Our Heritage
by the
Friends of Kurth Kiln
An incorporated group of volunteers under the auspices of Parks Victoria
A003622X1

A Picture Calendar
promoting greater awareness of the beauty and the historic significance of this fascinating place in the Australian Bush

July - June
2013/14

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The Kurth Kiln Heritage Site

The following are passages from Daniel Catrice’s introduction summary in his 1996 Kurth Kiln Conservation Plan. At the beginning of WWII the Federal Government encouraged the use of substitute fuels for the transport industry and the Forests Commission of Victoria was given the responsibility of ensuring adequate supply of quality charcoal. In 1941 this site was selected to construct a charcoal kiln to the revolutionary new design of Ernest Kurth, a Doctor of Chemistry at the University of Tasmania.

At the end of the war, from 1946 to 1963 the site became a forestry management camp and 18 “masonite” huts were acquired from the Army to accommodate up to 100 employees in forest management operations. By the mid seventies several of the huts had burned down and when the decision was made to develop it into a picnic ground the remainder was consolidated into the four huts and the big shed there now, The picket fence was added in 1982.

In 2002 a Heritage Action Plan was commissioned by Parks Victoria and the site nominated for Listing on the Victorian Heritage Register. Heritage Overlay Numbers HO21 and HO400 were raised and in 2008 the kiln and its historic buildings were added to the Victoria Heritage Register under number H2012.
Kurth Kiln Regional Park

Named after the historic kiln situated at its heart, the park comprises some 3,500ha of assorted bush-land, bordering on the 17,000ha Bunyip State Park in the East. The area used to be part of the Yarra Valley Multipurpose Park managed by the Forests Commission of Victoria, but in 1993 the former Land Conservation Council recommended the name “Kurth Kiln Regional Park” be given as the Kiln was a major feature of the park. The initially-considered name “Egg Rock Regional Park” (after the natural rock feature by that name) was dropped after realising that the rock had been dynamited off its perch by vandals in the 1960’s.

The Parks Victoria map below shows the park (shaded green) and Kurth Kiln detail (insert). Except for Gembrook Launching Place Road, all roads in the park are unsealed. Some of the bush tracks shown may be subject to seasonal closure.
Professor Ernest Edgar Kurth and his original Patent Paper 15,542 for the revolutionary charcoal kiln. It says in part:

I, Ernest Edgar Kurth, D.Sc., formerly of 28 Elphingstone Road, Hobart, but now of 18 Stoke Street, New Town, in the State of Tasmania, Commonwealth of Australia, Professor of Chemistry of the University of Tasmania, hereby declare this invention and the manner in which it is to be performed to be fully described and ascertained in and by the following statement: “This invention relates to improvements in and connected with charcoal kilns and refers especially to a charcoal kiln which is capable of continuous production of charcoal. The intermittent brick kiln in common use for the manufacture of charcoal takes a number of days to cool after charring of the wood has taken place and consequently the average capacity is small in relation to the capital cost. “It is an object of this invention therefore to provide a charcoal kiln of improved design which is capable of substantially continuous operation, and which has a greater productive capacity relative to initial cost…”
• 1895 Ernest was born on 1 November in Broken Hill. He was raised in the West Australian gold fields and attended Scotch College in Perth.

• He gained his Diploma at the Kalgoorlie School of Mines and worked at the “Sons of Gwalia Gold Mine” there.

• 1919 Moved to Hobart Tasmania and worked for the Electrolytic Zinc Co in the early stages of its establishment at Risdon, and was instrumental in the development of its scientists and technologists.

• 1923 Lecturer at the University of Tasmania, for Chemistry and Geology.

• 1924 married Irene Saunders. They had four Children. Two boys, Dudley and Geoffrey; and two girls, Shirley and Dorothy.

• 1928 received Bachelor of Science Degree. Helped the Tasmanian Shakle Oil Investigation examine the possibility of developing an oil industry.

• 1934 received Doctorate in Science, continued research in the composition of Tasmanian and NSW oil shales.

• 1940 designed gas producers for motor cars. Patented a design for an improved charcoal kiln

• 1941 became Professor of Chemistry at the University of Tasmania and Head of Chemistry Dept at Hobart Technical College. Supervised construction of a charcoal Kiln to his design at Gembrook Victoria.

• 1946 became Dean of the Faculty of Science, designed the new Chemistry Building at Sandy Bay.

• 1960 retired, honoured with the title Professor Emeritus. Continued studies on trace elements in timber ash.

• 1966 Ernest Edgar Kurth died on 4 January and is buried in the Cornelian Bay Cemetery.
Heritage Register


Kurth Kiln Collection – assessment of significance

Report for Parks Victoria
August 2008
Biosis Research Pty Ltd
Project no: 6473
Author: Gary Vines
WATERCHANNEL TK
HORSES, WALKERS & BICYCLES ONLY
The Waterchannel Track

One of the three essentials for Kurth’s kiln was a steady supply of water to cool the hot charcoal and allow continuous extraction. According to a preliminary report by District Forester, W. Griggs, ‘…the possibilities of an existing old water race, which could be used as a means of water supply by gravitation… needing only repairs in one or two places, fluming across one narrow creek and cleaning out’ (Grigg 1942-3). Left over from old mining operations around the turn of the century it was capable to supply all the water needed for the kiln.

