

EBOOK SERIES

# THERE AND BACK, THE STORY OF WOODLEA



# CONTENTS

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<b>Welcome to Woodlea</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Timeline</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Origins – The Formation of the Land</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>The Stone Tool Factories of Kororoit Creek</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>The Resources of the Land</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Lignum swamp and Plains Grassland</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Newcomers: Traces of Early European Settlement</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Survival – Frontier Conflict &amp; the Struggle for Identity, Community and Cultural Heritage</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Callsign Rockbank – The Critical Role of the Rockbank Receiving Station in the Empire Signal Chain</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Bibliography and Further Reading</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>32</b>

# WELCOME TO WOODLEA

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**Welcome to the exciting new  
masterplanned community of Woodlea!  
You are about to join a proud local  
community with deep roots in a rich  
and surprising history.**

# WELCOME TO WOODLEA



Figure 1 - 1854 Rockbank Inn (Source: National Trust of Victoria).

Welcome to the exciting new masterplanned community of Woodlea! You are about to join a proud local community with deep roots in a rich and surprising history.

This booklet has been produced by Woodlea to introduce new residents to the history and cultural values of the place. It is the product of years of investment and commitment Woodlea have made into investigating, identifying and protecting the important cultural heritage sites within the Rockbank North development precinct. This process has involved development of close partnerships with the Aboriginal traditional owner descendants, local history societies, state government heritage agencies, community groups and local residents. Partnerships that have been created to ensure that the important heritage sites are preserved for future generations, that cultural heritage in development areas is salvaged and recorded and the important stories about the place are recorded and told as part of development of the Woodlea community.

A significant part of Woodlea's commitment has been a series of extensive archaeological investigations carried out by specialist archaeologists working in partnership with traditional owners. The Aboriginal sites that have been found at Woodlea are a very important part of the heritage of the traditional owner descendants. The investigation and protection of Aboriginal sites provide traditional owner descendent groups with an important connection to ancestors and to fulfil obligations to care for traditional country. It provides a means of learning more about the deep past and an opportunity to use archaeological methods to learn more about how ancestors used the creeks and swamps of Woodlea. The design of Woodlea has gone to great lengths to protect the most important Aboriginal heritage sites and areas of sensitivity by placing them in green spaces and reserves. This will protect these important heritage sites in perpetuity.

Before you help us write the next chapter in the history of Woodlea, let us take you on a brief tour back in time to explore the history and colourful stories that have made Woodlea the place it is today.

# YOU MIGHT BE SURPRISED TO KNOW:

- The British “Red Coats” on their way to quell the 1854 Eureka Stockade miners’ rebellion on the Ballarat goldfields stopped off for a beer at the local pub on the way. Perhaps the publican was in on the plot because the Red Coats complained long and loud about the lousy beer and sore heads the next morning...
- Aboriginal people lived at Woodlea for tens of thousands of years before the first European settlers arrived in the mid-19th Century. Kororoit Creek crosses through the middle of Woodlea and was an important travel corridor for Aboriginal people moving inland from Port Phillip.
- Kororoit Creek was also the site of enormous Aboriginal stone tool making ‘factories’. Archaeologists and the Aboriginal community found a wide range of stone tools such as hafted axeheads, sharp spear barbs, points and seed grinding tools used for processing Kangaroo Grass seeds into food.
- If you were standing here in the middle of Woodlea 50 years ago you would have looked out across a field of tall masts and antennae and would have heard an eerie whistling as the wind swept across the rhombic aerials. Woodlea was the site of an important Royal Army Signals receiving station that formed a critical part of the Empire Wireless Chain and was originally set up by the US Army in 1943 during the darkest days of the Pacific Campaign in World War II.
- Woodlea has a rare pocket of remnant Lignum Swamp. This little pocket of swamp woodland is an incredible environment like no other you will experience in the region and provides great insights into the environment that existed before land was cleared across the Volcanic Plains of Melbourne.

**Join us over the next few pages for a tour through Woodlea’s past where we will encounter some of the places, people and stories that have helped make Woodlea the interesting community that it is today.**

# TIMELINE

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**Let Woodlea take you on a brief tour back in time to explore the history and colourful stories that have made Woodlea the place it is today.**



# TIMELINE

## **Dreamtime of the Kulin Nations**

The great creator spirits Bunjil (the Eaglehawk) and Waa (the Crow) formed the creeks and volcanic plains that made the land.

## **5 Million Years Ago – 7,200 Years Ago The Formation of the Volcanic Plains**

The Western Victorian Volcanic Plains were formed by Volcanic eruption – the most recent eruption occurred at Mount Napier 7,200 years ago. The landscape of Woodlea is the product of this turbulent history of volcanic activity.

## **30,000 Years Ago Aboriginal Occupation of Melbourne**

Aboriginal people first colonised Australia approximately 55,000 years ago, and archaeological dating evidence from the 'Keilor' terraces of the Maribyrnong River and from dune deposits in the old Carrum Swamp wetlands near Dandenong shows Aboriginal people were living in the Melbourne region by at least 30,000 years ago.

When Aboriginal people first arrived in Melbourne during the last Ice Age, the landscape and the environment were very different. Melbourne was connected to Tasmania by a land bridge, the environment was dry and cold, and Port Phillip was a dry plain.

## **10,000 Years Ago - 8,000 Years Ago The Flooding of Port Phillip**

Port Phillip Bay filled with water as the sea level rose and the coast shifted inland, cutting off Tasmania from the mainland. Traditional stories record the memory of hunting across the Port Phillip plain before it filled with water.

## **8,000 Years Ago – 1840's**

### **Aboriginal Life on Kororoit Creek**

For thousands of years the traditional owners enjoyed a thriving social, economic and cultural life focused along the Kororoit Creek corridor. Archaeological investigations on the edge of Kororoit Creek found large stone tool making 'factories' used to make a wide range of tools including spear barbs, points, axeheads and seed grinding tools used to grind Kangaroo Grass and other native grass seeds to make staple foods.

