

SWAN HILL WATER TOWER



Swan Hill Water Tower 2024



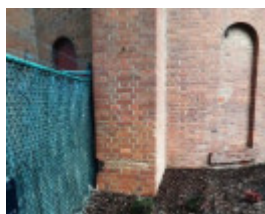
Aerial Sept 2025



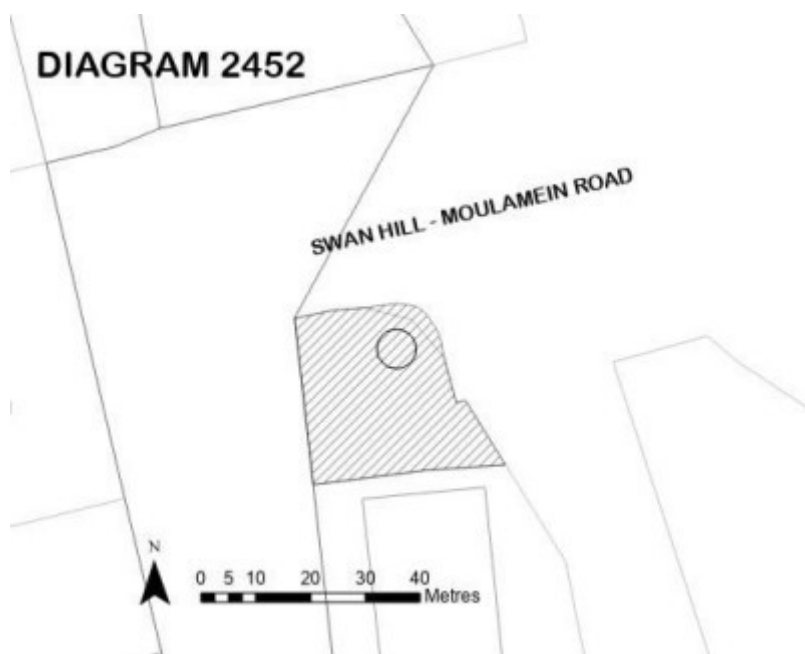
Interior view



2023 close view of the tower



c2023 view of the damaged buttress



Gazetted diagram Sept 2025

Location

MONASH DRIVE SWAN HILL, SWAN HILL RURAL CITY

Municipality

SWAN HILL RURAL CITY

Level of significance

Registered

Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

H2452

VHR Registration

September 11, 2025

Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Register

Statement of Significance

Last updated on - September 11, 2025

The place is located on Wamba Wemba Country.

What is significant?

The Swan Hill Water Tower, constructed in 1883 by the Swan Hill Shire Waterworks Trust under the supervision of engineer Henry Charles Kempson. It was the first of several water towers constructed in Swan Hill and supplied water to the township from 1883 to the 1950s. The Swan Hill Water Tower is a tall brick water tower featuring a permanent buttressed form supporting a riveted iron tank.

How is it significant?

The Swan Hill Water Tower is of historical and architectural 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 D

Importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of cultural places and objects.

Why is it significant?

The Swan Hill Water Tower is of historical significance as an example of major infrastructure constructed by a local water trust in Victoria in the late nineteenth-century. The water tower was built by the Swan Hill Shire Water Trust in 1883. Its construction followed a period of drought in the 1870s which affected much of northern Victoria. The 1870s drought led to a Government inquiry and legislation that enabled the formation of local water trusts and the building of water infrastructure. This infrastructure was designed to ensure consistent water supply and enabled the growth and expansion of townships and settlements across the semi-arid regions of the Wimmera, the Mallee and northern Victoria. The Swan Hill Water Tower is an example of early and substantial infrastructure from the local water trust phase of the late nineteenth-century which applied until the creation of the State Rivers and Water Supply Commission in 1905. The water tower was essential to the provision of a reticulated water-supply for the development of Swan Hill as a major population centre in regional Victoria.

(Criterion A)

The Swan Hill Water Tower is architecturally significant for being a notable, fine and intact example of a nineteenth century water tower. With its impressive height, rivetted iron tank, and fine brickwork, the Swan Hill Water Tower demonstrates the high-quality work of nineteenth-century bricklayers, builders and engineers. The prominent buttressed form displayed by the Swan Hill Water Tower is a variation to the design of most nineteenth century water towers to be found in Victoria.

(Criterion D)

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](#).

