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# SEASONING WORKS SITE AND TERRACOTTA LUMBERWALL

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## Location

DRY CREEK CRESENT WANDONG, MITCHELL SHIRE

## Municipality

MITCHELL SHIRE

## Level of significance

Heritage Inventory Site

## Heritage Inventory (HI) Number

H7923-0076

## Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Inventory

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## Statement of Significance

Last updated on - July 20, 2021

The site has local historical and archaeological significance to yield information concerning the daily lives of Wandong's early inhabitants; specifically relating to occupation, industrial activities, and the development of the township.

Based on new evidence, the Place History, 1894 Map, Chronology and interpretation of a remnant brick wall to the north of the Former seasoning works, the site needs to be reviewed and updated. This analysis provides information on the existence of a new Burnside residence, store and office, evidence for a dam and recommends a re-interpretation of the remnant terra cotta lumber wall. 1. An earlier date for the establishment of the seasoning works has been identified as 1889/90 and was associated with the Wandong Timber Company or Robertson's Sawmilling and Seasoning Works operation. 2. The seasoning works were located on Lot 1A of C, not Lot 2 – see Map 1894 which clearly shows the works on Allotment 1 A of C. 3. The interpretation of the remnant brick wall needs to be reassessed. Context Pty Ltd. recorded this as a possible kiln associated with the seasoning works, however there is no evidence to support this. 4. Context Pty Ltd. maintained there was no evidence for a dam associated with the Seasoning works however this is now contradicted with newspaper reports, Inquest documents and photograph of dam. 5. 1894 map evidences a new mill built near seasoning works; access to the dry creek for water supply (dam); the tramway line continuing past the 1884 Stables originally owned by Robertson. 6. Documentary and photographic material provides evidence for a new office and store built after October 1892 when fire destroyed the original Burnside residence, office and store associated with the Wandong Timber Company and Robertson's sawmilling enterprises.

Interpretation  
of Site

Hermes  
Number

201556

Property  
Number

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## History

In addition to the Place History provided by Context Pty. Ltd. 2016 in the Mitchell Shire Wandong Heathcote Junction Gap Study, the following Place History is provided to support the Analysis of the Site and a re-interpretation of certain aspects relating to the activities of the ASTC and the structures associated with it. The site of the Former Seasoning Works footprint and associated buildings was located on Allotment 1A of C, **not** Allotment 2 as indicated in the Mitchell Shire Heritage Gap Study (2016) however both lots were part owned by the Australian Seasoned Timber Company in 1892 with additional land transfers in 1902. The tramway from Mt. Disappointment traversed across Allotment 2 of C into and past the Seasoning Works on Allotment 1A of C and then onto the Wandong Railway Station where timber was processed and stored for despatch and sawdust transferred to the Victorian Terra Cotta Lumber Company works south of the station. Figure 1 - 1894 Map and Figure 2 - 1892 Auction map show location of Seasoning Works, Store, Office, Stables and tramway routes.

Robert Affleck Robertson transferred part of Title 2445 Vol 48849 No. 326151 Lots 1 & 2A of C on 10 June 1892 to the ASTC and the balance of Lots 1 & 2 A of C No.461049 on 19th September 1902, Vol. 2897 Fol. 579282. This effectively transferred the entire subdivision of the Wandong township including the seasoning works site as well as 166 blocks of land to the Australian Seasoned Timber Company and/or its director, David Beath.

The Former Seasoning Works were initially created by Robert Affleck Robertson 1888/89 as part of his sawmilling enterprise located at Wandong/Mt. Disappointment and not by the Australian Seasoned Timber Company. Robertson in concert with Reiser formed an initial syndicate – 'The Melbourne Reiser Seasoning Timber Syndicate' circa 1889 and began seasoning timber at Wandong (Plate 1). This company was eventually acquired by the Australian Seasoned Timber Company in July 1892 following which the company then expanded upon the works (Plate 2).