## **1824**

### **Hume and Hovell Explore the Upper Reaches of the Maribyrnong River**

The explorers, Hamilton Hume and William Hovell arrive on the upper reaches of the Maribyrnong River.

## **6th June 1835**

### **Batman 'Treaty' and the arrival of Squatters**

John Batman's unofficial 'Treaty' with the Woi Wurrung people at Merri Creek, near Westgarth in Melbourne. John Batman's group of settlers and squatters started to take up runs 'purchased' as part of the Merri Creek treaty. Early squatters in the district included William Pinkerton, James Robertson and William Cross Yuille (Yuille took up the first squatting run at Rockbank).

## **1836**

### **Frontier Violence**

Frontier violence between squatters and Aboriginal inhabitants was an unfortunate and sad part of the early history of European settlement as the squatters arrived with livestock and pushed Aboriginal people off their traditional hunting lands, leading to a cycle of resistance followed by reprisals.

## **1846**

### **Yuille Crown Grant**

W.C. Yuille is given a Crown Grant for the Rockbank Run.

# TIMELINE

**1852**

## **Woodlea incorporated into WJT Clarke's expansive squatting empire**

WJT Clarke obtained a special survey of 140 sq miles and rights to depasture stock on land that included Woodlea. Clarke, along with Simon Staughton (the owner of the neighbouring Exford estate centred on the Toolern Creek in Melton South) and William Taylor (owner of Overnewton Estate to the north east) amassed expansive squatting licenses, later purchased at auction.

**1853**

## **Rockbank Inn Built**

Melbourne Wine Merchants, Stewart and Brown commenced construction of the Rockbank Inn on the banks of Kororoit Creek adjacent to Beattys Road, one of the early overland routes from Melbourne to the Ballarat goldfields. The Inn likely incorporated some of William Cross Yuille's original homestead. The Inn was built within the vicinity of an important Aboriginal camp site.

**1854**

## **WJT Clarke purchases much of the land around Rockbank**

The land in Rockbank was auctioned between June and December 1854 - WJT Clarke purchased the largest proportion of the land in the area. Although he was based in Sunbury, Clarke had large landholdings stretching as far as Werribee including the Rockbank and Deanside pastoral estates.

**December 1854**

## **Eureka Rebellion**

Eureka Stockade miners' rebellion on the Ballarat Goldfields - British soldiers sent to quell the uprising stayed at the Rockbank Inn, expressing a great dislike of the colonial beer.

**1863**

## **Last Woi Wurrung Corrobboree held at Bacchus Marsh**

One of the Woi Wurrung corrobborees was held at Bacchus Marsh, an important Woi Wurrung corrobboree site.

**1863**

## **Charles Beatty purchases Rockbank Inn**

Charles Beatty rented Rockbank Inn in 1863 and his family remained on the land into the 20th century, giving their name to the adjacent Beattys Road.

**1906 - 1942**

## **Closer Settlement and the Gidney Farm**

Much of Taylor's Overnewton Estate and Clarke's Rockbank Estate were purchased by the Closer Settlement Board and the land was broken up into 150 acre parcels. This led to an influx of new families and farms across the landscape.

Most of Woodlea was owned by Isaac Gidney, who had a farm located just to the north of the current location of the Western Freeway.

**1914 - 1918**

## **World War 1**

The Rockbank district contributed locally bred Waler Horses to the Australian Light Horse units who fought with distinction in a number of theatres, including the famous Battle of Beersheba (31 October 1917) in the Palestine Campaign where the Light Horse successfully carried out the last great cavalry charge in history, storming a well defended Turkish position.

Many young men from the small rural community of Rockbank volunteered to serve. Two of the enlistees from Rockbank gave their lives on the fields of France: Pvt Henry Ernest Keating (1st Australian Machine Gun Battalion) and Pvt John Alfred Pallant (23rd Australian Infantry Battalion). As part of the Centenary of ANZAC commemorations, the Avenue of Honour in the Woodlea Town Centre remembers the sacrifice made by these men alongside the 420,000 Australians who enlisted for service in the First World War and the 60,284 who never returned. It also remembers the many men and women who served and sacrificed for their country in other conflicts and foreign theatres, and those currently enlisted who continue to serve and sacrifice on behalf of all of us.



# TIMELINE

**1942**

## **WW2 - Rockbank Receiving Station built**

US Army constructed a radio shortwave receiving station comprising four rhombic aerials mounted on sixteen 100 foot masts at Rockbank, taking up Gidney's land under wartime acquisition legislation. The station was designed to connect US Command in Melbourne with US bases at Panama, Pearce, Washington and Bombay. The Woodlea site was selected because of its excellent noise free conditions, perfect for long range wireless reception.

**1943**

## **Receiving Station handed over to the Australian Army**

The Rockbank Receiving Station was handed over to the Australian Army after Allied command structure moved further north with the progress of the Pacific War.

**1949**

## **Rockbank Receiving Station formed a key part of the Empire Wireless Chain**

The Rockbank Receiving Station and the matching Diggers Rest Transmitting Station were described as 'the radio transmitting and receiving centres of the Australian Relay Station of the Empire Army Wireless Chain and the AMF communication system.' Messages were relayed by landline for processing at the Army Headquarters Signal Office at Grosvenor in Melbourne.

**1956**

## **Melbourne Olympics**

In 1956 the Rockbank Receiving Station played a key role in transmitting news across the world about the Melbourne Olympic Games.

**1960s**

## **Upgrades to the Receiving Station**

New signals receiving base was constructed in the centre of Woodlea and a small subdivision of houses (since demolished) was constructed on the corner of the Western Freeway and Leakes Road to provide married quarters for some of the men working at the Rockbank Receiving Station.

**1980s / 1990s**

## **Closure of the Receiving Station and sale of the land**

The Rockbank Receiving Station was shut down as new satellite technology renders the technology obsolete. The land is sold by the Commonwealth Government in 2001.

