The Yarra Track: an exploration of post-contact cultural sites along an early Victorian goldfields route

Mountain gold

The year 1851 was momentous for the residents of the Port Phillip District. On 6 February, the district was swept by bushfire from the Murray to the sea. On 1 July, writs were issued for the first elections in the new Colony of Victoria. Only days later, gold was discovered at Clunes. By the end of the year, almost the whole of Victoria was mad with goldfever as parties of men ‘rushed’ to the latest discovery with hopes of a quick path to riches. By the end of the decade, the population of the new colony had grown from less than one hundred thousand to more than half a million.

As more and more of the colony proved to be auriferous, even the most remote of the mountain forests was combed for the precious yellow metal. From 1854, prospectors began to push their way south through the mountains from Jamieson via the Big River and the Goulburn River. Enchos Point, Gaffneys Creek and Raspberry Creek joined the list of places where gold could be won. In 1861, rich strikes were made at Woods Point. At the very time these latest discoveries were being made, the golden horse on which Victoria had ridden to prosperity showed signs of stumbling. Across the colony, gold yields were steadily declining and wages tumbled after them. The number of insolvencies rose steadily. The rush of immigration during the mid-1850s meant thousands were now out of work at a time when the government was under a heavy financial strain due to lavish expenditure on the new railway to Bendigo, and on a rash of new public buildings and works.

The Woods Point goldfield was one of the few rays of hope in a bleak financial landscape. The promise of Morning Star hill, Gooleys Creek, Standers Creek and Matlock drew large numbers of miners to the narrow valleys in the headwaters of the Goulburn Valley. Additional discoveries on the Black River and over the Great Dividing Range, in the Jordan Valley and at Donnellys Creek, increased the population until thousands were now out of work at a time when the government was under a heavy financial strain due to lavish expenditure on the new railway to Bendigo, and on a rash of new public buildings and works.

The Yarra Track

At first, the main supply route for the newly-discovered Woods Point and Jordan goldfields followed the prospectors’ route south from Jamieson. To reach the goldfields from Melbourne, the traveller took a coach north along the Sydney road as far as Longwood before turning east to Merton, and beyond Merton, Mansfield. Here the route turned south, and after reaching Jamieson, led into narrow valleys surrounded by tall ranges. Trains of pack-horses had to surmount steep spurs, and a bag of flour could be worth £11 by the time it reached Woods Point, 193 miles from Melbourne.

Food was not the only problem. The richest gold was locked in quartz veins underground and heavy machinery was required to reach and extract it. Even when this machinery was specially made in small pieces for assembly at the mine site, the cost of getting it to Woods Point was such that when it arrived it could have cost its own weight in gold. In the quest to discover a shorter route to the goldfields and reduce the
costs of supplies and machinery, many bushmen ventured into the forest in 1862 in the hope of a reward for their efforts.

George Rieck’s track was chosen as the best and the term ‘Yarra Track’ quickly became associated with his general route, although some early maps also show it as ‘The Great Mountain Road’. In gratitude, the Victorian Parliament voted the sum of £500 as a reward to the various explorers who discovered practical routes and a board was appointed to oversee its distribution. The first contracts for clearing were let in December 1863. The track had already been surveyed by assistant road engineer Farrell and marked for the clearing gangs to follow. A local bushman, William Robley, was engaged to find a new route bypassing the two worst features of Rieck’s Track, a steep climb over Mt Strickland and an unnecessary descent into the Big River Valley.

During 1864, the Victorian Government committed funds to the Yarra Track rivalling the amount of money being spent on the Sydney road, hitherto the most important road in the colony. In December 1864, when road engineer Clement Wilks submitted his progress report to Parliament, funds for clearing work along the track were exhausted and work had temporarily ceased. When funds again became available, the route would be completed. The final route selected for the Yarra Track was a little more than 100 miles long and at last gave promise of sending machinery to Woods Point by means of a wheeled vehicle and at a reasonable cost.

On the morning of Tuesday 1 November 1864, the isolated township of Woods Point expressed great excitement when they received word that a coach was in nearby Matlock, having struggled in over the partially finished Yarra Track. Later that evening the coach appeared in Woods Point, the culmination of a difficult six-day journey. It was the first wheeled vehicle to enter the town from the outside world. By this time, quite a crowd had assembled to welcome the coach and wild scenes ensued. Pistols were discharged, a band of musicians played *See the Conquering Hero Comes*, and innumerable ‘bumpers’ of champagne were drunk to the health of driver Gillies. As the coach set out on the return journey the next morning an impromptu ceremony was held to mark the occasion. Woods Point would no longer be so isolated from the rest of the world — it was hoped that by the time the road was completed, the town would

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**Figure 1** Historic sites associated with the Yarra Track.
only be two days' travel from Melbourne.¹

Over the next few years, Woods Point became a roaring boom town where fabulously rich mines rewarded their investors with hefty dividends and wealthy miners played skittles with full bottles of champagne. Such wealth soon attracted the attention of the less scrupulous. By 1867 the bubble had burst as wild speculation and ruthless dividend-stripping left mines without the capital to continue the search for new bodies of ore. Only one mine, the Morning Star, still attracted sufficient attention to keep the town alive. Over the next century, Woods Point largely depended on the mine for its income and the Yarra Track for communication with the outside world.

