

---

# BLUNT'S BOATBUILDERS SLIPWAY TIMBER & FLOATING DOCK



Blunts Boatbuilders And Sea Cadets Williamstown March 2003



Blunts Boatyard Williamstown March 2003 001



Blunts Boatyard Williamstown March 2003 002

---

## Location

NELSON PLACE WILLIAMSTOWN, HOBSONS BAY CITY

## Municipality

HOBSONS BAY CITY

## Level of significance

Heritage Inventory Site

## Heritage Inventory (HI) Number

H7822-0394

## Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Inventory

---

## Statement of Significance

Last updated on - November 9, 2009

What is Significant?

Blunt's boatyard and slipway at 150 Nelson Place, Williamstown, has operated as a boat building and repair business on this site by the Blunt family since 1926. The Blunt family operated a boat building business on or near this site from 1888 to circa 1900, before moving to another site on Nelson Place, Williamstown between Ann and Thompson Streets until 1926. The Blunt family had commenced boat-building in Victoria at Geelong in 1858.

Blunt's boatyard and slipway contains a simple rectangular shed with corrugated iron roof and weatherboard walls. The gables of this shed, as with the two sheds adjacent, feature simple timber tracery infill to upper half in Edwardian style. The main address is to the water with 'Blunts' appearing in large letters. The roof is supported on simple timber trusses with a central iron/steel tie. The trusses towards the sea side half of the shed have been modified to allow big boats inside, by cutting the bottom chord and installing a makeshift hammer beam system with an additional timber collar tie-cum-scissor truss reinforcement. The floor is of timber. The office in the front corner is lined inside and out with beaded softwood lining boards. A later extension of this enclosure is in similar materials. A set of slip-rails extends inside.

The timber shed, and two adjacent sheds of similar design on the Commonwealth owned naval cadet site adjacent to the west, date from around 1913. The slipway system occupies most of the yard. The original slipway was reputedly constructed using elements from the first floating dock to be used in Port Phillip, though there is no above water evidence of this. The slip leads to a three rail traverser system which is operated by a hand winch and which allows access to six storage/work bays. Another set of rails leads into the shed. The trusses of the seaward end of the shed have been modified to allow sheltered work on larger vessels. There are a number of cradles of various ages and materials in the yard. The main slipway winch is of a type likely to have come from a ship. An older main winch is still located nearby. The long timber pier has a number of moorings and is of a height suited to small vessels.

How is it significant?

Blunts Boatyard and Slipway is of historical and archaeological significance to the State of Victoria.

Why is it significant?

Blunts Boatyard and Slipway is of historical significance as a rare operating example of the many small scale boat-building and repairing businesses which operated on the Williamstown foreshore from the 1840s. The use, equipment and layout of the yard remain similar to that of earlier in the twentieth century, while many of the other yards have disappeared or have been changed more substantially. The Blunt family boat building business has operated continuously in Williamstown since 1888, and in Victoria since the 1850s. The business occupied a portion of the foreshore on or near the current site when they first moved to Williamstown, signifying a long link between this site and boat-building business.

Blunts Boatyard and Slipway is of archaeological significance for its potential to yield information about nineteenth century structures and works which occupied the site at 150 Nelson Place and information related to early boat building and repair structures in Hobsons Bay.

Interpretation  
of Site

The timber shed, and two adjacent sheds of similar design on the Commonwealth owned naval cadet site adjacent to the west, date from around 1913. The slipway system occupies most of the yard. The original slipway was reputedly constructed using elements from the first floating dock to be used in Port Phillip, though there is no above water evidence of this. Blunt's boatyard is also on the Heritage Register. Blunt's Boatyard and Slipway is of historical significance as a rare operating example of the many small scale boat-building and repairing businesses which have operated on the Williamstown foreshore from the 1850's on. The use, equipment and layout of the yard remain similar to that of earlier in the twentieth century, while many of the other yards have disappeared or have been changed more substantially. The Blunt family boat building business has operated continuously in Williamstown since the 1880's, and in Victoria since the 1850's.

Greg Blunt (pers comms) has shown the author a section of timber that was discovered when renovations were being undertaken on their current slipway traverse. Underneath the concrete slab, he located a 1.5m section of timber approximately 1.5-2m below the ground. The timber has evidence of former iron nail and treenail holes, and has absorbed a dense concentration of iron corrosion product into its fabric. One side of the timber appears to have been burnt, and there is also evidence of teredo borers, which is curious as the timber was found well above the tidal level. Mr Blunt thinks the timber may be part of the former floating dock that was used to construct the slipway. Given the time that Blunt's has been stationed at this site, it is likely that large archaeological deposits will have accumulated both in and out the water, in addition to the workshop area sealing archaeological deposits from previous use of the site.