**January 2015**

## **Construction of Woodlea commences**

# ORIGINS – THE FORMATION OF THE LAND

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**Woodlea forms part of the Western Volcanic Plains, which covers an area of 2.3 million hectares and is the third largest volcanic plains in the world after the Deccan Plateau in India and the Snake River Plateau in the USA.**

# ORIGINS – THE FORMATION OF THE LAND



*The Volcanic Plains of Woodlea (Source: AHMS).*

Woodlea forms part of the Western Volcanic Plains (also known as the Newer Volcanic Plains), which covers an area of 2.3 million hectares and is the third largest volcanic plains in the world after the Deccan Plateau in India and the Snake River Plateau in the USA.

The Western Volcanic Plains were formed by volcanic activity over the last 5 million years, a dynamic history of formation that only ceased 7,200 years ago with the last eruption at Mount Napier.

The landscape of Woodlea is the product of this turbulent history of volcanic activity. It can be read in the landscape – from the swamps that were created in shallow depressions as the lava flowed across the land in sheets to the rocky stony rises and pock marked scoria basalt rocks that represent the more recent sheetflow events to the extinct volcano Mt Cottrell that can be seen just a few kilometres to the south of Rockbank.

# ORIGINS – THE FORMATION OF THE LAND

Traditional owners were witness to the last part of the dramatic formation history of the Volcanic Plains. A number of dreamtime stories tell of volcanic eruptions, passed down over thousands of years by word of mouth from generation to generation such as the Dja Dja Wurrung story of the two feuding volcanoes, Tarrengower and Lalgambook on the Guildford Plateau.

In the dreaming and philosophy of the Aboriginal groups who lived around Port Phillip, the great creator Bunjil (the Eaglehawk), flew over the land and dropped a snake to form Kororoit Creek. The mouth of the snake is the mouth of the creek where it meets Port Phillip and the thin tail is the headwater source further to the north. The land is flat because Waa (the Crow), was burnt when he stole fire from the Seven Sisters and couldn't fly anymore. As he walked across the land, he tamped the ground down stamping across it.

After the last Ice Age gave way to warmer conditions 10,000 years ago, the sea level began to rise as ice caps melted. This resulted in dramatic changes to the landscape which also had profound effects on Aboriginal people who lived on either side of Bass Strait in modern day Victoria and Tasmania. Between 10,000 and 8,000 years ago, Aboriginal populations living on the southern isle were cut off from the mainland as the Bass Strait was flooded. During the same period, Port Phillip which was a dry plain during the Ice Age, was flooded when rising seas breached the heads between Point Lonsdale and Point Nepean. Incredibly, there are stories passed down over thousands of years that record this incredible event when Port Phillip was flooded and former hunting lands were cut off.

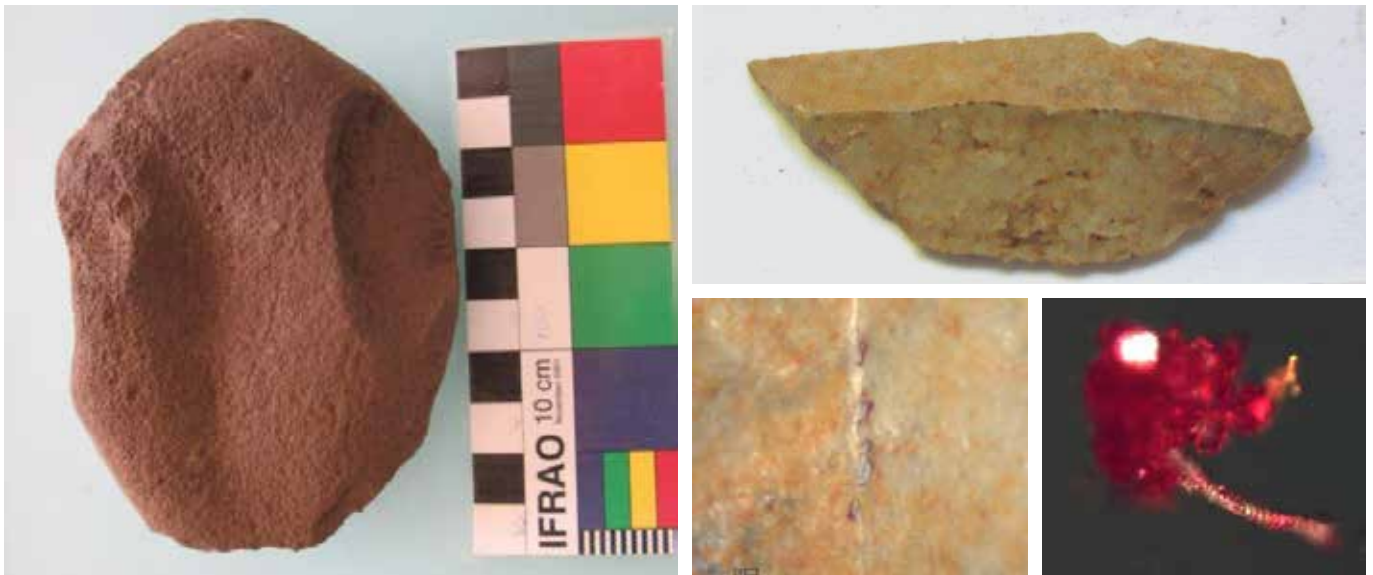
The rising sea level and flooding of Port Phillip pushed coastal Aboriginal populations inland to the current coastline areas and completely cut off Tasmanian Aborigines from the mainland. The new resources provided by creeks, swamps and the in-filled Port Phillip led to increased Aboriginal populations along the creek corridors and fringes of the bay, including along Kororoit Creek that crosses through Woodlea. These changes were accompanied by many new technological advances including the introduction of the 'Small Tool Tradition' toolkit and other innovations such as the introduction of the dingo, boomerangs and other technologies.

# THE STONE TOOL FACTORIES OF KOROROIT CREEK

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Recent investigations at Woodlea by a team of archaeologists and Aboriginal community representatives identified large stone manufacturing sites on the edges of Kororoit Creek. Thousands of stone tools were recovered from 'hot spots' on elevated land overlooking the creek.