But there was another kind of gold in the mountains, largely ignored by the miners except where it could help to produce the yellow metal. Timber, the ‘green gold’ of the surrounding forests, was an undeveloped resource. It would stay that way until transport technology advanced to the point where the timber could be moved to a market at a reasonable price. Railways promised the most effective transport, but the rugged terrain dictated a high initial cost and a series of water catchments blocked potential routes. These factors combined to ensure that no railways were ever built through these forests. The wooden rails of the next best thing, the bush tramway, were not enough by themselves to overcome the isolation of the mountain forests. Roads held the key to the future of the timber industry along the Yarra Track. A combination of tramway and road transport would eventually enable the first sawmills to get timber to Melbourne. In 1864, the Yarra Track was a minor miracle for the gold miner. In the century that followed, it became of increasing importance to the sawmiller as the green gold of the mountain forests replaced the yellow gold of the mines as a key economic resource in Victoria.

Cultural values along the Yarra Track

Today, the Yarra Track is an all-weather forest road stretching from Healesville via Marysville to Woods Point. Its importance as a historic route of human movement with a rich assemblage of cultural sites (mostly archaeological) is recognised by a nomination to the Register of the National Estate.¹ The Yarra Track provides some of the easiest access to historic sites in the mountain forests north-east of Melbourne.¹⁰ The future of most historic sites along the track seems relatively secure. To the south of the present road, most of the sites are in proclaimed water catchment forming the Yarra Ranges National Park and should remain undisturbed. To the north, the land is almost all State Forest. Sites on this land are potentially threatened from logging and widening logging access tracks. However, good management should see most of the remaining sites survive.

Only short sections of the original 1864 track are undisturbed, but the present road is still an important and impressive link through the mountain forests. The abutments of a bridge built over the Acheron River in 1871,¹¹ and two stone culverts incorporated into the track in 1870 near Cumberland Creek,¹² survive as historically and technically important examples of the road maker’s art. Two of the sites are recognised with National Trust classifications.

At its peak, the Yarra Track supported more than 20 shanties strung out along the road. Most of these existed in the 1860s, many of them situated in natural clearings close to a source of water and fodder. The least disturbed of these sites is Köehler and Shultz’s Mount Arnold Restaurant (see figure 2). Nearby is one of the few intact sections of the
1864 Yarra Track, meandering between the site of Henry Petty's shanty on Bellim Creek and the Mount Arnold Restaurant. Heavily overgrown, the track is visible as a slight depression traversing the side of a gently sloping ridge. The track owes its survival to a deviation in 1870 and its subsequent incorporation into the O'Shanassy water-supply catchment in 1910 (see figure 3). Perhaps the most dramatically isolated of the shanty sites is Fehring's clearing. Purchased as freehold by Johannes Fehring in...
1866, it passed to his sister Anna on his death in 1894. Anna married Polish-born sailor John Baker [or Becker] in 1902, and the couple continued to occupy the clearing until 1919 when the area was swept by bushfire. In 1922, the Forests Commission purchased the freehold land, erected a patrol hut and leased part of the land to the Country Roads Board for a road-construction camp. During the 1939 bushfires, workers from the nearby Richards & Sons’ sawmill used the clearing for refuge. After the fires the Country Roads Board resumed its occupation. Today, the only signs of a century of occupation of this isolated clearing are a few old fruit trees behind the site of the shanty, but a knowledge of its history helps bring the ghosts of the Yarra Track to life.

For more than a century, cattlemen used the Yarra Track as a route to move stock to-and-from rough grazing in the forests along the Great Dividing Range. This activity has left little visible mark because the huts and yards erected by the cattlemen were prone to natural decay and bushfire. However, at The Springs, near the eastern end of the Yarra Track, a large patch of cleared freehold is a reminder of strategic land selection as part of forest grazing early in the 20th century. Successfully operating a grazing lease in what miner and grazier Alexander Smith of Matlock described as ‘a wild waste of heavy timber’ depended heavily on having a well-watered mustering area from which the men in charge of the stock could supervise grazing operations during the summer. If such an area could be converted to freehold, it distinctly favoured the holder of the surrounding forest grazing lease while making the lease almost useless to anyone else. The area, just more than 300 acres, was first selected by Henry Siemsen in 1877, but abandoned in 1879. The block was subsequently selected by Joseph Coombs, but forfeited in 1898 after Coomb’s health failed and he was unable to keep up the payments. Alexander Smith took up the land in 1899 and through sheer perseverance built on the work of his predecessors until he was issued a crown grant of the land in October 1908. Within his fenced area, Smith controlled most of the springs

Figure 4 Teamsters on the Yarra Track at Maytown between Healesville and the Black Spur, some time in the 1880s. Small settlements like these were wiped out when the Watts catchment was resumed for water supply purposes. (Photo: J. W. Lindt, Peter Evans collection)
which gave the location its name and made the block strategically important as far as the surrounding grazing leases were concerned. 14