The inspiration for the establishment of the Seasoning Works at Wandong began with the arrival of a Swiss architect, Mr. Leon Reiser to Melbourne via Maria Island, Tasmania. Reiser brought with him a new process for 'Improvements in apparatus for drying of seasoning timber' and soon patented his process in the colonies – Patent No. 6358 (The Age 22 December 1888:4; Sydney Mail 22 June 1889:1325). Reiser's process was extolled as a "new epoch in the history of the native timber of Australia' and within a short period of time held an exhibition in the hall of the City Bank, Elizabeth Street at which many 'timber merchants, architects, builders, cabinetmakers

and interested parties including Baron Von Mueller, K.C.M.G'. attended. Mueller stated he thought 'the discovery of this process would lead to a large export trade for our native timbers' (Weekly Times 20 April 1889:2). Following the exhibition it was announced a group of interested people intended to immediately float a company to work the patent on a large scale (Weekly times 20 April 1889:2).

Some two months later a deputation to the Minister of Lands was made by Robert Robertson of the Wandong Timber Company, his brother William, Leon Reiser and his assistant Archibald D. Hunter. The deputation sought to gain a 'bonus' for the creation of a new manufactory for the seasoning of timber. Upon questioning by the Minister as to the merits of such an industry, Robertson responded stating such an enterprise "might not only stop importation of timbers" but also "add to the wealth of the colony by building up an export trade". Robertson indicated to the meeting that Reiser had decided to settle down at Wandong and to start a timber seasoning factory (Geelong Advertiser 17 June 1889:4 Australasian 22 June 1889:13; The Argus 15 June 1889: 8-9). It appears that a syndicate was formed, 'The Melbourne Reiser Timber Seasoning Syndicate' the members of which were: Leon Reiser, Robert Affleck Robertson, David Beath, Archibald D. Hunter and others although a date for this formation is unknown at present however it was prior to 1892.

Following the exhibition in April 1889, it was reported that Robertson "recognising the merits of the invention ... (had) within forty-eight hours bought all the Australian and New Zealand rights to Reiser's process. Then under the 'supervision' of Reiser, Robertson had the 'necessary works erected at Wandong' and in early January 1890 invited a party of gentlemen to inspect the premises at Wandong where a large quantity of messmate using the process was inspected – the results of which along with the seasoning process were described in substantial detail (Weekly Times 18 January 1890:30).

The works erected at Wandong were described by Robertson as: *'one steam house and a couple of kilns in operation. The steam-house constructed of wood, and quite steam-tight. The walls are double, and the space between filled with coal ash. The floor of the steam-house has a depression towards the centre, and grooves or channels carry the mixture of condensed water and exuded sap into a cistern below. The kilns are constructed of terra cotta lumber, and are plastered within. The heat is obtained from steam pipes and the arrangement of heat regulators or dampers is very ingenious. The capacity of the two kilns is about 20,000 superficial feet a week* (Weekly Times 18 January 1890:30).

*The seasoning works were also being supplemented with a small woodware factory at the time in which Robertson would "begin the making of casks, turnery, parquet flooring and other trade articles. The woodware factory is in course of erection ...and almost completed, while the necessary turning lathes, planing machines, moulding machines, hand saws and fret saws are on the ground ready to be placed in position"* (Weekly Times 18 January 1890:30).

In July 1890 it was reported that "during the last six months all kinds of timber have been treated with satisfactory results" and that Robertson "is about to float a limited company on the London Market" while "Reiser on behalf of Robertson (ordered) machinery of the most improved description from Switzerland and men skilled in this kind of work had been engaged to come out" (to Australia) (The Herald 17 July 1890:4). A month later Robertson had submitted a seasoned butter box as part of a trial shipment to London. The box was described as "measuring one foot square in tongue and grooved sections ...made of Victorian mountain ash and lined with vegetable paper" (The Australasian 16 August 1890:8).