Specific Exemptions:

The works and activities below are not considered to cause harm to the cultural heritage significance of the Swan Hill Water Towers subject to the following guidelines and conditions:

Guidelines

1. Where there is an inconsistency between permit exemptions specific to the registered place or object ('specific exemptions') established in accordance with either section 49(3) or section 92(3) of the Act and general exemptions established in accordance with section 92(1) of the Act specific exemptions will prevail to the extent of any inconsistency.
2. In specific exemptions, words have the same meaning as in the Act, unless otherwise indicated. Where there is an inconsistency between specific exemptions and the Act, the Act will prevail to the extent of any inconsistency.
3. Nothing in specific exemptions obviates the responsibility of a proponent to obtain the consent of the owner of the registered place or object, or if the registered place or object is situated on Crown Land the land manager as defined in the Crown Land (Reserves) Act 1978, prior to undertaking works or activities in accordance with specific exemptions.
4. If a Cultural Heritage Management Plan in accordance with the Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006 is required for works covered by specific exemptions, specific exemptions will apply only if the Cultural Heritage Management Plan has been approved prior to works or activities commencing. Where there is an inconsistency between specific exemptions and a Cultural Heritage Management Plan for the relevant works and activities, Heritage Victoria must be contacted for advice on the appropriate approval pathway.
5. Specific exemptions do not constitute approvals, authorisations or exemptions under any other legislation, Local Government, State Government or Commonwealth Government requirements, including but not limited to the Planning and Environment Act 1987, the Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006, and the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (Cth). Nothing in this declaration exempts owners or their agents from the responsibility to obtain relevant planning, building or environmental approvals from the responsible authority where applicable.
6. Care should be taken when working with heritage buildings and objects, as historic fabric may contain dangerous and poisonous materials (for example lead paint and asbestos). Appropriate personal protective equipment should be worn at all times. If you are unsure, seek advice from a qualified heritage architect, heritage consultant or local Council heritage advisor.
7. The presence of unsafe materials (for example asbestos, lead paint etc) at a registered place or object does not automatically exempt remedial works or activities in accordance with this category. Approvals under Part 5 of the Act must be obtained to undertake works or activities that are not expressly exempted by the below specific exemptions.
8. All works should be informed by a Conservation Management Plan prepared for the place or object. The Executive Director is not bound by any Conservation Management Plan and permits still must be obtained for works suggested in any Conservation Management Plan.

Conditions

1. All works or activities permitted under specific exemptions must be planned and carried out in a manner which prevents harm to the registered place or object. Harm includes moving, removing or damaging any part of the registered place or object that contributes to its cultural heritage significance.
2. If during the carrying out of works or activities in accordance with specific exemptions original or previously hidden or inaccessible details of the registered place are revealed relating to its cultural heritage significance, including but not limited to historical archaeological remains, such as features, deposits or artefacts, then works must cease and Heritage Victoria notified as soon as possible.
3. If during the carrying out of works or activities in accordance with specific exemptions any Aboriginal cultural heritage is discovered or exposed at any time, all works must cease and the Secretary (as defined in the Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006) must be contacted immediately to ascertain requirements under the Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006.
4. If during the carrying out of works or activities in accordance with specific exemptions any munitions or other

potentially explosive artefacts are discovered, Victoria Police is to be immediately alerted and the site is to be immediately cleared of all personnel.

5. If during the carrying out of works or activities in accordance with specific exemptions any suspected human remains are found the works or activities must cease. The remains must be left in place and protected from harm or damage. Victoria Police and the State Coroner's Office must be notified immediately. If there are reasonable grounds to believe that the remains are Aboriginal, the State Emergency Control Centre must be immediately notified on 1300 888 544, and, as required under s.17(3)(b) of the Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006, all details about the location and nature of the human remains must be provided to the Secretary (as defined in the Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006).

Exempt works and activities

Swimming pool, water slide and any associated structures

1. Maintenance and repair of the existing water slide and associated swimming pool structures, providing there is no damage to or alteration of the original structure or fabric of the Water Tower.

2. Demolition or removal of the existing water slide and associated swimming pool structures, providing there is no damage to or alteration of the original structure or fabric of the Water Tower.

Soft landscaping

3. Removal, pruning and lopping of all vegetation.

Footpath, road pavement, road reservation and rail infrastructure

4. Maintenance, repairs upgrade and replacement of footpaths, road pavement, road kerb and road related infrastructure associated with existing road formations and road reserves and ancillary works within the road reservation.

5. Maintenance, upgrade and replacement of rail related infrastructure associated with the existing rail formations and rail reserves.

Theme

6. Building towns cities and the garden state

Construction dates 1883,

Architect/Designer Henry Charles Kempson (Engineer),

Heritage Act Categories Registered place,

Other Names WATER TOWER, BRICK WATER TOWER,

Hermes Number 209539

Property Number

History

Settlement of Swan Hill

Swan Hill is located on the southern bank of the Murray River at its junction with the Little Murray River. The Wamba Wemba people occupied present-day Swan Hill for thousands of years prior to the European settlement. [\[1\]](#) The area was named Swan Hill by the Scottish explorer Thomas Mitchell, while he camped beside a hill on the 31 June 1836. The place was sometimes called Castle Donnington. Both names were used interchangeably

throughout the nineteenth century.

