the people of the central goldfields region of Victoria. It is important that local people do, from time to time, see that the rest of the world actually cares about the heritage of a region such as this. After all, the responsibility for actually caring for these aspects of our heritage does not fall on us “blow-ins” but on the people who live and work here, and who own property here, these people for whom our “heritage” is the stuff of their daily lives.

I think that I speak for all of us when I state that we consider that these things we have seen and spoken about are important for all Australians. As a consequence, we are all in debt to those people who have that burden of the stewardship which is entailed in living and working amidst important evidence of the past. We should certainly recognise the responsibilities of that stewardship, applaud achievement in this area, and see what we can do to assist.

These concerns have been expressed in different ways by the speakers. The Chairperson of the Historic Buildings Council, Ms Roz Hansen, and the Chairperson of Australia ICOMOS, Ms Jan Lennon, welcomed us and the conference was officially opened by the Minister for Planning and Environment, Tom Roper. The Minister outlined the various programs operating under the auspices of the Ministry for Planning and Environment for the benefit of the region and its heritage. He also pointed out the part that is left to be played by the people and the local authorities of the region. Importantly, he stressed that following the passage of the Planning and Environment Act, 1987 it is now incumbent upon every planning and responsible authority to take note that conservation is part of normal and orderly planning in Victoria and that while the State Government will continue to support, guide and co-ordinate heritage conservation initiatives across the State it is now more important than ever that local government picks up its share of responsibility for the recognition, protection and management of Victoria's heritage.

Professor Weston Bate placed the history of the region in context, claiming it as one of the world's great cultural areas. He stressed its unique role in Australian history, explaining how the discovery and exploitation of gold led to hitherto unprecedented inland development, and the extensive transplantation of nineteenth century urban culture to this part of the world. It was this peopling of the inland which distinguished Victoria from the other colonies in the nineteenth century and which distinguishes us still. Up until the twentieth century Bendigo and Ballarat were the only inland cities of any consequence in Australia.

Gold was the spark which ignited all this but we should not allow our understanding of the region to be reduced to an appreciation only of gold mining. Weston Bate encourage us to consider the marriage of natural resources - the fertile soils, the rich forests - with human resources and ingenuity. It was this which provided for the creation of something unique in Australia's experience.

It is not my intention here to provide a resume of each speaker's address but rather to reflect on some key issues raised, we are fortunate to have had with us these past few days so many knowledgeable people. Many of
these are ICOMOS members and professionally involved in interpreting and conserving historic environments and artefacts.

I particularly want to refer to the talks given by Dr Peter Milner and Dr Peter Bell on mining sites. From very different, but both profoundly understood, perspectives they offered us remarkable insights into Australia's experience of mining sites and relics. Peter Milner spoke eloquently of the difficulties involved in identifying sites, especially when in many cases a good deal of the original workings will have been removed. He spoke of the need for greater understanding of the technology and elements of so-called historic mining sites and the extreme fragility of many of them.

We may say "so-called" because in many cases we simply don't know enough about them to be able to ascertain their significance. Mining sites probably can be arranged into similar sorts of typologies such as those we associate with, say, buildings but comparatively few people are aware of what those typologies are. There is a need for greater public understanding in this area. Then there is the often extreme fragility of these sites. It may be that we will not be able to conserve too many of these and have them accessible at the same time.

With the aid of two slide projectors Peter Bell took us on a Cook's Tour of mining sites across the nation which helped us to place those of the central goldfields of Victoria in perspective. The contrast was illuminating. If Peter's talk pointed, by implication, to the intensity and the richness of the mining heritage of the region it also suggested that here was an area where time, revegetation and subsequent human activity in the central goldfields have mellowed and recaptured mining landscapes, giving them an aesthetic gloss they never possessed in their heyday. The more recent mining sites of South Australia, Western Australia, Queensland and the Northern Territory shown by Peter largely lacked those mellowed qualities.