Other Names    MACRO'S JETTY,   WILLIAMSTOWN FLOATING DOCK,

Hermes  
Number        13674

Property  
Number

---

## History

### Contextual History

From the 1830s maritime facilities were developed at Williamstown. Deep waters off Point Gellibrand offered anchorage to vessels, while the promontory formed by Point Gellibrand sheltered the beach. Small to medium sized craft were essential in the Port of Melbourne to ferry both passengers and cargo from vessels anchored in Hobsons Bay to the centre of Melbourne which was inaccessible to large vessels. Smaller craft also provided essential passenger transport around Port Phillip Bay and along the Yarra River at a time when road and rail networks were inadequate. Private boat repair and building premises were located at Williamstown from as early as 1841 when James Jacks and Charles McIntosh proclaimed themselves boat-builders and shipwrights (Ackerley). By the second half of the nineteenth century a number of boat builders and repairers were dotted along Nelson Place, Williamstown. J.J. Legge built a slip for small craft in the early 1850s on a site opposite the Anglican Church. This was taken over by Knights, who

built craft for the shell-grit and Tasmanian & King Island trades. (Evans 1969, p92, Elsum p38) William Knight died in 1903 and William Junior carried the business on till 1960. J. J. Savages, another boat-yard just north of Blunts, relocated to the Williamstown site from South Yarra in 1935 (Butler 2000, Vol. 2. p.36). This site has been heavily redeveloped.

William White built skiffs and dinghies from about 1854 on a site adjacent to the present Blunt's Boatyard. (now the site of the Naval Cadet's clubrooms and jetties). White was joined by his brother George and formed W. & G White in 1856. In 1857 William White was commissioned by the Harbour Master, Charles Ferguson, to construct four of Victoria's first lifeboats (Barnard, 2008, p.51). W. & G. Whites was the best known and most productive of

the early medium scale boat builders, producing schooners, tugs, lighters, light boats, and steamers for the NZ west coast trade (Evans, 1969, p.40). Other early slips and boat repair yards were located on the foreshore near Ferguson Street and between Ann and Thompson Streets.

Williamstown also rapidly became a site for slips for larger vessels. In 1855 the first local patent slip was erected by William Isbister. It could take one 1000 tons vessel or two of 500 tons. The slip was 620 feet long, with 160 feet of carriage. The slip was leased c1859 by Wright, Orr and George Duke. Later known as Wright's Slip, it was included on an 1858 map of Williamstown (CS 85 Ross). When the Melbourne Harbour Trust assumed control of the site of Wright's Slip, it refurbished the slip, before leasing it to Grey Brothers. The site of Wright's slip is now enclosed in the former Harbour Trust Workshops site and is located beneath the Harbour Trust's Workshops Jetty. The site is now managed by Parks Victoria.

Government ship repair and building facilities at Williamstown were initiated after a Parliamentary Committee recommended in 1853 that the government construct a dry dock for the repair and maintenance of vessels or, at the very least, a patent slip. Work began on the government patent slip at Williamstown in 1856 (Barnard, 2008). The graving dock would be constructed adjacent to the patent slip between 1864 and 1873. The patent slip and graving dock formed the nucleus of what would become a significant ship repair and construction precinct at Williamstown. When the Melbourne Harbour Trust was constituted in 1878, it assumed control of what had been since the 1850s a Government Marine Yard, expanding the yard in the early twentieth century to become the Melbourne Harbour Trust Workshops where Harbour Trust plant and vessels were built and maintained.

#### History of Place:

The first boat builder's yard to be operated by the Blunt family was established in Geelong in 1858. One of the family, Clem Blunt, moved from Geelong to establish a boat-building business at Williamstown in the late 1880s. Evans (1969, p. 8 ) reports that Blunts had moved to Williamstown 'about 90 years ago', while the *Argus* of 17 June 1932,( p.6) reported that Clem Blunt had been boat building at Williamstown for 'more than forty years'. Clem Blunt, boatbuilder, is first listed in a business directory at Williamstown in 1888 occupying a site close to or actually on the site now occupied by Blunts. The business remained at this site until the early 1900s, when both Blunt's and

the adjacent White's boatbuilding business moved to the foreshore area between Ann and Thompson Streets. Here, Clement Blunt occupied a yard, with shed, pier and slipway, close to the Government marine yard developed in the 1850s. This site had been previously tenanted by Mr J Clark (unnamed newspaper cutting, 24 February 1922). Here Clem Blunt produced 'finely-built' sailing vessels that were sent to 'all parts of the world' ( *Argus*, 31 May 1926, p.11). In 1923 Clem Blunt completed the first of a number of motor launches for the Melbourne Steamship Company (*Argus*, 18 August 1923, p.27). He also built motor launches for the Presbyterian Mission and for the Australian Board of Missions. The launches, which could also use sail, were designed for the use of missionaries in the New Hebrides (Vanuatu) (*Argus* 18 October, 1922, p. 17, 31 May 1926, p.11, 30 August, 1927, p.13).

