
Bete Bolong Prisoner of War Camp

Location

South side of the Buchan - Orbost Rd BETE BOLONG, EAST GIPPSLAND SHIRE

Municipality

EAST GIPPSLAND SHIRE

Level of significance

-

Heritage Listing

Vic. War Heritage Inventory

Construction dates 1940,

Hermes Number 126517

Property Number

Physical Description 1

Located on south side of the Buchan - Orbost Rd, 3km south-south-east of Bete Bolong.

A site located in an area of intensively farmed land on the Snowy River Flats at Jarrahmond and Bete Belong, north of Orbost.

The site is located on elevated land with spectacular views over the Bete Bolong flats and across the Snowy River. The site consists of a number of features consisting of structural remains of buildings, building sites, garden features and an access track. They extend for around 170 metres along a SW-NE trending ridge; concrete features possibly associated with buildings also occur on the western slope of the ridge. Vegetation on the ridge is open woodland of black box and grey gum. There are numerous introduced plant species, including aloe vera, lilies and radishes. Deposits of alluvial gravel, largely quartz, occur on the higher slopes at the southern end of the ridge.

At a number of points along the ridge, linear and circular arrangements of quartz pebbles can be discerned. These are likely to be decorative edging for small garden plots and paths. Two distinct lines of eucalypt trees can be seen extending down through the spine of the ridge. These may flank a road or path which led through the centre of the camp towards the NE end of the ridge. Pebble edging is discernible at some points along this alignment.

The site contains the remains of fourteen distinct features. They are as follows: gravel extraction pits, a loading dock, two ablutions blocks, a septic tank, unidentified buildings remains, unidentified building footings, a brick mound, a garden, two areas of terracing, an earth ditch, an earth mound, and an access road.

Details of features are listed in the Heritage Victoria Register record.

Historical Australian Themes

Providing administrative structures and authorities - defence

Physical Conditions

Good, as a site that can be interpreted (1993).

Veterans Description for Public

The Bete Bolong Prisoner of War Camp was located on the south side of the Buchan - Orbost Rd. From November 1943 to November 1945, Italian prisoners of war were based at Bete Bolong, cultivating maize, peas, beans and other vegetables on local farms. Unlike other 'farming' prisoners of war, those at Bete Bolong did not live with the farming families, but at a Prisoner of War Control Centre on Crown land overlooking the Snowy River Flats. About fifty Italian prisoners lived at the centre, along with an Australian Military Force staff of approximately seven people. The prisoners were driven to and from the farms each day. Three of them apparently simply swam across the river to work. They worked a six day week, with Sundays off.

Although they were provided with rations, both prisoners and staff maintained vegetable and flower gardens. They were also skilled at cooking 'anything' they could catch, and at making illegal grappa.

Very few of the Italians were experienced farm workers. Some of them used their skills to make things for the families they worked for; a cabinet-maker made furniture, a cobbler made shoes, etc. They interacted with the local community and, although they were not supposed to go within one kilometre of town, some were found at local dances on Saturday nights.

As recreation the prisoners were allowed to walk along the road to the west of the camp. Local people from both sides of the river could hear them sing as they walked. The prisoners also helped to construct an 'ant bed' tennis court on a property adjacent to the centre. Although now overgrown, the site of the tennis court can still be discerned as a flat area above the site of the centre.

Prisoner of war camps tended to be far more substantial than those that had housed unemployed labour in the 1930s, or even 'friendly aliens' in the early years of the Second World War. The Geneva Convention specified certain conditions for prisoner of war accommodation, so huts were provided, rather than tents. Two of the dormitories that housed the Bete Bolong prisoners of war are still standing in the local area. One was sold to a local farmer and used as a hay shed, and another was used for some time as a local dance hall.

This place/object may be included in the Victorian Heritage Register pursuant to the Heritage Act 2017. Check the Victorian Heritage Database, selecting 'Heritage Victoria' as the place source.

For further details about Heritage Overlay places, contact the relevant local council or go to Planning Schemes Online <http://planningschemes.dpcd.vic.gov.au/>