Following Peter Milner, Peter Bell also stressed the fragmentary nature of the material evidence of mining sites and, again, their fragility, maintaining that our culturally significant mining sites were now under greater threat than ever before. He identified four main agents of threat: that posed by a renewal of mining, natural decay, vandalism and local authorities "rehabilitating" or making a feature of particular site.

Peter Bell also asked a number of pertinent questions. For example, what attitude should we take towards the conservation of sites of recent origin such as those concerned with uranium mining in the Northern Territory. Or, what about those which do not conform to modern ecological standards - that is, where the surrounding landscape has been poisoned by mining. Contemporary thinking tends to insist on the ecological rehabilitation of the site but this may also lead to the destruction of its heritage value. Which should prevail - the heritage or the ecological value?

The conference traversed many paths. Without removing his National Trust Chairman's hat Simon Molesworth donned his lawyer's garb to offer us some learned thoughts on the role of heritage legislation. Clearly, legislative powers do exist to protect mining heritage. Why then, he asked, are these mechanisms not more effective? Perhaps conservationists need to take a closer look at the legal opportunities offered them by the various acts and agencies, and to draw attention to anomalies.

George White of Western Mining spoke to us about the continuing prospects for mining in the area. He questioned whether, in fact, it could be said that a modern mining boom was underway, drawing attention to a great deal of peripheral activity in the field. In particular, he distinguished mainstream mining activity from the essentially speculative activity of "real estate" trading on rights to peg claims of land of often doubtful gold-yielding capacity. These people derive their existence from Victorian mining legislation with ancient origins which originally sought to guarantee the rights of the smaller miners against those of large owners of agricultural property. In the modern era the tables have been turned and it is the property owners who are being bailed up. Conflict between the mining industry and the local community (especially farmers) has been the result with no real economic profit to the community at large. Mr White indicated that these people were not a part of real mining and that it would be better of they disappeared from the scene.

Alison Blake of Footscray Institute expressed surprise that no conservation strategy had been developed for the whole area, and observed that little work had been undertaken on the region as a whole. She also reflected on what heritage values and initiatives have meant for social relations in the region, suggesting that some public questioning may be in order. All too often, she suggested, heritage is being used to assert social standing and to exclude, with the "gentrification" of small towns and the attendant predatory inroads made by outsiders providing a case in point. In this respect the impact of heritage awareness may not have been entirely beneficial. She observed a tendency for heritage to offer a benefit for the few, often only the rich. She expressed concern also about the presentation of a commodified heritage in tourist imagery and in such programs as streetscape modification. Heritage, she suggested, may be a two-edged sword for the communities of the central goldfields.

Neville Burkett of the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Services spoke about Hill End, the famous "ghost" gold town of New South Wales which is also the subject of the extraordinary collection of documentary photographs known as the Holtermann Collection. Hill End has been "conserved" and presented to the world with the aid of this extensive documentary record. One could not help thinking whether the exercise would have been possible otherwise. But Hill End also offered a contrast to the Victorian ex-
experience. It pointed to the more extensive scale of gold mining inspired urban development in Victoria, and its more enduring character. Victoria's gold towns are not "ghost towns" on the Hill End model but places where communities have survived with their historic environments. And so it is that many of the problems of conservation in Victoria are also community problems.

Dr. Mike Pearson of the Heritage Commission offered some sobering thoughts on the prospects of the area for world heritage listing. He conceded that an area existed which could be defined as having certain important cultural characteristics but argued that the assessment of its elements and the overall significance of the region in international terms was still unclear. What is distinctive about the region, he asked, that is not also expressed elsewhere? A great deal of comparative work would need to be done before a successful case could be mounted. In any case, it seems unlikely that the Federal Government would be inclined to mount a case for world heritage listing which would result in it taking a more direct involvement in the conservation of the heritage of the region unless severely provoked to do so. While we should not be discouraged it is probable that the responsibility for meaningful conservation planning initiatives in the region will remain with State and local authorities.

