
EADIE'S MILL ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE

Municipality

Level of significance

Heritage Inventory Site

Heritage Inventory (HI) Number

H7822-2429

Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Inventory

Statement of Significance

Last updated on - September 5, 2023

What is significant?

Eadie's flour mill comprises a large bluestone ruin, water race and weir on the west bank of Jackson's Creek Sunbury.

How is it significant?

Eadie's flour mill is of historical, scientific and archaeological significance to the State of Victoria.

Why is it significant?

Eadie's flour mill is of archaeological significance for potential evidence of the nature of mill design and technology employed in the first decades of European Settlement in Victoria, as well as the potential for domestic and commercial occupation remains related to the miller's house and operation of the site.

Interpretation of Site

The mill building is mostly ruinous with the east end wall nearest the creek standing almost to full height but the side and western end mostly collapsed. Some of the stone appears to have been removed but there is a large pile of stone inside the building footprint. The water wheel pit is intact, along with the supporting walls and bolts for holding down the main axle bearings. The track to the mill is evident, as is the route of the water race and the breached dam, still with iron bolts in the remaining part probably used for holding boards to control the water height. A later intact weir is located further upstream. It is likely that remains of the floor, and supporting structure for the gearing and millstones are still inside.

Other Names Ben Eadie, Sunbury flour mill,

History

John Eadie was born Dunblane, Scotland in 1828, where his family held Netherton Farm Blackford, in Perthshire and was at least familiar with the Mill of Ardoch. He moved to Sunbury c.1861-62 after working for nine years as a contractor-builder in Melbourne. He is thought to have had milling experience in his native Scotland, and to have built the mill with his brothers, Peter, a stonemason who became a prominent local businessman and citizen (see Dunblane), and Robert, a carpenter. Eadie is said to have returned to Scotland to purchase the mill machinery, and also brought out an engineer, George Straughan from Berwick-on-Tweed, England to operate it. It was completed by at least 1863. Another account suggests Straughan had already been employed as miller at the nearby Lochton steam mill in Bulla. Eadie's skills, appear to have been related to more sophisticated mill designs, from an industrial origin rather than the smaller village mills represented by most early Victorian millers. The mill was of four stories with an all-iron water-wheel weighed 20 tons and is likely to have been manufactured locally. Jones & Jones suggests it was sufficient to drive three pairs of stones which could produce 15 bushels (900 lbs) of wheat per hour. Round the clock operation may have been possible in the winter months when the miller McGregor, was living on site in the 1870s. In 1888 the mill was grinding about 400 bags (1200 bushels or 36000 kg.) of wheat per week. The water race underwent several changes, beginning with an earth channel and timber dam, feeding a timber flume, with a stone dam and more substantial head race constructed in the 1870s, then a second stone dam built just above the waterfall for storage and flood control in the late 1880s at a cost of £800. This however, was washed away by floods soon after completion. In 1914 the mill-wheel was scrapped for the war effort, and in 1917 its timbers were sold. History and Historical Context from HERMES (Hume Heritage study David Moloney) John Eadie moved to Sunbury c.1861-62 after working for nine years as a contractor-builder in Melbourne. He is thought to have had milling experience in his native Scotland, and to have built the mill with his brothers, Peter, a stonemason who became a prominent local businessman and citizen (see Dunblane), and Robert, a carpenter. Eadie is said to have returned to Scotland to purchase the mill machinery. The mill-wheel weighed 20 tons and is likely to have been manufactured locally. A plan of September 1863 shows the mill, dwelling, stable, hut, mill-race, track, and another small building. The original channel, said to have been largely earthen, was unsuccessful due to blocking and flooding, and a weir was built. It has been surmised that a first timber dam was temporary, used to facilitate construction of the present bluestone one which was probably built in the 1870's. The water-race from the weir was cut into rock, attached to the side of cliffs and then carried on a high timber viaduct. In the late 1880s another dam was built just above the waterfall for further storage and flood control, but was washed away by floods soon after completion. A later photograph shows a substantial timber (and perhaps bluestone) store or stable behind the mill. The one-way track past the mill, and then Ben Eadie homestead, avoided the necessity of turning carts in the constricted space. It appears on the 1863 plan, coming directly across the undeveloped township from the railway station, revealing that, from the beginning of his enterprise, Eadie received grain from a wider district. The first Rate Book of the Bulla Road Board (1863) confirm the existence of John Eadie's 'Mill, Dwelling and Land'. By 1867 the valuation of this property increases from £150 to £195, indicating the busy development of the property in these years. The original miller is said to have been George Straughan, the occupant of the bluestone dwelling a few hundred metres above the mill, who by this account, was especially brought out from Scotland by Eadie. It is possible that the closure of the Lochton Mill in Bulla (which by another account already employed Straughan as its miller) in about 1861, was sealed by the opening of the Ben Eadie Mill. The Lochton Mill (qv) did not have access to the rail. Jones estimates that Jacksons Creek may have provided power for at most three mill-stones, capable of milling 15 bushels of wheat per hour. While there are no records which indicate the frequency and duration of the mill's operation, local memories, vivid in the early 1960s, portrayed the mill in operation as a hive of activity. If not always thriving, it seems to have prospered sufficiently well. A Mr Gregor, carter, lived in one of the mill houses near the weir when he began work in 1872, and also helped operate the mill at night during the winter months in order to exploit the water supply. The construction of the new (ill-fated) dam in the late 1880s, at a cost of £800, suggests the viability of the enterprise at that time, and the investment and upgrading taking place in order to remain viable. In 1888 he was grinding about 400 bags of wheat per week at the mill. In 1888-9 John Eadie was corresponding with the Railways Line Engineer seeking a site near the Sunbury Railway Station to build a new

