

City of Whittlesea – A Stone Upon A Stone



City of Whittlesea



Stony farmyard scene near Epping, c.1875. Here on the basalt plain, European settlers gratefully utilised the abundant bluestone to construct their homes, farm buildings and fences, many of which still survive almost 150 years later. Photograph – Rob Wuchatsch



"This photograph taken in 1946 shows my father Vance schooling his horse Navy Blue over one of the local dry stone walls in preparation for the Royal Agricultural Show. Dad was a member of the Findon Harriers Hunt Club. In those days he used to make horses available for people who wanted to go out hunting. When I was young I used to ride one horse and lead two. This was the best way of getting horses to the annual hunts in the days of two horse floats." Bruce Batten March 2002. Photograph – Courtesy Bruce Batten



Stone wall, Fenwick Stud Farm Yan Yean, 2001. This wall, almost two metres high and 50 metres in length, is believed to have been erected between 1870 and 1890. Fenwick's walls are the best preserved in the City of Whittlesea. Photography – Bill Goodridge



Rock walls and Red gums in the City of Whittlesea 2001. Photography – Bill Goodridge

Lava flows from outlets such as Mount Fraser, near Beveridge, sent molten rock to fill old valleys transforming the City of Whittlesea's landscape west of the Plenty River to become the basalt plain. While only subtle evidence of aboriginal occupancy remains, many basalt or 'bluestone' buildings and structures, built by 19th Century European settlers, still survive. These include churches, bridges, farmhouses, stables, barns, milking sheds, dairies and a chequer board network of dry stone walls.

By the 1870s dry stone walls in a variety of styles were common west of the Plenty River. The Whittlesea area was important as a location for fox hunting and the Findon Harriers, based at Mill Park, hunted widely across the basalt plains. Hunts west of Epping Road were said to take place 'practically all over stone walls.'

How did these fascinating dry stone walls come about?

At Westgarthtown, established in 1850, German settlers built many kilometres of dry stone walls as they cleared their land of stone and established dairy farms to provide milk and butter for Melbourne. Today Westgarthtown's remaining walls, around the Lutheran Cemetery at Lalor, stand in stark contrast to modern suburban fences.

At Summer Hill in Craigieburn, Dr Thomas Wilson had by 1870 constructed more than 32 kilometres of dry stone walls. Wilson, an Irishman, considered dry stone walls, where stone was available, to be the cheapest form of fencing and the best. His first walls, built during the gold rushes of the 1850s, cost 44 shillings a chain for building alone, but by 1870 the cost had dropped to 26 shillings per chain, inclusive of raising and carting the stones and building.

At Epping, dry stone walls were still being constructed in 1891 at Sambourne Farm, operated by Englishman Stephen Morgan. The cost of erecting a wall four feet in height was 'about 25 shillings per chain, a man well used to the work being capable of building about one chain per day.'

At Yan Yean, Fenwick Farm has over ten kilometres of dry stone walls, believed to have been built between 1870 and 1890 by then owner Englishman John Horner, aided only by a boy and a horse. The approach to the homestead incorporates the best and most intact example of dry stone walling to a single farm in the City of Whittlesea. Another wall at Fenwick, magnificently constructed, stands over six feet high and runs for over 50 metres.

Today, despite the recent vast increase in population within the City of Whittlesea, many dry stone walls still remain to provide residents with an inspiring connection to the early days of their cultural heritage.

- 1837 European settlement of Plenty Valley began.
- 1838 First land sales.
- 1842 Plenty Bushrangers captured in shootout at Whittlesea and hanged in Melbourne.
- 1850 Westgarthtown German/Wendish settlement established at Thomastown.
- 1851 Black Thursday bushfires ravage the Plenty Valley.
- 1853 – 57 Yan Yean Reservoir constructed.
- 1870 Shire of Darebin proclaimed (name changed to Epping in 1894).
- 1875 Shire of Whittlesea proclaimed.
- 1889 Railway to Whittlesea opened.
- 1898 Findon Harriers Hunt Club formed (the Findon Hounds was originally formed in 1872 by the Miller family and kept at their family residence Findon at Kew).
- 1915 Shire of Epping merged with Shire of Whittlesea.
- 1988 City of Whittlesea proclaimed.

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