# THE STONE TOOL FACTORIES OF KOROROIT CREEK



Stone artefacts from the Aboriginal sites of Kororoit Creek. L - Seed grinding stone, Top R - Backed Blade, probable spear barb, Bottom Centre - Microscopic residue from use retained on stone tool, Bottom Right - High magnification photo of plant residue.(Source: AHMS).

Recent investigations at Woodlea by a team of archaeologists and Aboriginal community representatives identified large stone manufacturing sites on the edges of Kororoit Creek. Thousands of stone tools were recovered from 'hot spots' on elevated land overlooking the creek. One particular site on the east bank of Kororoit Creek yielded a phenomenal 13,000 stone tool artefacts within a 25 square metre area, one of the highest densities of artefacts ever found on an Aboriginal site in Victoria.

The archaeological remains provide an important and fascinating insight into the nature of Aboriginal life on Kororoit Creek. The large sites speak of repeated use and occupation of the creek corridor to utilise the rich water sources, plant resources, animals and food provided by the creek. Early accounts of Aboriginal movement through the landscape, such as the records of the Assistant Protector of Aborigines William Thomas, indicate creek corridors like Kororoit Creek were also very important travel and transit corridors.

The range of tools found at the sites on Kororoit Creek are diverse and reflect a wide range of gathering, hunting and plant processing activities associated with day to day life living on the creek and on the large Deanside Wetlands located in the south-east part of Woodlea. Tools found during the archaeological excavations included grinding stones for processing grass seeds, axe heads that were hafted onto handles to make hand axes and sharp retouched stone flakes used as barbs on hunting spears and a variety of points.

Detailed analysis of the artefacts identified grass-seed grinding practises, plant processing activities and mineral residues associated with manufacturing activities and pounding. Residues relating to hafting (resins) and residues relating to use were found. The wide range of use-related residues that were identified demonstrates that flaked stone tools were often employed as versatile tools to perform a variety of functions. Grass seed grinding, likely to be *Themeda triandra* (Kangaroo Grass), was undertaken on grindstones from the Rockbank area.



# THE STONE TOOL FACTORIES OF KOROROIT CREEK



Left - Screenshot of AHMS 3D flythrough model of Trench 3, Stone Factory - The 3D model shows the dense concentration of stone tools and tool making debris produced at the tool making factories that lined the banks of Kororoit Creek. Trench 3 is a small snapshot into the past, providing a source of evidence about the rich and vibrant life that existed for thousands of years along the creek corridor. Right - Archaeological Excavation Team (Source: AHMS).

Although no datable material was found, the sites on Kororoit Creek included artefact forms that were commonly made during the last 7,000 - 8,000 years and the sites likely reflect repeated occupation and use over that period of time.

Woodlea may have been an important 'jumping off' point for Aboriginal people travelling from Kororoit Creek to the Werribee River corridor further to the west. This is because Rockbank is located at the closest point between these two large waterways that dominate the west of Melbourne. This may be one of the reasons such an exceptionally high density of artefacts have been found along Kororoit Creek at Woodlea.

# THE RESOURCES OF THE LAND

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**The diverse natural resources of the land have shaped the history of Woodlea and set the course for the patterns of land use and occupation over thousands of years.**

# THE RESOURCES OF THE LAND



*Seasonal wetland at Woodlea (Source: AHMS).*

The diverse natural resources of the land have shaped the history of Woodlea and set the course for the patterns of landuse and occupation over thousands of years.

Kororoit Creek is the dominant feature in the landscape, slicing and snaking north to south across the volcanic plain. In the dreaming and philosophy of the Aboriginal groups who lived around Port Phillip, it was formed by the great creator, the Eaglehawk Bunjil, who dropped a snake from his beak, the head forming the mouth of the creek at Port Phillip and the thin tail forming the headwater source further inland. The large Aboriginal sites dotted along the length of Kororoit Creek and around the edge of the Deanside Wetlands in the south-east corner of Woodlea show the importance of water resources in supporting traditional Aboriginal life in the region.

The water bodies provided sources of fresh drinking water and also provided a diverse range of plants that were used as food sources, medicines and raw materials for making equipment. The waterbodies also attracted a wide range of animals that provided important sources of protein and materials such as skins for clothing and bone for making spear points and a range of other tools. If you walk around the edge of Deanside Wetlands or along Kororoit Creek, even today you will still see the large mobs of kangaroos that congregate to browse on the abundant grasses that grow in these areas. The waterways were the life source of the traditional owners and were used almost like highways to move from Port Phillip up into the hinterlands as travelling parties moved from camp to camp along a well-known network of creeks and swamps.

# THE RESOURCES OF THE LAND



*This drawing by J. H. Wedge (1835) Yam diggers at Indented Head, Victoria, 1835 shows women digging roots of the Yam Daisy. The roots of this plant were an important food source for people of the Port Phillip area, Victoria. (Drawing used with permission of the State Library of Victoria).*

The landscape is sacred to the traditional owners. It holds their dreamtime creation stories and spiritual sites, their teaching places, living areas, meeting spots and burial places. Natural landforms were inextricably linked with day to day social and religious life and maintenance of traditions. The Woi Wurrung people, who occupied much of the land covering modern Melbourne, observed seven seasons and their movements across the seasons were carefully calibrated to access resources and carry out spiritual obligations at particular times of the year. A large spring camp to dig the fresh Murnong Daisy Yams (a traditional delicacy and staple of the Melbourne area) to a large gathering of the five tribes of the Eastern Kulin language groups, the Woi Wurrung, Boon Wurrung, Wathaurong, Daungwurrung and the Dja Dja Wrung to a small family camp foraging further afield when food sources became more scarce in winter. There was a familiar pattern and rhythm of life observed through the year and it was closely linked to the seasonal resources of the land.

