

THE BACCHUS MARSH COUNCIL TRENCH, ITS GEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE AND RECENT CONSERVATION

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SUMMARY

The Council Trench at Bacchus Marsh in central Victoria contains the only known outcropping of Triassic-aged sedimentary rock in Victoria. It is a geologically and historically important site that has been recognised and given State heritage status by the Geological Society of Australia.

From its original gazettal in 1873 as a stone reserve, through the discovery of Triassic plant fossils in its rock late in that century and until 2000, the Trench site remained a public reserve. In 2000, despite its geological heritage significance, the Victorian government offered the site for private sale and development.

From 2000 to 2003 a dedicated group worked to have the sale offer withdrawn and for the site to remain in public ownership. They were successful. The Bacchus Marsh Council Trench Crown Land Reserve was gazetted in 2003 and a Committee of Management was soon formed.

Since 2003 the committee has gained two grants from the State government. These funds have been used to provide a visitor access path to the Trench, to fence the site and to carry out an intensive, on-going program against environmental weeds and rabbits.

The successful action by a dedicated group to prevent a geological heritage site being sold for development and to have it declared a Crown Land Reserve, may represent the first occasion that such action has been taken in Victoria.

Key words: Council Trench Reserve, Triassic, Bacchus Marsh.

INTRODUCTION

In 2000, the Council Trench reserve at Bacchus Marsh was offered for public sale by the State government as a housing development site, despite the reserve having State geological heritage significance.

This paper examines the geological history of the Trench that led to its heritage significance classification. A prime facet of the Trench history is that it contains the only known outcropping of Triassic sedimentary rock in Victoria.

The processes undertaken to ensure that a sale did not eventuate are described. Continued public ownership of the site was ultimately guaranteed when the site was nominated as the Bacchus Marsh Council Trench Crown Land Reserve and a committee of management approved.

The paper concludes by discussing initiatives that the committee of management has undertaken to conserve the reserve for the future.

THE COUNCIL TRENCH HISTORICAL RECORD

A notice in the Victorian Government Gazette of 1873 temporarily reserved a "six acres two roods twenty-two perches" (2.1 ha) allotment of land north of Bacchus Marsh township in central Victoria, on the southern slopes of Bald Hill, as a "site whence stone may be procured" (Victorian Government Gazette 1873). Quarrying records are unobtainable, but the allotment's period of use as a stone quarry was probably brief, because its sandstone was not of high quality. The disused quarry site is known today as the Council Trench. Chapman (1927) referred to the site as "a trench in the Council Paddock." Jacobson & Scott (1937) were the first to use the name Council Trench to describe the quarry.

The Council Trench has geological significance in Victoria because it is the only known outcropping of Triassic-aged sedimentary rock in the state. It comprises a small quarry about 40m in length, about 4m in width and 2 to 5 m in depth cut into a low ridge. Roberts (1984) named the outcropping the Council Trench Formation and described the section as follows – "The Council Trench Formation...consists of fine to medium grained, cream to brown, feldspathic sandstone and lenses of conglomerate ranging in thickness from one pebble layer to 40cm. The conglomerate contains subrounded to subangular pebbles of dark grey quartz and occasional lithics, ranging from 2mm to 2cm in diameter, set in a sandy matrix. The formation is locally ferruginised." Roberts (1988) and Mitchell et al. (2000) considered the sediments to be of freshwater origin. The Triassic rocks unconformably overlie Early Permian Bacchus Marsh Formation glauconitic sediments.

Plant macrofossils from the site were identified by McCoy (1892). He determined that the material was of Triassic age. Later palaeontological investigators examined further fossil evidence and confirmed the Triassic age of the outcrop, e.g. Officer & Balfour (1894); McCoy (1898); Chapman (1919, 1927); David (1950).

Douglas (1969, 1976, 1983, 1988) was more circumspect and assigned the Council Trench beds to a "Triassic or probably Triassic" age, while Spencer-Jones (1969) assigned them to a "Triassic or more generally Mesozoic" age.

During the 1970s J. Webb & N.W. Archbold took specimens of plant fossil material from the Trench. In a paper that has been submitted for publication in the Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria, J. Webb & M. M. Mitchell report that these specimens are of Late Triassic age.

State geological heritage status was granted to the Trench in 1980 by the Geological Society of Australia (G.S.A.) (Joyce &

King 1980). In a later reassessment, Mitchell et al. (2000) retained the State significance rating for the Trench.

For almost 130 years, the Trench had been visited and studied by academics, students and amateur geologists, often as a short side trip when visiting the nearby Bald Hill and Korkuperrimul Creek Permian glacials. It was generally taken for granted that this unprepossessing but important outcrop would remain in public ownership forever. Then in 2000, despite its geological heritage classification and historical significance, the Council Trench reserved land was offered for sale as a residential development. It was part of a Victorian Government initiative to dispose of all Crown Land that was not being actively managed.

RECENT CONSERVATION OF THE COUNCIL TRENCH

Intensive lobbying, both by individuals and the Geological Heritage subcommittee of G.S.A., Victoria Division, led the government body overseeing all Victorian Crown Land matters to withdraw the offer of sale of the Trench. The Bacchus Marsh Council Trench Crown Land Reserve was proclaimed. A Committee of Management was approved and appointed in early 2003. Members were drawn from the local community and from the G.S.A. Heritage subcommittee. The committee's role is to ensure that the Crown Land Reserve is managed and maintained appropriately and that the vegetation on the site is conserved. Weed eradication and fire control, visitor information and visitor safety measures are management priorities.

The committee received a Victorian Government Crown Land Reserves Improvement Program grant of \$5000 in 2003. A significant proportion of the grant has been spent on fencing the Reserve's roadside boundary, cleaning debris from the Trench, providing a walking path from the roadway to the outcrop, and installing a large redgum sign at the gate identifying the Triassic Council Trench Reserve to visitors.

A survey of plants on the site has been carried out, revealing remnant vegetation species seldom encountered on intensively farmed and residential local land. The remainder of the grant will be spent on a geological and botanical educational information panel to be placed near the outcrop, as well as on management priorities.

On Saturday October 11th 2003, the Bacchus Marsh Council Trench Reserve Committee of Management Incorporated officially opened the Council Trench Reserve. Forty-eight people, many of them local residents, were present at the site to celebrate the occasion.

During 2004, the committee produced a comprehensive Management Plan for the Reserve and launched it at a well-attended public meeting in Bacchus Marsh followed by a site visit.

In June 2005 the committee gained further grant money under a Department of Sustainability and Environment Stewardship in Action scheme. This money is to be used for risk mitigation action to remove a large rock overhanging the quarry and also to provide further visitor interpretation opportunities on the reserve.

A "Triassic Park" Visitors' Guide is being prepared.

CONCLUSIONS

Instead of allowing the important geological heritage site of the Council Trench to disappear and become a housing development as planned in 2000, the hard work and perseverance of a group of enthusiasts ensured that it was retained in public ownership. This may be the first time in Victoria that such action has been taken to retain reserved land in public ownership.

A dedicated Committee of Management is undertaking conservation measures following sound management practices so that visitors to the reserve into the future can appreciate its Triassic outcropping and other amenities.

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