By 1922 'two or three' of Clem Blunt's sons had joined him in the business, as had his brother, Charles, who had relocated from the Geelong waterfront (unnamed newspaper cutting, 24 February 1922). In that year the Melbourne Harbour Trust began to reclaim land adjoining Blunt's boatshed and slip. It was intended that the Blunt's slipway would be lifted from its position and that the boat shed would be temporarily moved to a site closer to Nelson Place and then returned to the water front once reclamation was completed (unnamed newspaper clipping dated 24 February 1922) .The boatshed was moved in late 1925 ( *Argus*, 7 January 1926, p.7) but was destroyed by fire in May 1926. An *Argus* article of 31 May 1926 (p.11) reports that Mr Blunt's building on Nelson Place had burnt down almost completely, along with the boats, kauri and bulloak timber and tools inside. Losses exceeded 800 pounds.

It appears that it was after the fire in 1926 that the Blunts moved their business back to 150 Nelson Place between Pasco and Parker Streets. The foreshore here had been occupied by a number of lessees when the Melbourne Harbour Trust assumed control of the area in 1878 (Melbourne RL37) and Coode's 1879 map of the Port of Melbourne shows White's Slip close to the Blunt's site and a long jetty on the Blunt's site. Macro is described as occupying the site of the jetty at that time. Before him Chapman's Steam Sawmill had been on the site (Heritage Victoria, Heritage Inventory). Blunt was then on or near the site from 1888 to 1900. A 1905 MMBW plan of this area shows one simple building structure in the vicinity of 150 Nelson Place, though there is a complex of structures on the site of White's Slip. In 1908 the Harbour Trust erected a training wall along the foreshore here to allow the reclamation of two and a half acres of land. It was intended that spoil from the

Williamstown sewerage works would be used to fill the area, to a depth of 4 foot six inches (MHT Commissioners Report 1908, p. 9).

In 1911 McAuley and Meiers, boatbuilders, were occupying a site on the Nelson Place foreshore, between Pasco and Parker Streets (Sands and MacDougall, *Melbourne Directory*, 1911). But by 1915 A.G. Dow, motor engineer, was on the site. By 1918, when Dow was still in operation, the Naval Boat Depot (now occupied by the Sea Cadets) was on the former site of White's Slip. It is possible that the sheds occupied by the Naval Depot and the shed now occupied by Blunts, had been moved from the Williamstown Naval Depot (now part of BAE dockyards) as preparations were made to move Victoria's Naval Base from Williamstown to Flinders Naval Base and as much of

the former torpedo station adjacent to the dockyards was about to be incorporated into the dockyards site (National Archives of Australia series MP472/1, item 831848).

Clem Blunt's business is listed in the Sands and MacDougall Melbourne Directory as occupying the site at 150 Nelson Place in 1928. Clem Blunt died in 1932, but the business has been carried on on the site by later generations of the Blunt Family. The business has been known as

Clem Blunt boatbuilders 1926-32

Clem & Arthur Blunt Boatbuilders 1932-73

Robert Blunt Boatbuilders 1974-91

Robert Blunt Estate Boatbuilders 1991-92

Greg Blunt Boatbuilders 1993-present

Reputedly, a portion of the first floating dock which operated in Port Phillip Bay was used in the construction of the Blunts' slipway at 150 Nelson Place (Evans, 1969, p.8) and had also been used in the jetty at their other Williamstown location close to the marine yard. (Evans, 1969, p.89). This floating dock had been built by a private consortium in 1852 and was intended to handle a 1,000 ton ship. The dock was severely damaged by fire in 1871 and condemned in 1895 (Evans, 1969, p.89). It is possible that timber discovered underneath a concrete slab during renovations to Blunt's slipway in the early 2000s was a remnant of this floating dock. 'One side of the timber appeared to have been burnt, and there was also evidence of teredo borers' suggesting that the timber had been, at some time in the past, under water (Duncan, 2003). Alternatively, the timber may have originated from earlier uses of the Blunt's Slipway site before the land had been reclaimed. Although there has been ongoing material replacement of the working boat yard, jetty and slip, potentially fabric from earlier uses of the site and of the floating dock, might remain under water, beneath the slip and jetty, and beneath the land occupied by Blunt's boatshed.

*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/>*