Similar resources also brought in the first European settlers. The expansive Plains Grasslands that spread across the volcanic plains made perfect grazing country

for the early squatters. Many of the earliest homesteads were built close to rivers and creek confluences, on exactly the same ground where the largest and most frequently occupied Aboriginal campsites were once located. The access to fresh water was just as critical to the early settlers as it had been to the Aboriginal inhabitants of the land. The natural deposits of basalt cobbles and rocks strewn across the volcanic plains made a great source of stone for constructing walls and livestock enclosures. While deeper quarries provided a source of 'bluestone' for most of the early buildings, including the 1853 Rockbank Inn, the remains of which can still be seen adjacent to the old line of Beattys Road.

Perhaps the strangest natural resource that Woodlea provided was silence. After an exhaustive search across Victoria, the noiseless conditions found at Rockbank were considered ideal for the construction of the US Army Rockbank shortwave radio receiving station in 1942. Silence was considered critical to maximise reception of long range military communications from US bases across the world, which was critically important in coordinating the allied Pacific Campaign against the Japanese in WW2.

# LIGNUM SWAMP AND PLAINS GRASSLAND

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**Woodlea is the site of a pocket of very rare and significant remnant woodland that includes Lignum Swamp and Plains Grassland vegetation communities.**



# LIGNUM SWAMP AND PLAINS GRASSLAND



*The Lignum Swamp woodland (Source: AHMS).*

Woodlea is the site of a pocket of very rare and significant remnant woodland that includes Lignum Swamp and Plains Grassland vegetation communities. It is quite a unique experience walking through this woodland, quite unlike anywhere else across the volcanic plains, where almost all original vegetation was cleared during the 19th century to make way for grazing and agriculture. The woodland also provides a rare insight into the nature of the environment that existed across parts of the volcanic plains before European settlement augured in large scale clearing.

The Lignum Swamp is dominated by an overstorey of River Red-gum *Eucalyptus camaldulensis* and an understorey of Tangled Lignum *Muehlenbeckia florulenta*. The reserve also includes a smaller area of Plains Grassland. Lignum Swamp and Plains Grassland are both endangered within the Victorian Volcanic Plain bioregion. The woodland is a rare pocket of remnant vegetation on the volcanic plains, locally and in the region.

The woodland was also the site of the original Army Signals Rockbank Receiving Station mess, accommodation huts and radio shack.

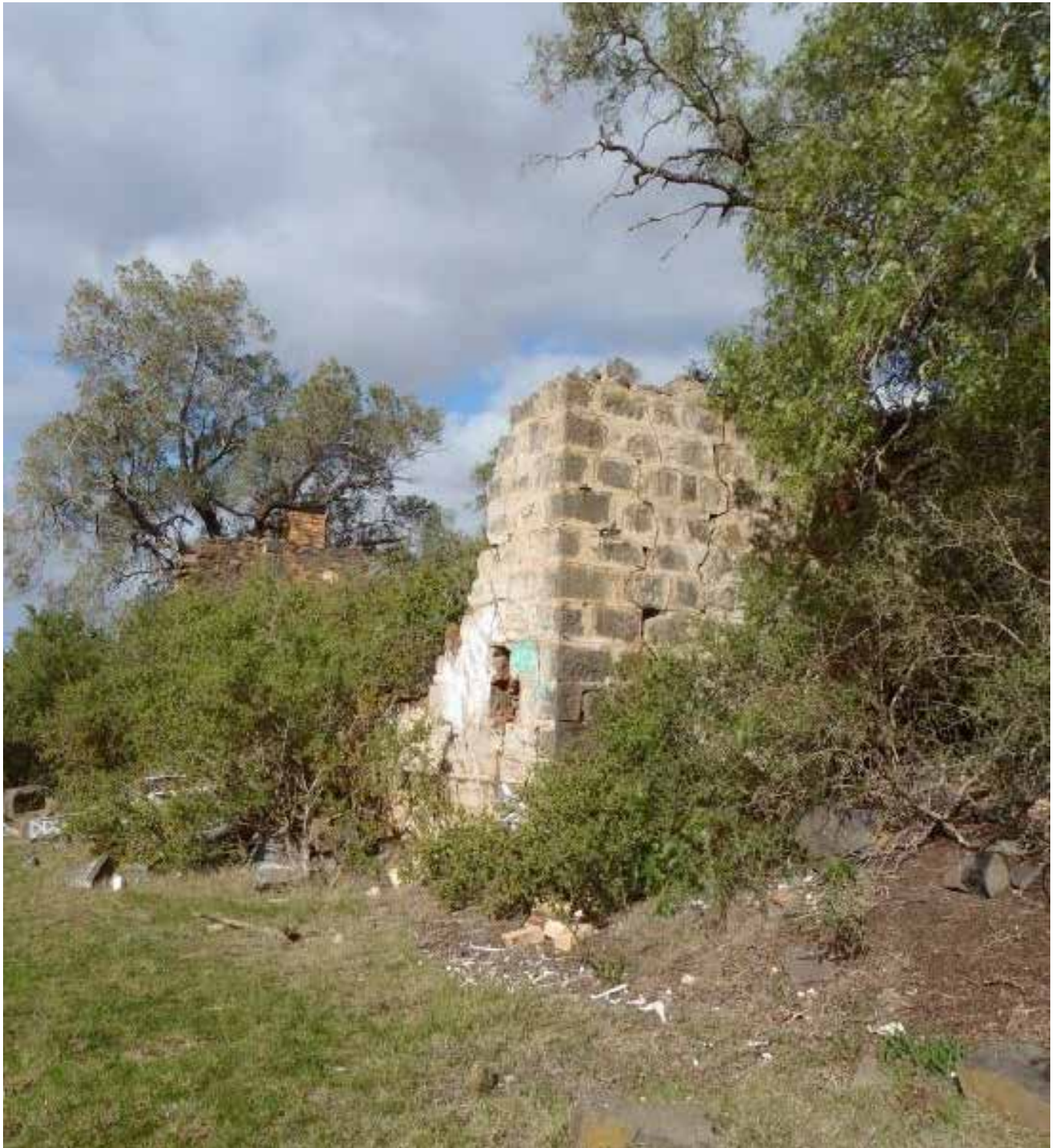


# NEWCOMERS: TRACES OF EARLY EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT

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**Woodlea is very lucky to have rare and state significant relics of the very earliest period of colonial occupation of the volcanic plains to the north of Melbourne.**

# NEWCOMERS: TRACES OF EARLY EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT



*Ruins of the Rockbank Hotel (RHS, Source: AHMS).*

# NEWCOMERS: TRACES OF EARLY EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT

Woodlea is very lucky to have rare and state significant relics of the very earliest period of colonial occupation of the volcanic plains to the north of Melbourne, a time when vast squatting empires stretched across the land and men and women struck out on their own to build a new life in a very alien unfamiliar landscape.