Ms Jane Lennon, the Manager of the Historic Places Section of the Victorian Ministry for Conservation, Forests and Lands, spoke about the sequence of different occupations of the lands of the central goldfields region. These range from Aboriginal occupation through to mining activity and the extensive agricultural history of the region. All of these have left their mark. She cautioned us against adopting explanations of historical significance that are either too simplistic or narrowly framed as a basis for assessing the heritage of the region and pointed to the need for more detailed and rigorously conducted studies.

In a stimulating talk educationist and historian Jan Penny spoke about how the new VCE Australian Studies course which is to be introduced into Victorian Schools in 1990 will revolutionise the ways in which students appreciate and learn about the world around them. It is planned that as much as 40% of learning may take place outside classrooms with an active orientation to historic environments and workplaces. Are we geared up to face this explosion of interest?

Mr Bernie Ebbs of the Victorian Tourism Commission and I both spoke about that two-edged sword, tourism, and its prospects for both the region and the cultural environment. Bernie Ebbs spoke about the process undertaken by the Victorian Tourism Commission in developing a program of tourism activity for the central goldfields region. His talk also highlighted, inadvertently perhaps, the threat to heritage of the region posed by government departments intent on encouraging commercial and leisure oriented activity. An example of this being the activity of "fossicking" which the Victorian Tourism Commission has publicly suggested as one of the potential attractions of the region. Is this invitation to fossick an invitation to vandalism, the audience asked?

On the Monday we left Bendigo, hitting the trail for Maldon where Mr Nigel Lewis spoke of his experiences over many years as an architectural adviser and the difficulties involved in sympathetically balancing human needs and the conservation cause in the case of individual applications. He also indicated some of the problems posed for the heritage architect when people seek to embellish or add to the "historic" character of a place like Maldon. At what point does such activity begin to impair historic identity. And what of the plans to faithfully recreate Maldon's bank, once the centrepiece of the main street but demolished within recent memory to make way for a service station?

The Maldon day saw a number of problems and issues surface. Interestingly, Maldon is often seen as perhaps the conservation movement's great triumph. Heritage controls have been in place here longer than anywhere else. We may well argue that they have been successful here to the point of actually saving the town in the modern era. Would Maldon exist at all if conservationists had not taken it up as a cause in the 1960s?

But today Maldon is a town divided. Among its residents you will find some of the staunchest defenders of the conservation interest to be found anywhere but it seems that many are ambivalent at best about both the extent and quality of heritage planning controls on citizens. Cr. Arch Martin indicated this in a discursive and at times angry address. Does the conservation movement have the right to impose its will on the people of Maldon, he asked?

Many of the issues which bedevil contemporary Maldon are not clear cut. Cr. Martin has himself acted strongly in the conservationist interest. Followers of the Maldon scene will never forget Cr. Martin's dramatic act of a few years back when he nailed his arm to the door of the Maldon Hospital in protest against the proposed painting over of its historic honour rolls.

The irony, as Dr Miles Lewis pointed out in a witty response, is that Maldon having been "saved" by the conservation movement in the sixties and seventies then attracted a new type of resident (Councillor Martin among them) who purchased property and set up antique and craft stores. They were themselves newcomers attracted to Maldon because of its newly established heritage status. Commercial interests which are seeking to capitalise on, even to embellish, that heritage status may be a continuing threat to Maldon.

As if that were not enough, there are natural hazards as well. Maldon is surrounded on three sides by native forest and national park. A few years ago it experienced the trauma of bushfire. But Maldon has other problems as well. Among the most contentious has been a revival of gold mining. A large central processing plant working gold-bearing material from territory far afield as well as of local origin has been established just outside
Maldon at Porcupine Flat. This was undertaken only after the planning decision was contested by locals and conservationists. The decision by the Planning Appeals Board to allow this plant to go ahead at Porcupine Flat has been interpreted as a slap in the face for those residents of Maldon and surrounding districts committed to the conservationist cause. Others see the plant as a symbol of the revival of mining and industry in the district. There do not seem to be any middle ground views on the subject.