European migrants began to settle in the Swan Hill area and broader Mallee region from the early 1840s onward. Farming and grazing were the main industries. In 1853, riverboat traffic reached Swan Hill from South Australia. In 1856 the settlement was proclaimed a township.

Population of the Swan Hill township grew slowly throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. By the early 1880s, when the Water Tower was built, the European population accounted for approximately 350 people.

Swan Hill became a shire in 1871, a borough in 1939 and a city in 1965.

Establishment of the Swan Hill Shire Waterworks Trust

Water supply varied considerably across Victoria in the nineteenth century. Reliable streams, rivers and lakes are available along the coastline, in the central area and the mountainous north-east. However, the climate became much drier and more prone to drought in the northern part of the State. In the early stage of their settlement, European settlers in northern Victoria collected water through primitive methods. They carted water manually from nearby creeks and rivers. Groundwater and rainwater were also collected when possible.^[2] Rudimentary dams and weirs were also constructed by European settlers for farming and grazing purposes. In Swan Hill, water was carted around the town in barrels on a sled for sale and customers purchased the water by the cask.

Drought from the late 1870s to the early 1880s impacted Swan Hill and northern Victoria, resulting in financial loss for farmers.³ It was clear by this time that European settlements in the drier part of Victoria would need more comprehensive water supply and irrigation systems to survive. This led to the government commissioning two engineers, George Gordon and Alexander Black, to investigate and report on water supply issues in northern Victoria. Their findings recommended the following:

- 1) the water of each river in the northern districts should, as far as possible, be used within its own basin.
- 2) summer supplies should be conserved in the creeks and watercourses by the construction of weirs and dams. Where possible, waters from winter floods should be diverted to and conserved in creeks for the use in the dry seasons.
- 3) the forementioned schemes should be carried out by local waterworks trusts or similar authorities.^[3]

Gordon and Black's findings propelled Alfred Deakin, then Minister for Water Supply, to introduce the *Water Conservation and Distribution Act 1881* for the establishment of local waterworks trusts. These trusts were permitted to borrow funds from the government for the construction of irrigation works. The trusts could then charge water rates to users, recoup their costs and pay the interest on the loans. In addition, the Act also alienated the frontages of virtually all the rivers, lakes and water courses in Victoria that were not alienated from the Crown at that stage. This ensured the protection of waterways for future use.⁵

Following the introduction of the Act, the Swan Hill Shire Waterworks Trust was established by an Order-in-Council on 17 July 1882 alongside waterworks trusts for the East Loddon, Korong and Marong Shires.^[4] The responsibilities of the Trust could be summarised as follows:^[5]

- 1) supplying waters to the towns of Swan Hill and Kerang.
- 2) maintaining and upgrading the existing dams and weirs built by the early European squatters within the shire territory.
- 3) managing the Gunbower and Loddon River water scheme infrastructure located within the shire territory.

The Trust committee comprised the Swan Hill Shire council members plus a commissioner appointed by the Colonial Government. In its inaugural year, the Trust employed an engineer, two draughtsmen, one secretary and two surveyors. Charles Henry Kempson, who later supervised the construction of the Swan Hill Water Tower, was the Water Trust inaugural engineer, was appointed to the position in 1881.^[6]

Following the *Irrigation Act 1886*, the Trust became the Swan Hill Irrigation and Water Supply Trust in September 1887.^[7] It was dissolved in 1906. The functions of the Trust were carried out by the Swan Hill Irrigation and

Water Supply District under the newly established State Rivers and Water Supply Commission.

Swan Hill Water Tower

Swan Hill Water Tower was constructed in 1883 by the Swan Hill Shire Waterworks Trust,^[8] under the supervision of Henry Charles Kempson, the Shire Engineer. A notice was published in January 1883 calling for tenders from bricklayers, carpenters and joiners.^[9] Thomas Edwards of Reedy Lake (on the north of Kerang) was appointed the bricklayer, with George Betts being the manufacturer of the bricks. W Barker was contracted to supply the 20,000-gallon water tank. The tower was complete in late 1883.^[10] In addition to the water tower, the site also consisted of a boiler house and a wood-fired steam engine. The facilities pumped water out of the Murray River and into the water tank atop, which took four and half hours of pumping to fill. Water then flowed to the surrounding businesses and residences by gravitation.

The Water Tower supplied water to the Swan Hill township in the ensuing decades. However, the tower began to struggle by 1897. This was due to blocked pipes, corroded mains and deteriorating engines and pumps. Supply to residences on higher ground was regularly interrupted as the water system needed to be turned off to allow enough pressure to send water uphill.^[11] Due to wood shortages at the time, the pump operation had to be ceased after 11pm daily, leading to insufficient water reserves in the tower.