The broken bluestone ruins of the 1853 Rockbank Inn still evoke the welcoming but isolated haven it provided for travellers and the dispersed community of early settlers. What is striking about the Inn is the quality of construction and beautiful stone masonry that is still on display – it speaks of the intent of the early settlement community to lay down long lasting roots and build for the future. The Inn was constructed on high ground overlooking a fordable bend in the creek, the same qualities that made the location an important Aboriginal camp site before the arrival of European settlers.

The founding Licensee Mr Charles Davies placed an advertisement in the Melbourne Argus on 8th September 1853, which provides an insight into the intentions of the business and shows the pub was established primarily aimed at travellers heading north to the goldfields of Ballarat:

*“ROCKBANK HOTEL, late W. C. Yuille’s Station, Ballarat-road, 17 miles from Melbourne via Bacchus Marsh.*

*Mr. Charles Davies begs to announce to his numerous friends, and the settlers generally of Victoria, that he has lately opened the above hotel for the accommodation of travellers, which he intends to conduct in such a manner as will ensure him a portion of their patronage. Gentlemen and diggers travelling to and from the far-famed Balaarat diggings may rely upon good beds, and every attention to cleanliness and comfort, at the above hotel. Mr. D. has also laid in a stock of the very best qualities of wines, spirits and ales; and substantial meals will be provided, all at low charges. Good stabling provided for horses, and every attention paid.*

*Rockbank Hotel, 1st September, 1853”<sup>23</sup>*

Just over a year after opening, Rockbank Inn played host to a famous group of travellers – the British Redcoats marching to Ballarat to put down the Eureka Stockade miners’ rebellion. Major General Sir Robert Nickle, the Commander in Chief of all military forces in the Australian colonies, recorded his visit in company with soldiers of the 12th and 40th foot and gun parties from HMS Electra and HMS Fantome:

*“At Rocky Banks next day, the troops met a sharp discomfiture from ‘a sour, squashy, disagreeable drink ... colonial beer’ which reduced the thirstier and those not yet familiar with the local tipple to ‘excruciating pain and suffering”.*

If the publican’s plan was to aid the miners, it was ultimately unsuccessful. By the time Nickle and his party arrived on the field in Ballarat the stockade had been stormed and the rebellion was at an end. Despite his dislike of colonial beer, Sir Robert Nickle was highly regarded for the calming and sensitive role he played in the aftermath to the conflict on the goldfields in Ballarat and when he passed away the following year he was universally mourned.

Rockbank Inn was well placed at a crossing point over Kororoit Creek and adjacent to one of the early overland routes to Ballarat, later named Beattys Road. Today the remains of the original 1860’s bridge can be seen just to the north of the ruins of the Inn. If you look closely you can still see some of the original bluestone road cobbling on the surface of the old track leading up to the Inn ruins. This is an extraordinary group of heritage relics from the earliest phase of settlement and from a time when a stream of travellers were heading up and back from the goldfields of Ballarat.

<sup>23</sup> <http://trove.nla.gov.au/nlp/del/article/4796779?searchTerm=rockbank%20hotel%20charles%20davies%201853&searchLimits=>

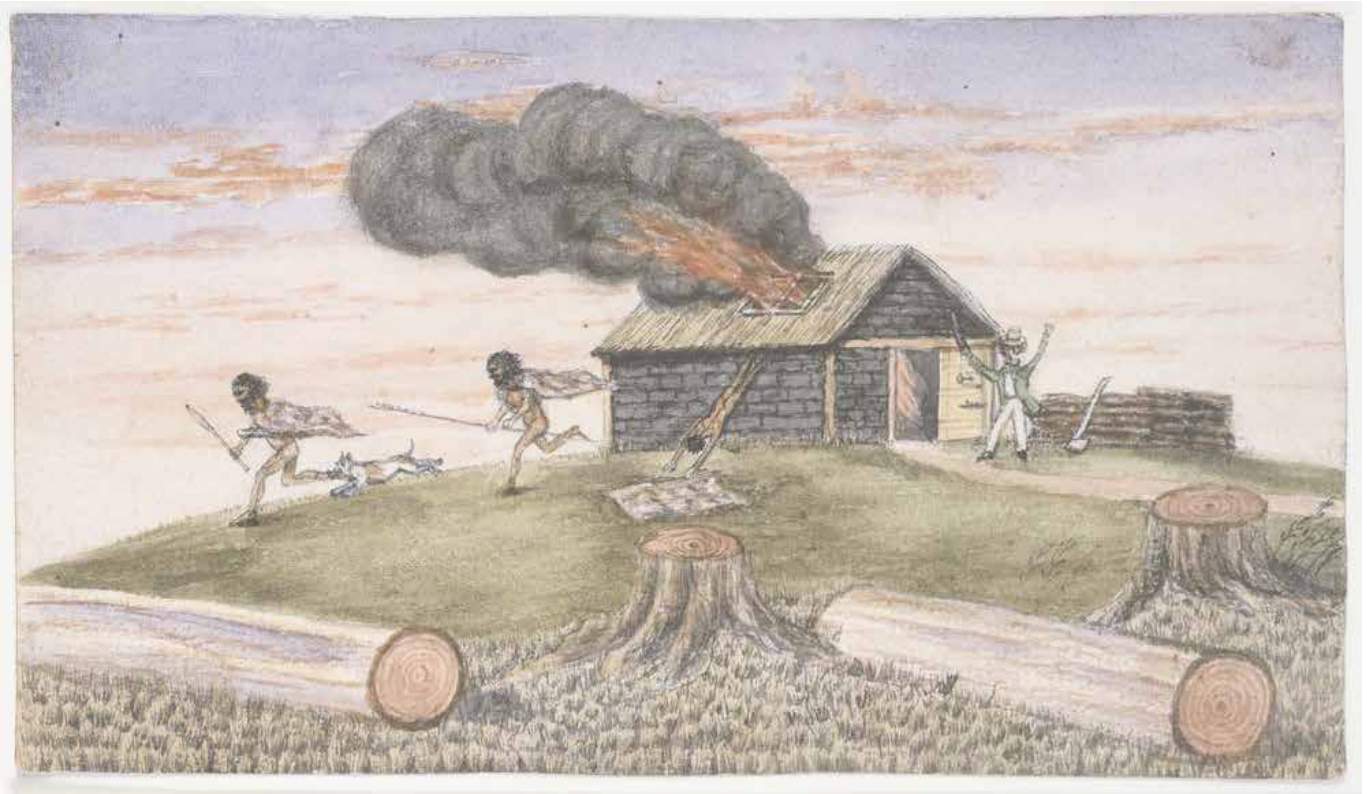
# **SURVIVAL – FRONTIER & THE STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY, COMMUNITY AND CULTURAL HERITAGE**