The proposed name of the new company was "The Australian Timber Seasoning and Parquet Manufacturing Company Limited with its headquarters to be based in Melbourne" (Maryborough Chronicle, Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser 25 April 1889). A new company named 'The Australian Seasoned Timber Company Ltd' (ASTC) was eventually formed in July 1892 and it was this company that acquired the assets of 'The Melbourne Reiser Timber Seasoning Syndicate' along with all of Robertson's sawmilling enterprises including the Victorian Terra Cotta Lumber Company Ltd (Prospectus of the Australian Seasoned Timber Company Ltd, The Argus, 18 June 1892, p6; Memorandum and Articles of Association of the Australian Seasoned Timber Company Limited 30 June 1892; Table Talk 15 July 1892:13). Reiser received £3,500 for his patent, £500 in cash with the balance to be paid over eight years. Before transforming into the ASTC, the Syndicate lodged patents for the seasoning process in various colonies with plants established in Adelaide by R. Honey at Port Adelaide – Lion Seasoning Works (The Age 26 May 1892:7) and in Hobart at the Franklin Mill owned by the Risby Brothers (Illustrated Australian News 1 July 1892:19). The rights were also disposed to Messrs J. and F. Gunn of Launceston (The Argus 18 June 1892:8). The patent was then transferred and registered to the ASTC in 1894 (Victorian Government Gazette No. 120, September 20 1894:3688)

The prospectus of the new consortium was well supported by the general public while the Directors of the company represented many of Melbourne's elite businessmen. The value of the new works being constructed at Wandong were said to be £8-10,000 with a sizeable extension being undertaken.

To promote the suitability of seasoned timber to the Australian public the company established a showroom under the name of the 'Australian Art Works' at Tower House, City Road, South Melbourne (Record 31 December 1892:2). The company employed William Howitt a renowned artist and woodcarver to produce decorative panels and furniture to showcase its seasoned timber. Howitt was commissioned to carve the reredos for the Holy Trinity Church at Kew (The Argus 16 December 1892:7); was involved in the decorative architecture of the Bairnsdale Court House (Bairnsdale Advertiser 29 June 1893:4) and the ecclesiastical furniture of St. Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne, namely the pulpit and Bishop's throne (Portland Guardian 13 February 1893:4). In 1899 Howitt moved to Western Australia where he taught wood carving with some of his works being displayed at international exhibitions (De Garis 1983).

Within one month of the ASTC being registered it was reported that the foundations of new buildings were being erected..." (Broadford Courier, 26 August 1892:4). All of Robertson's sawmilling assets and buildings from which he conducted his business as well as the Stables and tramway servicing his sawmills at Mt. Disappointment were sold to the ASTC. The new consortium took over the Office, Store, Stables and tramway in July 1892 however in October, some three months after the acquisition, a fire broke out destroying the residence, store and office. Despite the efforts of workers, Robertson's Burnside residence, including the company's adjoining store and office were totally destroyed. Only the quick efforts of a Mr. Brown, brother of a company foreman managed to save the company's books. The estimated loss was £3,000 which was covered by insurance (Argus 8 October 1892:7).

A new Office, Store and Secretary's residence was built on Rail Street as depicted in Figure 3 and Plate 6, while Robertson's Stables and tramline remained in place (Figure 3). Plate 6 shows the company's buildings on Rail Street were located adjacent to the Wandong Railway Station. Kilmore rates record 'buildings and Store Rail Street, Wandong as paying £15 in 1900 and £12.10.0 in 1901 indicating a reduction in asset value. A new Burnside residence would eventually be built at No. 5 Rail Street, Wandong owned by the Ryan family. The family later subdivided the parcel of land in 1999. (Lot 5 on Plan of Subdivision 400510W). In 1892/93 Kilmore rates show (?James) Ross McKenzie paying rates on 28 acres of land/stables and a Store on Lots 2 and 3.