Now, as pressure for urban growth on Maldon's fringe intensifies, there is talk of the need for modern amenities, including underground sewerage. Some people, including Mr Martin, have posed the threat of contagious diseases in Maldon if this is not forthcoming. Such debates have nineteenth century character befitting the town but the real argument may not be about sewage and health but about continued urban growth. Maldon Council has applied to the State Government to meet the costs of this installation but the usual practice is for local communities to pay for such amenities themselves. Of course, if sewage is brought in at local expense it is likely that the town will have to grow to pay for it. Should the State Government offer the property owners of the district a benefit which may not be desirable or necessary? The issue is a double edged sword and we may well ask the old question: who benefits?

Maldon has divided views on the sewerage question. Indeed, there is very little that Maldon people do seem to agree upon. The town has two newspapers which oppose each other on virtually everything. If that were not enough the local parliamentary seat is one of the most marginal in the states of Victoria where the Government only holds office by a slender majority and does not control the upper house. We may also ask whether Maldon's local government is sufficiently representative or adequate to solving the town's problems. It may be that the answer to Maldon's problems will be found in a re-engagement by conservationists in the issues which challenge the town and a finding of altogether new, technically innovative, solutions to its infrastructure problems.

It is interesting, however, that the example of Maldon has inspired others, and also served as a caution to them. What is now long in the tooth at Maldon other communities are just embracing and in each instance the cry is the same: "we don't want another Maldon!" The fact is that they do want another Maldon. They do want proper conservation planning and controls but they don't want the squabbles and public disagreements. There is evidence to suggest that some of the other communities of the central goldfields have learned from the Maldon experience and are well on the way to avoiding some of the pitfalls.

Both at Maldon and Creswick we were made aware of the extensive and long-standing involvement in the region of the Victorian Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands. At Maldon Mr Max Kitchell, the regional manager of the department who is himself a resident of that town, spoke about the town's management plan. At Creswick we stayed at the historic School of Forestry which is managed by the Department which has extensive responsibilities for national parks but also for government controlled and owned historic sites.

We travelled to Creswick through the wonderful landscape of the Berry Deep Leads, where the remnants of some of the greatest mines this country has ever seen can be found in sequence amidst (at that time of the year) a green landscape. These follow the great underground river beds whence fortunes of gold were so extensively mined down huge shafts by our forebears with great steam engine driven crushers and pumping and winding gear. The remains of these mines today mainly include dumps of different types of material - slurry, crushed rock, pebbles and gravel - and massive red brick foundation structures which once supported engines and stamping batteries. They are silent now but no less moving.

It is no small irony that those very elements of the landscape which so captured our attention also recently divided the Creswick community for and against the conservationist cause. For years the dumps of the deep leads have themselves been progressively "mined" as sources of metal, reworked or speculated against for the small quantities of gold which may one day yet be obtained by ultra sophisticated modern mining methods. The former Victorian Minister for Planning and Environment, Mr Jim Kennan, resolved the question of conservation of these dumps with one stroke of his pen, bringing into force an interim development order. It is fair to say that this decision sent a shock wave through the small Creswick community. Only now, after this somewhat rude awakening, is Creswick beginning to come to terms with the general question of conservation with a community-directed heritage conservation study funded through the Victorian National Estate Program.

At Creswick Dr Charles Fahey, formerly of the Historic Places Branch of the Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands spoke on the history of gold mining in Victoria, and especially in the Creswick area. We were honoured to have been taken along the wonderful landscape of the Berry deep leads by Mr Jack Sewell, a local resident and historian with a deep and profound knowledge of the history of the area. Mr Sewell, together with the late Dr Semens of the School of Forestry, was a founder of the Creswick Historical Museum and a Shire Councillor of 24 years standing. Mr Sewell lost his seat on the council over the mining dumps issue; he remains a highly respected citizen of Creswick but we should perhaps remember that such stands require a certain amount of courage in small communities.

