

## FORMER BENALLA MIGRANT CAMP



196487 f RAAF Base & Migrant Centre Benalla May 2015.JPG



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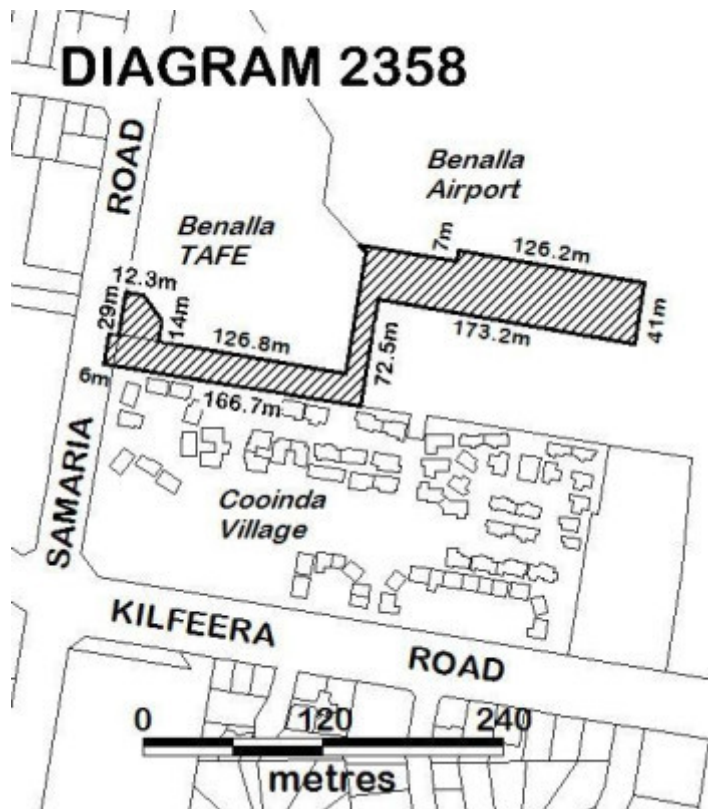
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diagram

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### Location

1 & 57 SAMARIA ROAD BENALLA, BENALLA RURAL CITY

### Municipality

BENALLA RURAL CITY

### Level of significance

Registered

### Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

H2358

### VHR Registration

May 19, 2016

### Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Register

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## Statement of Significance

Last updated on - September 23, 2025

Former Benalla Migrant Camp is located on Yorta Yorta Country.

## What is significant?

The Former Benalla Migrant Camp including associated buildings and a range of on-ground and below-ground infrastructure.

### History Summary

The Benalla Migrant Camp was established in September 1949 on land previously used by the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) as an Elementary Flying Training School (1941-1944), making use of the accommodation and facilities which remained. The camp was part of a bold immigration programme launched to increase the population, and hence the labour force, of Australia. Reception and training centres were established to provide accommodation and training and between 1945 and 1965 more than two million migrants came to Australia as a result of an international promotional campaign. The largest Australian migrant reception centre was the Bonegilla Migrant Centre which was the first camp to be used for this purpose when opened in 1947. Victorian holding centres were established at country locations at Benalla, Mildura, Rushworth, Sale West and Somers. The Benalla Migrant Camp operated as a holding centre and provided accommodation as well as a kindergarten, school, hall, hospital, shops and a gymnasium and primarily housed unsupported women who had limited access to jobs. A number of migrants stayed longer than those at other camps. Some residents worked at the centre itself, in administration, the kitchen or hospital, or as cleaners, while others found domestic work in Benalla itself or worked at the nearby Latoof and Callil clothing factory and Renold Chain Company factory. By 1958 Benalla (renamed the Benalla Migrant Accommodation Centre) and Bonegilla were two of only six government operated centres remaining in Australia. During its 18 years of operation an estimated 60,000 migrants were accommodated. After its closure in 1967 the airfield continued to be used for civil aviation purposes, principally for recreational gliding and ballooning. Many structures were demolished in the 1980s before the former City of Benalla acquired ownership of both the airfield and the remaining structures in 1992.