1903 Kilmore Rates show Daniel Wilson, Storekeeper occupied the "New Store" situated at Lots 2 and 3 Rail Street, then owned by David Beath. It is suggested that the location of these new buildings were at No. 3-3A Rail Street. In 1906 the Kilmore rates show John Bowman, Sawmill Manager as occupying a Weatherboard Store on Lots 2 and 3 Rail Street, rated at 35s. In 1908, Margaret Burgess is listed as owning the Old Stables situated on 28 acres of land and a dwelling on Lots 2 and 3, Wandong. It is assumed that McKenzie, Bowman and Burgess owned/leased/operated the Store on Lots 2 and 3 of Rail Street and that the Stables referred to were Robertson's original stables close to his residence.

1893/94 rates on the stables owned by Robert Robertson and located east of Rail Street were paid by the Police Constable, James Wilcox and were known as the Police Stables. 1892-1896 Rates also show Constable Wilcox as paying rates on the Police Station/House/Land situated on Lots 1,2,3,4 initially owned by Robertson (see separate Place History for Police Station). Lots 1,2,3,4 Section D were then transferred to David Beath & Co. When the Police Station closed in 1902. Lots 1,2,3,4 Section D ownership was transferred to Thomas O'Shea, farmer who remained on this site until 1907. The rates on the Stables were paid by James Ross McKenzie in 1902/3.

Robertson remained as the General Manager to the Australian Seasoned Timber Company until 1895 after which time he had little or no association with the company (Broadford Courier and Reedy Creek Times 14 June 1895:3). Alexander Clark Mackay would replace Robertson as Manager until the company was liquidated in 1903 (The Argus 9 July 1903:1). Failing to secure access to the Wallaby and Silvery Creeks within the MMBW water reserve of the Mt. Disappointment area, the ASTC company explored options to move its operations to Warburton and to the forest of Bit Pat's Creek area (McCarthy2001:4). The delay in the Government extending the railway up the Yarra Valley eventually saw Alexander Mackay move to New South Wales where he became manager of the British Australian Timber Company around 1906 (BAT).

In the interim Robertson began divesting himself of various assets such as the Yarrowonga Sawmill Brick and Terra Cotta Lumber Work and the Boho sawmill near Violet Town before leaving for Scotland via South Africa and America in 1900 to secure funds for a new venture in Tasmania. Having gained the necessary funds

Robertson floated a new Glasgow company called the “Huon Timber Company” of which he became manager (The Mercury 20 May 1903:7; Clennett 2016:185-196). Robertson created a new mill at Hospital Bay equipped with the “most modern American plant” serviced by a new tramway (The Mercury 11 November 1905:55; Otago Daily Times 4 March 1904:4). The new company consisted of: sawmills with American band saws at Port Huon, other mills at Geeveston; a wharf at Hospital bay; a railway from the mills to the mountains and appointed agents for distribution of timber (The Mercury 3 July 1905:1). It was only a short period before Robertson eventually sold the business to Henry Jones & Co of IXL fame in 1905 (The Mercury 11 November 1905:5) before returning to Melbourne where he died in 1924 and was buried in the Mornington Cemetery (Clennett 2016:185-196).

As for the Australian Seasoned Timber Company its fortunes began to wane. The large capital investment into the expansion of its seasoning works, falling timber prices, limited access to new forests, a looming depression, restricted cash reserves, bad winters, droughts and imports all began to take a toll on the company’s economic viability finally resulting in a dramatic slow-down of production in 1900. To add to the woes of the company a disastrous fire broke out at the Comet sawmill in November of 1900 completely destroying the mill (McIvor Times 29 November 1900:2) leaving only an engine funnel to what was once described as “the largest sawmilling plants in colony” (The Argus 26 November 1900:6). By January of 1901 however the company had almost completed “the re-erection of their sawmilling plant close to the site of the old comet mill” (The Argus 28 January 1901:9). By 1902 the company realising its financial predicament decided to liquidate its assets and began to sell off its new mill plant to Western Australian interests. With work ceasing, a steady stream of men began to leave Wandong seeking their fortunes elsewhere. Then in October of 1902 David Beath, one of Robertson’s partners in the Melbourne Reiser Season Timber Company and Director of the Australian Seasoned Timber Company said his final farewells to the workers and left Australia for England dying in 1923 (Fremantle Courier 18 June 1902:3).