At the twin small towns of Clunes and Talbot we were feted. Few will forget the splendid country lunch at the Talbot Town Hall. These small towns which form the one municipality have just completed a conservation study and are only now beginning the process of implementing heritage controls. Heritage consultant
Richard Aitken served as our guide through both towns. If Maldon and Creswick spoke to us in terms of ambivalence about the conservationist cause then at Talbot and Clunes the message was enthusiastic.

Both towns tell us something very different about the gold experience. Although they were the scene of some of the earliest of the State's gold discoveries, and burgeoned as a consequence, these towns do not grow. They have remained small towns without becoming ghost towns. Talbot, in particular, is the quintessential small town (it is the only Victorian country town where a dog can sleep peacefully on the middle of the main road on an summer's day). Clunes is important, as Richard Aitken pointed out, for its association with the Port Phillip Mining Company, one of the earliest to operate successfully in Victoria and one of the few foreign owned. Not the least interesting aspect of Clunes is the degree to which its mines are documented in a series of extraordinary models held by the Museum of Victoria, which Richard Aitken is currently researching.

And so we arrived at Ballarat, perhaps the cultural heartland of the Victorian gold era, where we received a warm welcome from the Mayor, Wanda Chapman. Our final session took place in the remarkable Trades Hall building located on the edge of the famous volcanic escarpment which separates East and West Ballarat, and overlooks the same Yarrowee Creek that caused such excitement in 1854. Here we heard from Historian Mr Paul Fox who by detailed reference to Ballarat's buildings amongst other things was able to present a sense of the ideas that moved Ballarat and its citizens last century. Tourism rode again with consultant Mr Chris Wood spreading the word on cultural tourism. He outlined the need for the region to develop and to present a sophisticated image of itself to the world along similar lines to those of other great destinations, and a message that will attract the sort of tourists the region needs and can handle. The models for this already exist but they are not currently being followed in their view.

The next speaker was Mr Peter Hiscock, the Director of Sovereign Hill as fate had recently decreed the new chairman of the Victorian Tourism Commission. Suddenly the television cameras and the press appeared. Without exactly offering to personally send a new broom through the VTC Peter indicated his willingness to listen to new ideas and approaches. Perhaps the long awaited tourism boom really is like the mining boom with a great many people making a lot of fuss about something that hasn't yet happened.

Something in the way of a new perspective was offered by heritage consultant Christine Johnson when she explored some of the possibilities inherent in popular culture and offered a challenge to the conservation movement to move beyond some of its more conventional canons of significance.

What then did the Central Goldfields Conference actually achieve? We may all have different views on that but let me suggest that it sought to do the following things:

It sought to reaffirm what most of us already knew, that is that the central goldfields region of Victoria is a place of cultural importance to the nation.

It brought to high realisation that given that there is very little likelihood that the region will be protected by a grand national initiative such as world heritage listing the responsibility for conservation in the region is going to remain with the local authorities of the region with some support deriving from the State Government.

We were also made aware of three significant dangers to the cultural heritage of the region. These include, first, the ill-conceived and directed resumption of mining, second, similarly ill-conceived and directed tourism initiatives, and - last but not least - an over zealous approach to the heritage of the region. By over-stating and fabricating the region's heritage we may trivialize and destroy its genuine claims in this area. Roads other than those to hell may also be paved with good intentions.

The conference also identified some real opportunities. We were made aware of three significant dangers to the cultural heritage of the region. These include, first, the ill-conceived and directed resumption of mining, second, similarly ill-conceived and directed tourism initiatives, and - last but not least - an over zealous approach to the heritage of the region. By over-stating and fabricating the region's heritage we may trivialize and destroy its genuine claims in this area. Roads other than those to hell may also be paved with good intentions.

Tourism is a two-edged sword. Whilst it may be a threat we should also understand that it offers opportunities for the region and for the better interpretation and conservation of its heritage. What we must insist on is a tourism that is intellectually credible and culturally and environmentally sensitive. Cultural tourism would seem to offer some promise in this respect.

We should also be aware of the educational potential of the heritage of the region which has scarcely been tapped but, as with tourism, may be by new initiatives. As conservationists and professionals in the field we must be actively involved in these developments.