### Description Summary

The Former Benalla Migrant Camp is located on land which previously formed part of the World War II RAAF Base at 1 & 57 Samaria Rd, Benalla. The land contains nine P1-type huts, two toilet blocks, concrete gate posts at the intersection of Barc Avenue with Samaria Road, a remnant below-ground cistern, Barc Avenue itself together with kerb and channel and several unused electricity reticulation poles, and concrete surface drainage channels beside most of the huts. The huts were constructed using a standard P1-type design with timber frames, gabled ends, horizontal corrugated iron wall cladding, and corrugated iron or asbestos cement roof cladding. Five out of the eleven buildings have apparently been moved within the former RAAF base and varying degrees of maintenance, modifications and minor additions have occurred to those eleven buildings over time. This site is part of the traditional land of the Yorta Yorta Nations.

## How is it significant?

The Former Benalla Migrant Camp is of historical and social significance to the State of Victoria. It satisfies the following criterion for inclusion in the Victorian Heritage Register:

### Criterion A

Importance to the course, or pattern, of Victoria's cultural history.

### Criterion B

Possession of uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of Victoria's cultural history.

### Criterion G

Strong or special association with a particular community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons. This includes the significance of a place to Indigenous peoples as part of their continuing and developing cultural traditions.

# Why is it significant?

The Former Benalla Migrant Camp is significant at the State level for the following reasons:

The Former Benalla Migrant Camp is of historical significance for its association with post-World War II non-British migration. It is an example of one of only a small number of surviving centres which had been part of a network of camps that were established and used to accommodate migrants throughout Victoria and Australia. Benalla was Victoria's longest-lasting holding centre and played a distinctive role in settling vulnerable groups of non-British migrants into Australia in the post-war years.

(Criterion A)

The Former Benalla Migrant Camp is rare as one of only a small number of examples of a post-World War II holding centre for non-British migrants.

(Criterion B)

The Former Benalla Migrant Camp is of social significance for its connection with former residents and their families and for its ability to interpret the experiences of post-World War II non-British migrants to the broader Victorian community.

(Criterion G)

## Permit Exemptions

### General Exemptions:

General exemptions apply to all places and objects included in the Victorian Heritage Register (VHR). General exemptions have been designed to allow everyday activities, maintenance and changes to your property, which don't harm its cultural heritage significance, to proceed without the need to obtain approvals under the Heritage Act 2017.

Places of worship: In some circumstances, you can alter a place of worship to accommodate religious practices without a permit, but you must [notify](#) the Executive Director of Heritage Victoria before you start the works or activities at least 20 business days before the works or activities are to commence.

Subdivision/consolidation: Permit exemptions exist for some subdivisions and consolidations. If the subdivision or consolidation is in accordance with a planning permit granted under Part 4 of the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* and the application for the planning permit was referred to the Executive Director of Heritage Victoria as a determining referral authority, a permit is not required.

Specific exemptions may also apply to your registered place or object. If applicable, these are listed below. Specific exemptions are tailored to the conservation and management needs of an individual registered place or object and set out works and activities that are exempt from the requirements of a permit. Specific exemptions prevail if they conflict with general exemptions.

Find out more about heritage permit exemptions [here](#).

## Theme

2. Peopling Victoria's places and landscapes

Construction dates	1941,
Heritage Act Categories	Registered place,
Other Names	Benalla RAAF Base, Benalla Migrant Camp,
Hermes Number	196487
Property Number	

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## History

### HISTORY

#### *Elementary Flying Training School, Benalla*

A landing ground was established on this site in 1928 by Benalla based members of the Port Melbourne Flying Club. Until 1939 it served as a civilian aviation emergency landing ground on the Sydney to Melbourne route and it is reported that about two hundred planes landed there in that period.