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**One of the important untold stories in the development of Woodlea is the role it has played in the survival of thousands of years of Aboriginal culture.**



# SURVIVAL – FRONTIER & THE STRUGGLE



W. F. E. Liardet (1875) 'An Escape from the First Gaol' State Library of Victoria. Tullamareena was a senior Woi Wurrung man who was imprisoned in 1838 for stealing John Gardiners sheep in Hawthorn. Along with Moonee Moonee and Jin Jin, he escaped and burnt down the first Melbourne Gaol. This episode was typical of the resistance and frontier violence in the 1830s and 40s in areas like Rockbank.

One of the important untold stories in the development of Woodlea is the role it has played in the survival of thousands of years of Aboriginal culture and heritage and the importance of the landscape, the dreaming stories and the cultural heritage sites to the descendants of traditional owner groups, particularly the Wurundjeri elders and descendants and the Boon Wurrung descendent groups.

In the dreaming and philosophy of the Aboriginal groups who lived around Port Phillip, the land of Woodlea was formed by the Eaglehawk Bunjil, who dropped a snake from his beak, the head forming the mouth of the creek at Port Phillip and the thin tail forming the headwater source further inland. Kororoit Creek was an important transit route for Aboriginal groups moving from Port Phillip up into the hinterland towards Sunbury. The creek corridor was also the setting of a thriving

Aboriginal social, economic and cultural life over thousands of years as large clan groups were attracted by the permanent source of water it provided, the rich source of plants and animals that lived in the creek and in the vegetation on its fringes, and shelter in the bends and hollows against prevailing winds that whip across the plains. Archaeological evidence recently unearthed on the banks of Kororoit Creek shows repeated re-use and visitation of occupation sites and stone tool making camps along high points overlooking the creek.

The vibrant traditional Aboriginal life that had existed for thousands of years across the plains, on the creeks and around the swamps was suddenly broken in the 1830s and 1840s. As squatters fanned out across the grassy plains to the north and west of Melbourne, they brought with them livestock and shepherds to establish pastoral squatting runs. As the take up of

# SURVIVAL – FRONTIER & THE STRUGGLE

squatting land started to squeeze Aboriginal people out of their traditional lands and flocks of sheep took over traditional hunting lands, the traditional owners fought back. The traditional owners retaliated for attacks on their women, meted out punishment to shepherds who threatened them and speared livestock for eating to replace the kangaroos that had been driven away. This led to a range of reprisal attacks organised by squatters that ranged from poisoning flour to kill off the traditional owners to shootings and even organised reprisal expeditions that almost resembled Wild West possies.

One of the most infamous examples of frontier violence occurred just to the south of Woodlea, at the base of Mt Cottrell. It's a story that illustrates the sadness and tragedy of this chapter of our history. In July 1836, the squatter Charles Franks and his shepherd were found dead on their sheep run with tomahawk blows to the head. Equipment and supplies had been pilfered. It is likely that the attack on Franks and his shepherd was provoked by earlier actions. A contemporary and well respected squatter, Von Steiglitz, claimed Franks called his bullets 'blue pills' for the natives and there is also evidence that a young Aboriginal woman was abducted near Mt Cottrell before Franks arrived on the squatting run. Therefore it is likely the attack on Franks and his shepherd were payback killings.

The killings led to an uproar and the formation of a punitive expedition assembled from among squatters and using Aboriginal trackers, who tracked a group of approximately 80 Aboriginal people encamped on the Werribee River. Although the accounts are murky and in part covered up to avoid criminal investigation by Colonial authorities who did not sanction or approve the attack, in the words of an old Aboriginal man, Gostyn:

*“They let fly at them; killed a great many, and what was not killed and wounded ran away, leaving all behind them; a dray was loaded with what they had carried away, and their spears and waddies and tomahawks.”<sup>24</sup>*

No records of the number killed are known, although it is clear that there was a dramatic decrease in the local Aboriginal population after the 1830s. Some of the survivors led by 'King John Bull' sought refuge for a number of years on Simon Staughton's Exford Estate, in Melton South. Simon Staughton's fine example of humanitarian care shows that there were people on the frontier who tried to establish friendly relations with traditional owners and helped protect them when they were threatened.

Although traditional life across the plains of Melbourne was broken, the survivors continued to struggle on the fringes of colonial society and later were corralled into missions and native reserves. What is remarkable is that out of this the Aboriginal community managed to stay together, pass down culture and stories and survive as a community in the face of exclusion and official state sanctioned policies of assimilation. Led by strong leaders like William Barak, the remnants of the Woi Wurrung were able to find some respite on the Coranderrk Mission at Healesville and later in the 20th century the community moved into the inner city suburbs of Fitzroy and Collingwood and the western suburbs where work was available in factories and meatworks. Today the Aboriginal community in Melbourne is flourishing, passing on and celebrating their culture and their survival against all the odds stacked against them.