The grand venture had finally come to an end. The Comet Mill State School teacher Mr. Herbert Allen wrote to the Education department stating the school at Mt. Disappointment had closed, all of its furniture had been shipped to Wandong and that the “dismantling of the mill begins tomorrow and that all the families must leave before the tram tracks between the Mill and Wandong are pulled up, in about a month’s time” (Broadford Courier and Reedy Creek Times 10 October 1902; The Age 11 October 1902:14;)

A month later under instructions, Osborn and Hudson auctioneers advertised a ‘Clearing Sale of goods, animals, stores and equipment belonging to the Australian Seasoned Timber Company’. As the advertisement details, the sale included ‘buildings for removal including Old Stores, offices and other buildings’ (Kilmore Free Press 30 October 1902:3 – Figure 4). The sale was apparently successful with a “large attendance of buyers” with the stock and buildings “realising good prices” (Broadford Courier and Reedy Creek Times 14 November 1902:3).

Then in December 1902 a further advertisement appeared for the sale of the company’s Storekeeping business as a going concern. The advertisement was for two lots – One Lot for the stock in trade and a second Lot for the Cash Register. The advertisement confirms the Store was **new**, that it remained in place in Rail Street and that the business provided for a profitable turnover (Age 15 December 1902:9, Figure 6).

By June 1903 at a General Meeting a resolution was passed to place the company into voluntary liquidation (The Argus 27 June 1903:17). The ASTC timber concession would eventually be granted to Mr. Harper of Macedon who recommenced sawmilling at Wandong/Mt. Disappointment in May 1909 (The Argus 8 May 1909:16).

## **REMNANT TERRA COTTA LUMBER BLOCK WALL ON DRY CREEK**

### **Dam at rear of Seasoning Works**

The Mitchell Heritage Gap Study for Wandong 2015/16, cast doubt on the presence of a dam attached to the Former Seasoning Works and the function of a remnant section of terra cotta lumber block wall (Plate 10).

The site card for the wall stated:

- Creek had been diverted from its original course
- Doubt that the wall formed a dam across the creek
- Remnant wall likely represents a kiln associated with Seasoning works

We believe the following anecdotal, photographic and historical evidence contradicts the site card – “*that there was no dam attached to the seasoning works*”.

Whether the remnant wall was contemporary with the seasoning works remains unknown.

## **Background**

The Wandong History Group inspected this remnant wall with Heritage Victoria archaeologist David Bannear and the owner of the land upon which the wall stands circa 2015 (Plate 12). The land owner, Mr. Allan Ryan now in his 90s stated the following:

### **Anecdotal evidence:**

- wall was a mirror image on both sides of the creek
- there was a central section straddling the creek from east to west
- it formed a spillway with a half-moon shape in the centre and had a sheet metal outlet in the middle acting as an overflow that he demolished the eastern side and centre of the wall as the creek was washing away the
- foundations causing instability within the wall
- that he buried the eastern and middle section of the wall in the eastern paddock where it still remains today and
- the creek did flood quite often in the past.

Further discussions with the owner in December 2020 indicate:

- width of the wall across the creek was insufficient for pedestrian or vehicle use and that it did straddle the creek.
- He states he also actively cleared the land including land adjacent to the nursery (LB Davern Reserve) and covered various concrete foundations belonging to the seasoning works.
- His brother states that a dam existed on the eastern side of the creek (March 2021)