In 1939 Britain, with Canada, Australia and New Zealand, established the Empire Air Training Scheme (EATS) to rapidly train air crews for the British Bomber Command. The scheme operated from 1939 to 1945 and the Royal Australian Air Force initially committed to training 28,000 air crew over a three year period. This included navigators, wireless operators, air gunners and pilots and equated to training about 900 air crew every four weeks.

To achieve this the RAAF embarked on a rapid and extensive program. Five initial training schools were established in Australia, the first located at Somers in Victoria, and a network of twenty-eight EATS schools were established in eastern Australia by the end of 1941. Each of these schools specialised in specific skill sets required of air crew members and included twelve Elementary Flying Training Schools (EFTS) for training pilots to fly light aircraft. After initial training, these pilots progressed to Service Flying Training Schools, the first of which was established at Point Cook, Victoria. In Victoria, EFTS school were established at Essendon (no 3) and Benalla (no 11). Other schools included three Wireless Air Gunners Schools (the first and only one in Victoria was established at the RAAF Base in Ballarat) and Bombing and Gunnery Schools such as that established at Sale, Victoria.

The EFTS at Benalla was proposed by the Minister for Air, Mr McEwan, and was officially opened on 26 June 1941. The existing civil aviation landing ground was doubled in size at this time to accommodate the RAAF unit. Buildings and services were of a standard type adopted by the RAAF, with the common P-Type Hut design adopted to cover all military personnel requirements. This basic module was used and modified to produce facilities such as mess halls, guard huts, canteens, medical aid posts, dental surgeries, recreation huts, classrooms and offices. These facilities at Benalla are shown on an annotated site plan, a copy of which is held at the Benalla Rural Council. This plan shows a collection of more than one hundred structures, a number of hangars, a sports oval and parade ground. The base was provided with electric light, power and hot and cold water and a network of roads and the capital cost of the project was £85,000.

The EATS programme effectively ended in October 1944, and was formally suspended in March 1945. At this time nearly 3,000 pilots had been trained at Benalla as part of the EATS programme. The following year the base became a RAAF Care and Maintenance Unit and in late 1948 all aircraft were transferred to a similar RAAF facility at Tocumwal, NSW.

#### *Post-War Migration to Australia and Accommodation Centres*

In the immediate post-war years the Department of Immigration was established in Australia and a bold immigration programme was launched to increase the population, and hence the labour force, of the country. Between 1945 and 1965 more than two million migrants came to Australia as a result of an international promotional campaign to encourage migration to Australia. A large number of migrants arrived as part of an

assisted passage scheme which targeted migrants from Britain but expanded to provide assistance to migrants from a variety of European countries. Others were displaced persons who had fled their countries during the war. In return these migrants were required to stay in Australia for at least two years and work in allocated jobs.

Reception and training centres were established to provide accommodation and training for newly arrived non-British migrants in Australia. Many of these were set up at former military camps where accommodation and facilities already existed. Contracted to work in allocated employment, migrants were initially housed in these centres while awaiting employment instructions. While at these centres, migrants received medical checks, and attended courses in English language and the Australian way of life.

By 1951 three reception centres and an additional twenty holding centres were in operation in Australia, briefly housing more than 40,000 non-British new arrivals. The holding centres were, in effect, short term camps with residents remaining there for between four to six months. Over half the holding centres were near country towns in inland NSW and Victoria and most of these opened in 1949.

Over time the type of migrant began to change, with increasing numbers of families, non-working dependents and single mothers requiring accommodation. Existing reception centres could not accommodate the number of new arrivals and newly designated holding centres were opened to provide short term accommodation for women and children.

The largest Australian migrant reception centre was the Bonegilla Migrant Centre which was the first camp to be used for this purpose when opened in 1947. This former army campsite was selected for its distance away from the metropolitan areas of Sydney and Melbourne in an attempt to avoid accommodation and employment competition and the formation of racial groups in the cities. The centre was also close to rural employment. Similarly Victorian holding centres were established at country locations at Benalla, Mildura, Rushworth, Sale West and Somers. Over time several hostels were also established in the industrial or less developed outer suburbs of Melbourne, for example at Altona, Broadmeadows, Holmesglen, Maribyrnong, Nunawading and Preston.