By the early 1900s, it was clear that the water supply system was inadequate. Residents in Swan Hill township had increased to 950 by 1900-01. Another drought also hit the region around this time. This sharply increased the levels of salt and hydrochloric acid in the Murray, leading to the further corrosion of the water tank.¹⁴ In response, a second brick water tower was constructed in 1902 and a third concrete water tower was built in 1937 to increase the water supply capacity. ^[12] These two towers are located further eastward on McCallum Street and Splatt Street.

The Swan Hill Water Tower was disused from the ca.1950s. The engine and boiler houses were subsequently removed. The tower was later incorporated into the Richards Swimming Pool Leisure Centre.

Henry Charles Kempson

Henry Charles Kempson (1826-1899), a native of Birmingham, was trained as a civil engineer in England. He worked on the construction of the Caledonian Railway in Scotland prior to migrating to Australia in 1852. After a short stint in the gold fields, Kempson resumed his engineering career and worked firstly for the Roads and Bridges Department of the Victorian Colonial Government and then for various road boards and shires. In 1878 he moved to the Swan Hill and Kerang areas and stayed there for the rest of his life. He worked as engineer for both the Shire and various water trusts and supervised the construction of several schemes.^[13] An advertisement published in 1899 lists Kempson as a civil engineer, architect and licenced surveyor.^[14]

Apart from the Swan Hill Water Tower, Kempson also supervised the construction of the Kerang Water Tower in 1883, which has been converted into a lookout tower. Kempson's other building works remain unknown.

References

Australasian (Melbourne)

Bendigo Advertiser

Context, 2007, *Victoria Water Supply Heritage Study*

East, L., R., 1934, "Irrigation and Water Supply in Victoria", in *One hundred years of engineering 1834-1934*, pp.389-393.

Kerang Times and Swan Hill Gazette

Riverina Recorder

Kerang Times

The Guardian (Swan Hill)

Swan Hill Rural City Council, undated, *Aboriginal culture and heritage*
<https://www.swanhill.vic.gov.au/Community/Aboriginal-culture-and-heritage> (accessed 10 July 2024). Swan Hill Historical and Genealogical Society collection

Victorian Government Gazette

- [1] Swan Hill Rural City Council, *Aboriginal culture and heritage*.
<https://www.swanhill.vic.gov.au/Community/Aboriginal-culture-and-heritage> (accessed 10 July 2024).
- [2] Context, *Victorian Water Supply Heritage Study*, Vol 1, pp. 3-4 3 "Water Conservation Act" in *Australasian*, 23 Dec 1882, p 23.
- [3] L R East, 1934, "Irrigation and Water Supply in Victoria", in *One hundred years of engineering 1834-1934*, p 390 5 Context, 2007, *Victoria Water Supply Heritage Study*, p 32.
- [4] Victoria Government Gazette No 71, 07 July, 1882, p1664.
- [5] "The Water Conservation Act" in *Australasian*, 30 December 1882, p 25; "The Water Conservation Act" in *Australasian*, 27 January 1883, p 23.
- [6] "Death of Mr Kempson, C.E" in *Bendigo Advertiser*, 05 October 1899, p 3.
- [7] Victoria Government Gazette 30 Sept 1887, No 91, p2841.
- [8] "Watering the City", *Swan Hill Guardian*, 04 April 2007, p2.
- [9] "Swan Hill Shire Waterworks Trust Notice" in *Bendigo Advertiser*, 05 January 1883, p 4.
- [10] "Swan Hill Shire Water Works Trust" in *Bendigo Advertiser*, 02 February 1884, p2.
- [11] "Watering the City", *Swan Hill Guardian*, 04 April 2007, p2. 14 Ibid.
- [12] "150,000 gallon reinforced concrete structure", *Riverina Recorder*, 11 September 1937, p 3.
- [13] 'Death of Mr H C Kempson, C.E." *Kerang Times*, 06 Oct 1899, p 2.
- [14] *Kerang Times and Swan Hill Gazette*, 12 March 1889, p 1.

Extent of Registration

NOTICE OF REGISTRATION

As Executive Director for the purpose of the **Heritage Act 2017**, I give notice under section 53 that the Victorian Heritage Register is amended by including a place in the Heritage Register:

Number: H2452

Category: Registered Place

Place: Swan Hill Water Tower

Location: Monash Drive, Swan Hill

Municipality: Swan Hill Rural City

All of the place shown hatched on Diagram 2452 encompassing part of Crown Allotment 18 Section 2 Township of Swan Hill and the road reserves of Monash Drive and Swan Hill-Moulamein Road to the extent of 5 metres measured from the base of the circular wall of the water tower at ground level.

11 September 2025

STEVEN AVERY

Executive Director

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/>