flour mill and siding. He was obviously aware of the big difficulties confronting the mill, which had by then become somewhat anomalous as the wheat-lands had moved inland in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Most of the other early mills near Melbourne had long closed. The milling industry had also outgrown the 'village mill' stage, and was rationalising on the basis of capitalisation (primarily, introduction of the new roller-mill technology) and regionalisation, in line with the expanding rail network. Eadie did not succeed in setting a new mill up before he died in 1890. At the same time Eadie obviously considered that his mill water-wheel was in good order, as it is recorded that he proposed to convert it to generate electricity for the district. At the same time he was also offering to supply water to the Railway Engineer at Sunbury for £300 per annum, an offer refused by the Engineer. He probably intended to use the wheel as a pump, and lay a line to the new tanks at the station. By the end of the century only 5 or 6 of the 75 surviving mills in Victoria still used stones, rather than roller mills, for grinding. While most small mills had succumbed to the changing economic environment, the Ben Eadie Mill had some advantages. Unlike the Whittlesea, Dandenong, and Lilydale districts, the Sunbury area still produced some wheat after the 1860s. The mill's strategic location on the railway would also have been a critical factor. With reliable access to regional sources of raw materials and markets, Eadie's mill was probably always a 'merchant' rather than a 'village' mill. That is, instead of simply milling for farmers at an agreed price per bushel, it is likely to have operated on a bulk purchase and sale basis, necessitating grain and flour storage facilities for 'programmed' milling, and a sales and distribution system. It appears that Eadie's mill had received grain by rail from its beginning. The grain would probably have come from further down the line. It is said that much of the product then went (doubtless by rail) to Aitken Brothers, Melbourne distributors to city bakers and exporters. The mill's low-cost hydro-power would also have given it a competitive advantage. Its disadvantages, of seasonal stream flow and drought, were alleviated as best as possible by construction of weirs and night operation during the wet season. According to a student research essay, the mill operated only intermittently after John Eadie died in 1890. Directories indicate that the mill had been a family operation well before then. While the 1875 directory has John Eadie listed as a miller, by 1884-5 he is listed as a farmer, with John Eadie junior as the miller. John junior continued to be listed as such until 1893-4, when he was joined by brother Will. Throughout the 1890s the 'Eadie Brothers' of Sunbury were listed only as millers, indicating that the mill was certainly still open for business, apparently providing the principal, or a significant, part of the brothers' incomes. The mill appears to have closed sometime near the turn of the century. In 1901 a visitor's eye was struck by a 'quaint view of an old mill, buried almost amongst the hillocks.' At this time the creek at Ben Eadie was used for picnics, such as that to farewell a Mr George Elliot, at which the 'old mill on the cliff at the banks of the creek was used for refreshments.' The great flood of 1909 removed most of the race. In 1914 the mill-wheel was scrapped for the war effort, and in 1917 its timbers were sold. The aesthetic and social values of the mill and its environs have long been evident. Early commentators, encouraging excursionists, noted the 'pretty English', and 'romantic and picturesque', qualities of Jacksons Creek. In 1866 Henry Gritten had painted 'Jackson's Creek Sunbury' as a (wildish) arcadia. In 1914 a resident presented the mill as a scene of snug village congregation: 'No busy mill-wheel hums its melancholy lay, The only one is used sometimes on Boxing Day, There wends the happy blithesome picnic band, To frolic there for want of sea and sand.' This sentiment was echoed when the dismantling of the mill continued in 1917. The Sunbury News lamented the event: 'One of the oldest landmarks about Sunbury was obliterated when the old flour mill at Ben Eadie was dismantled. It stood as a monument of our town in the halcyon days, and the very oldest of our residents would feel a pang of regret when they heard it was in ruins, as they no doubt cherished a love for the old romantic edifice, because it brought back to them Sunbury as it was years ago, when things wore a rosy hue.' It was clearly an integral and cherished part of the town's nineteenth century social life and physical fabric. Its ruinous form still remains one of Sunbury's oldest monuments. In the modern era, long after the passing of anyone who might remember the driving, dusty excitement of its operation, the romantic aesthetic of the ruinous mill and its river setting is still much-praised. It was one of the relics of primitive natural and cultural beauty that were being discovered in Sunbury by the counter culture in the 1960s and 70s. Only 15 water-only powered flour mills (one of which was turbine operated), and another 8 combination water-steam mills, are known to have operated in Victoria. While several water-turbine powered mills were built later in the nineteenth century, the known water-wheel powered mills were probably all built by about 1864. Apart from Anderson's mill at Smeaton, the only known substantial remains of water-wheel mill buildings in Victoria are the Ben Eadie Mill at Sunbury and Cashin's mill at Lilydale. While not all of the former mill sites have been fully surveyed, it would appear that only the slightest evidence remains of other former structures (such as those on the Plenty River). Remains of substantial races for later water-turbines (and, possibly, their earlier water-wheels) exist at Dights mill (Collingwood), and Water Wheel Flour Mills Pty. Ltd. (Bridgewater). The original late nineteenth century turbines have been found buried at the Dights Mill. Known relics from other sites consist of evidence of former mill races, and stone foundations, although remains of the Struth waterwheel may survive in the Merri River at Woodford.

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.

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