#### *Benalla Migrant Hostel*

The Benalla Migrant Camp operated as a temporary holding centre from September 1949. At the time of opening there was a large surge in numbers of new arrivals due to the increased availability of ships for transporting migrants from Europe in late 1948. When the facility closed in December 1967, an estimated 60,000 migrants had been accommodated at this camp. In comparison the Bonegilla Migrant Camp housed about 320,000 immigrants between 1947 and 1971.

The first years at the Benalla Migrant Centre were the busiest, with a peak occupancy of 1063 migrants in 1951. The number of migrant arrivals decreased markedly when the displaced persons scheme drew to an end in 1952 and a number of holding centres closed. Throughout the 1950s the resident population at Benalla remained at about 400 with an average of 200 people moving in and out each year and by the mid-1960s the occupancy did not exceed 250 with an annual turnover of about 240.

The Migrant Camp at Benalla provided accommodation as well as a kindergarten, school, hall, hospital, shops and a gymnasium and primarily housed unsupported mothers who had limited access to jobs. A number of migrants stayed longer than those at other camps. Some residents worked at the centre itself, in administration, the kitchen or hospital, or as cleaners, while others found domestic work in Benalla itself or worked at the nearby Latoof and Callil clothing factory. Some migrants formed close bonds with the local Benalla community.

By 1958 there were only six government operated centres remaining in Australia. Two were located in Victoria - at Benalla (renamed the Benalla Migrant Accommodation Centre in 1958) and Bonegilla. From this time the Benalla Camp provided accommodation for migrant workers in the district, and their families and women and children with no male support. By 1967 there were only 135 residents at Benalla Migrant Camp and it was closed that year. Bonegilla remained in operation until 1971.

After the migrant hostel closed in 1967 the airfields continued to be used for civil aviation purposes, principally for recreational gliding and ballooning. Many structures were demolished in the 1980s before the Council acquired ownership of both the airfields and the remaining structures in 1992. Short term leases have been given to various community groups for designated buildings.

KEY REFERENCES USED TO PREPARE ASSESSMENT

B Pennay, 'Benalla Migrant Camp: A Difficult Heritage', Draft 2015

D Kemp, 'Heritage Assessment: the former Benalla Migrant Accommodation Centre', Report to the Council of Rural City of Benalla 2014

Context Pty Ltd, 'Victoria's Post 1940s Migration Heritage Study', 2011

P Miller, 'A Little Marvel in Timber and Tin - the Military P1 Hut of the Second World War', Paper delivered at the 14th National Engineering Heritage Conference 2007

Trevor Budge & Associates, 'City of Benalla Conservation Study', 1992

Various newspapers including:

*Shepparton Advertiser*, 27 September 1940, p 1; 10 August 1945, p 8

*Benalla Ensign*, 18 April 1941, p 2; 29 August 1941, p 1; 28 September 1950, p 2

*The Land* (Sydney), 2 December 1949, p 40

*The Argus*, 21 April 1941, p 4; 28 January 1950, p 3

*Good Neighbour* (ACT), 1 September 1967, p 8

## Plaque Citation

Victoria's longest lasting holding centre is a rare survivor of a network of post-World War II camps which accommodated migrants in Victoria. It played a distinctive role settling non-British migrants.

## Extent of Registration

### NOTICE OF REGISTRATION

As Executive Director for the purpose of the **Heritage Act 1995**, I give notice under section 46 that the Victorian Heritage Register is amended by including the following place in the Heritage Register:

Number: H2358

Category: Heritage Place

Place: Former Benalla Migrant Camp

Location: 1 and 57 Samaria Road Benalla

Benalla Rural City

All of the place shown hatched on Diagram 2358 and encompassing part of Lot 2 on Plan of Subdivision 509898, part of Lot 1 on Plan of Subdivision 347898 and part of the road reserve for Samaria Road.

Dated 19 May 2016

TIM SMITH

Executive Director

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*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/>*