### **Contradictory considerations:**

- While the wall is constructed in a similar fashion to the kilns described in 1890 in that the wall is rendered, this is because the bricks were made of terra cotta lumber and porous. They were not waterproof and placing them in a wall across a creek would have necessitated some form of protection.
- The seasoning works relied on steam to season the timber and the patent design shows steam pipes associated with the kilns – there was no town water (according to Robertson) connected to the seasoning works with the creek being the only form of water supply available.
- The remnant wall is built into the creek embankment below the surface of the seasoning works footprint – as the (Plate 10 above shows).
- There is no ability to access this wall from the seasoning works plant other from above nor is it possible to access the wall via a rail line along the thin creek embankment as would be required for moving timber trucks in and out of a kiln as depicted by the company in 1893 (Plate 13).
- There is no evidence remaining to suggest there was any enclosure forming a kiln or steam house and anecdotal evidence states the wall was no higher than is evident today in 2021.
- Figure 1 shows there was a passageway leading toward the creek between the Seasoning kilns and Sawmills suggesting a possible pump house located on the creek to supply water for the boilers.
- Plate 14 Labelled ‘Transom Way’ circa 1894 shows the passageway leading to creek. Figure 1 shows the footprint of a potential pump house near the creek embankment. Plate 15 shows further detail of Transom Way.
- Figure 1 dated 1894 shows no further structures beyond the Seasoning works footprint other than the 1884 Stables and tramway lines.
- In 2015 a section of railway line was found embedded in the west creek embankment at the rear of the seasoning works site now nursery. This could be an artefact of Transom Way and the result of the dismantling of buildings associated with liquidation.

- Further inspection of the Dry Creek 25 February 2021. Following heavy rains in 2021 a further inspection of the creek was undertaken to determine if the length of rail seen in 2015 was still visible. Investigation shows the Dry Creek is blocked in several places along its length with fallen trees, branches, dumped materials (bricks, pavers, plastics) etc restricting water flow. The length of rail seen in 2015 is no longer in the west embankment. However, four lengths of rail are now exposed on the east side of the creek, two are embedded in creek floor and two are caught in the fallen debris blocking the creek flow (Plates 16-21).
- Measurements and photographs have been taken of the four exposed lengths of rail, additional features identified – possible conglomerate of black stone and cement, interpreted to be foundation material is embedded on both east and west sides of creek embankment and a piece lies within the creek bed itself. Other objects identified: An exposed glass bottle neck is embedded on west bank, a flat metal strip; three rusted metal objects (rail spike/drill tool and a hook type implement) and quantity of terra cotta lumber blocks embedded in creek banks (see Plates 16-21).

While we acknowledge that the Dry Creek has changed its orientation over time, historical records indicate that there was a dam/waterhole attached to the seasoning works site and possibly located at the end of Transom Way. The depth of the water at this dam/waterhole was reported to have been 12ft in 1893. This would indicate that some method of water retention of the creek was in place.

Historical Records show that Thomas Wakeham an employee of the Seasoning Works drowned in the waterhole/dam on 25th April 1893 and both the local newspapers and Inquest documents detail his drowning.

### **Further Evidence regarding a dam**

#### **1894**

Letter from R.A. Robertson to Kilmore Water Trust – Indicating that *“he did not require a meter for works down at Wandong as the boilers were supplied by water from a dam and the Hazel Creek water supply would only be required for domestic purposes. Commissioner Phillips stated that they would put a meter on all the same, saying “it is hardly likely men will pump water out of a dam when they have got a supply of water at hand”* (Kilmore Free Press, 1 March 1894:2).

Kilmore Water Trust - Correspondence from Robert Affleck Robertson stating *“need of water was not required at Wandong, as they only wanted the water for domestic purposes”*. This domestic supply was for his new subdivision (Kilmore Free Press 5 April 1894:3).

#### **1895**

Kilmore Water Trust - Secretary informed Trust that *Mr. Robertson “wanted a 1in pipe on to the new mill at Wandong. The Secretary stated that the Inspector not allow a larger pipe than 1in”* (Kilmore Free Press 11 April 1895:2).

### **Conclusion**

As can be seen, a dam did exist near the Seasoning works, that it was used to supply the works' boilers and that it was not until 1895 that the connection of a water pipe was considered by the Kilmore Water Trust. We therefore recommend that the Site Card and Place History for the Seasoning Works and Remnant Terra Cotta Lumber Wall be revised.

*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/>*