By far the richest network of cultural sites along the Yarra Track has been left by the timber industry. Without a railway these forests were largely untouched, save for the splitters' axe and the graziers' match, until motor transport became available. The first Yarra Track sawmill at Woods Point in 1864 was followed by a second at Healesville in 1877. 15 A few sawmills were established on the northern side of the Black Spur between 1902 and 1920, but were defeated by the Melbourne & Metropolitan Board of Works' refusal to allow either a line of rails or an improved road to traverse the Watts catchment. Only after a section of the road was diverted in 1937 did the timber industry manage to become firmly re-established on the northern side of the catchment. Marysville became a thriving timber town reliant on road transport to take timber south over the Yarra Track to the railhead at Healesville. 16

Marysville continues to rely on the sometimes conflicting tourism and timber industries. The two industries continue to survive, with tourism celebrating the history of the timber industry in a re-created timber tramway bridge at Michaeldene, and a display of old logging technology in a park. Careful coupe planning in the Wilks Creek Valley has spared many of the relics from the Marysville Timber & Seasoning Company (1930-1967) tramway and logging operations. The site of the company's No. 1 mill is now a stopping place on the Bicentennial National Trail and its sawmilling history is being interpreted. However, the site of the No. 2 mill has been obliterated by huge stacks of logs waiting for the sawmill or chipper. The tensions between timber and tourism, and between production and conservation, continue to simmer much as they have for a century. Caught between these opposing forces is a growing public awareness that the forests have cultural as well as natural values.

Figure 5 The remains of the sawmill which replaced Fitzpatrick's mill near Matlock. Built on the foundations of the burnt mill, the new building almost replicated the old and used the same but refurbished power plant. This place has been nominated for the Register of the National Estate as the site of the most number of deaths in a Victorian bushfire. (Photo: Peter Evans)
Further east near Matlock is evidence of the last phase of forest-based sawmilling. The first sawmills were established here just before the catastrophic 1939 bushfires. These fires were one of the greatest catalysts for policy change in the management of Victoria’s forests — rules under which the mountain sawmills operated were radically re-written. The changes included legislative protection for sawmill workers against the threat of bushfire. Among the cluster of abandoned sawmill sites near Matlock is the pleasant, silent clearing where 15 men and eight horses died horribly at Fitzpatrick’s mill in the inferno of Black Friday, 13 January 1939. The weathered timber foundations of the replacement mill provide allegorical evidence of the site’s history (see figure 5). Single out for special mention in royal commissioner Stretton’s damming report on the part played by the fiery hand of man in the 1939 bushfires, this disaster was largely responsible for enshrining the concept of the fire refuge dugout in law. Not far from Fitzpatrick’s mill site, and directly abutting the present route of the Yarra Track, is one of the very few maintained dugouts available for today’s forest traveller to use.\(^ {17}\)

If the wide range of cultural values along the Yarra Track could be said to come together in a single concentrated area, it is at Cumberland, east of Marysville. Ironically, the Cumberland Scenic Reserve is officially celebrated for its natural beauty. However, hidden beneath the lush foliage is also a rich record of its human history. Nearby are the remains of the Mount Arnold Restaurant and the 1864 Yarra Track — perhaps the only surviving mark made on the Australian continent in answer to a gold rush in New Zealand. Not far away a logging winch and boiler, abandoned by the Steavenson Sawmilling Company in the 1940s, rusts quietly in the bush (see figure 6). The ruins of the Cambarville sawmill and the remaining mill houses provide some understanding of what was once a thriving forest community. However, the giant tree stumps fringing the mill clearing contribute most to the realisation of the magnificent but senescing forest that preceded European occupation. From vantage points along the walking track, following an old mining race above the Armstrong Creek Valley, the
end notes

5 VPRS 1108, unit 13, pp. 65-67, 69, 97, 101-103.
6 VPP, Votes and Proceedings Legislative Assembly, session 1864, volume 1, paper A-20, pp. 391-393.
7 VPP, Votes and Proceedings Legislative Assembly, session 1864-1865, volume 2, paper C-7.
8 The Woods Point Mountaineer, 7 November 1864.
10 Griffiths, T., Secrets of the Forest - Discovering History in Melbourne’s Ash Range, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1992. Griffiths provides an excellent exploration of the themes in the forest history of this region.
11 VPRS 1108, unit 15 contract 71/1067.
12 VPRS 1108, unit 15 serials 69/118, 69/1257, 69/4677 unit 1 serials 69/1318 and 71-2/120.
14 Stretton L. E. B., Transcript of Evidence, Volumes 1, 2 and 3, in Royal Commission into Bushfires, 1939. (Copy held in the Department of Natural Resources and Environment Library, Melbourne.)
15 Supple, R., Parham, G., & Griffiths, T., Historic Sites in the Melbourne East Study Area, volume 2 of part 2, unpublished report to the Land Conservation Council, 1989. (Copy held by the Historic Places Section, Department of Natural Resources and Environment.)

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