<sup>24</sup> <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article36848557>



# CALLSIGN ROCKBANK – THE CRITICAL ROLE OF THE ROCKBANK RECEIVING STATION IN THE EMPIRE SIGNAL CHAIN

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**Woodlea was suddenly shaken out of its quiet pastoral existence when the United States Army arrived in April 1942.**

# CALLSIGN ROCKBANK – THE CRITICAL ROLE OF THE ROCKBANK RECEIVING STATION IN THE EMPIRE SIGNAL CHAIN



*A photograph of the Rockbank Receiving Station Troop, Christmas 1949 (Source: Royal Signals Museum, Simpson Barracks, Greensborough).*

Woodlea was suddenly shaken out of its quiet pastoral existence when the United States Army arrived in April 1942. These were the darkest days of the World War 2 Pacific Campaign; just 2 months after Japanese forces captured Singapore and one month after they invaded Papua New Guinea – the start of the Kokoda Campaign. US General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Allied Commander South-West Pacific, set up his Melbourne headquarters in March 1942 and immediately set out to establish long range communications with the allied forces under his command, arrayed far and wide across Australia, New Guinea and the South Pacific. An urgent search was launched to find two sites close to Melbourne

that had the optimal 'quiet' conditions required for long range short wave radio communication. The US Army settled on Woodlea, Rockbank for the site of its Receiving Station and Diggers Rest further to the north near Sunbury for the site of its Transmitting Station.

The farm owned by the Gidney family was compulsorily acquired under wartime legislation that allowed the military to commandeer private property essential to the war effort. A series of huts were quickly thrown up to house the 'Radioshack', mess and accommodation for the signal troop, located under the tree canopy in the remnant woodland near Leakes Road.

# CALLSIGN ROCKBANK – THE CRITICAL ROLE OF THE ROCKBANK RECEIVING STATION IN THE EMPIRE SIGNAL CHAIN

Four Rhombic aerials mounted on 30 metre high masts were arrayed across the paddocks and set up to receive messages sent directly from transmission stations far afield in Port Moresby, San Francisco, Noumea and Chungking, the Chinese Kuomintang capital during WW2. The station was also set up to communicate closer to home with Darwin and Townsville. In doing so, the Rockbank Receiving Station played a very important communications role in the most critical stage of the Pacific Campaign.

By late 1942, the focus of the Pacific Campaign moved further north after key allied victories in New Guinea, on the Pacific island of Guadalcanal and in the naval battles of the Coral Sea and Midway. With it went the allied HQ, which shifted north to Brisbane. By the end of 1942, the US Army no longer needed the Rockbank Receiving Station and the Diggers Rest Transmitting Station. Both were transferred to the Australian Army in early 1943 and would remain an important international military communications facility for the next forty years. The new Australian Army signals station was expected to have:

*'... high power multi frequency transmitter and associated equipment is expected to be delivered in the next few months. This will be used to operate a radio link to London and possibly Moscow.'<sup>25</sup>*

The Rockbank and Diggers Rest stations enabled the Australian Army to modernise its communication network. Signals were received at Rockbank, relayed by landline to the Army Headquarters Signal Office at Grosvenor in South Melbourne where messages were deciphered and encrypted replies sent on to the transmission station at Diggers Rest. After the war the signal stations continued to play a critical role in the Australian Relay Station, which formed part of the Empire Wireless Chain linking with British and Commonwealth signal stations and the Australian Military Forces communication system.

For most of its operating life the Rockbank Receiving Station had a staff of about 30 men, and most were accommodated on site, initially in the WW2 era huts constructed in the woodland area adjacent to Leakes Road. The crew included radio operators, technicians, a cook and linesmen who were charged with maintaining the large 'antenna farm' of masts and rhombic aerials arrayed across the fields of Woodlea. Former Officer Commanding, Lt Col (Ret) Reg Elder, remembers life at the Station in the 1950s and 60s was basic and the relative remoteness of the station meant that many basic amenities were lacking. The winters were tough, particularly for the linesmen who were responsible for the constant upkeep of communication lines, aerials and masts in the cold, wind and rain. There was good camaraderie though, and the troop would often share a drink and a laugh with the local farmers in the staff bar.

Conditions at the Rockbank Receiving Station were greatly improved in the 1960s with the addition of married quarters housing built near the corner of Leakes Road and the Western Freeway. A modern new signal base was also constructed further to the east, right in the centre of Woodlea.

The Rockbank Receiving Station continued to play a very important role in Army Signals communications, within Australia and to units deployed overseas, including with the 1st Australian Task Force at Nui Dat during the Vietnam War. The station even played a civilian communications role during the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games, communicating the results and major events of the games out to the world.

By the late 1980s, the short wave communications technology was superseded by advances in satellite communication and the facilities at Rockbank became obsolete. Most of the buildings were demolished, the antennae, aerials, masts and cables were removed and the land sold in 2001.

You can take a virtual tour with Lt Col (Ret) Reg Elder as he tells the story of life in Rockbank Troop in the 1950s and 60s.

<sup>25</sup> National Australian Archives, Series MP927/1, Item A259/18/442: Feb 1946: AMF Minute Paper, 'Sigs 5099'

# BIBLIOGRAPHY AND FURTHER READING

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**The study area has been the subject of a number of previous studies, which have been drawn on as secondary information sources**

# BIBLIOGRAPHY AND FURTHER READING

The study area has been the subject of a number of previous studies, which have been drawn on as secondary information sources:

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In addition to the above secondary sources, we also consulted the following archives and primary source repositories:

- Australian War Memorial online collections;
- State Library of Victoria and National Library of Australia online collections;
- National Trust (Victoria) archival primary source records;
- Melton and District Historical Society archival primary source records;
- The Melbourne Argus (National Library of Australia, Trove); and
- The Australian Abo Call (National Library of Australia, Trove).

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