The race follows a course along the 230m contour line commencing on a branch of Tomahawk Creek upstream of the Gembrook-Launching Place Road. Where the channel crosses Soldiers Road, Kurth had the water diverted into a retarding basin and used an iron pipe for the last 300m down to the kiln.

The Friends of Kurth Kiln have installed Interpretation Boards on the Waterchannel Track (funded by Cardinia Shire) for visiting walkers to learn some of its turbulent story.
The Tomahawk Creek Nature Trail is a 2km circuit walk, alongside the gurgling water gushing over the rocks in the creek. The many species of plants beside the track caught Swinburne Conservation and Land Management Teacher, Gaye de Lisle’s, eye. Gaye created an interpretation project, in which her students photographed, identified and described plants on the track, GPS their coordinates and compiled a resource book.

The resource book, called “Some Plants along the Tomahawk Creek Waking Trail”, was presented to the Friends of Kurth Klin and Parks Victoria, when each student spoke briefly about their plants. The book has become a valuable asset used on many walks with various groups interested in local plant varieties.
The Ferguson Heritage Tractor Group at Kurth Kiln
### Visiting Groups

School-, Scouts- and U3A groups, Vintage Cars-, Tractors-, Rotary-, Probus-, Horse Riding and Pony clubs, campers and picnickers all enjoy a visit to Kurth Kiln. Many groups and clubs arrange with the Friends of Kurth Kiln to open up the facilities, show them around and give a talk about the history and significance of the kiln site and of the Friends group activities.

Often elderly visitors have recollections of visiting the area in bygone days, or tell us stories of their experience driving vehicles fitted with charcoal gas producers.
A Russian Music Fest at Kurth Kiln
The Bush and the People

Many people love the bush experience, are interested in its fauna and flora and look after the environment. The Friends of Kurth Kiln are aware of the importance to preserve the our sensitive bushland for future generations and delight in school and Scout groups, both young and older visits.

Young students from different schools enjoy learning about the history and environment and are keen to help keep the picturesque tracks in good order and preserve the unique bush environment.
Thornton Track Nature Walk

The Thornton Track is a moderately difficult 1.1km, 1/2 hour walk. A return circuit walk to Kurth Kiln is possible via Scout Camp Track and a further 1km for one hour walking. The walk travels through seven plant communities and is a great place to observe the tracks, traces and sounds of the park’s wildlife.

Ron Thornton was a man who loved Kurth Kiln. He adopted the site as his own and looked after it for nearly 20 years. In his retirement he lived in one of the historic huts and assumed the role of an unofficial caretaker of Kurth Kiln and its picnic ground. Sadly, Ron passed away in 2000, and to commemorate his dedication to the bush and the Kurth Kiln environment, the Friends of Kurth Kiln, with the support of Parks Victoria, created this walking track through the pristine bush along Tomahawk Creek, upstream from the kiln.

Six interpretive signs have been placed at strategic points along the track to highlight changes in the bush environments. There are historic relics along the way that can still be seen, left over from an era when over 100 sawmills operated in these forests. Distance markers are set about every 100 metres.

We hope you enjoy the experience.

You enter the Thornton Walk from the Tomahawk Weir and the small picnic ground north of the lake at the corner of Beenak Road and Soldiers Road.

The track is moist here at the start of the track, so you can find many types of fungi. The understorey is typical of this area: Tea Trees, some Silver Wattle, Blackwood and Dusty Miller. High above are canopies of Messmate, some Mountain Grey Gums and Narrow Leaf Peppermint. Mountain Grey Gum, *Eucalyptus cypellocarpa* (also known as Monkey Gum), a straight, smooth-barked forest tree, can reach over 60 metres tall in moist protected gullies.

Near the creek to your right you can see Ferns and Sedges. It is a good area to look for White-throated Tree Creepers (*Cormobates leucophaea*) and Ground Thrush.

This is a joint project of Parks Victoria and the Friends of Kurth Kiln funded by Melbourne Water, to promote greater awareness of the sensitive nature of the Victorian Waterways and their environment.
The Thornton Nature Walk

The Friends of Kurth Kiln created the Thornton Walking Track back in 2002 to commemorate Ron Thornton, the “unofficial caretaker” of the Kurth Kiln for 16 years. The official opening took place on Sunday 13 October and both the Mayor of Shire of Yarra Ranges, Cr. Ken Smith and the Mayor of Cardinia Shire, Cr. Keith Ewenson, attended.

To highlight its unique fauna and flora the Friends of Kurth Kiln have applied for (and received) funding from Melbourne Water to install six interpretive signs at strategic points along the track; at the same time promoting greater awareness of the sensitive nature of the Victorian waterways and their environment. Historic relics along the track can still be found, left over from an era when over 100 sawmills operated in these forests, and remind us of the relevance of Kurth Kiln in our heritage.

In preparation for their installation and the official opening with the Gembrook Primary School the ten faded distance markers were re-labelled with metallic tags.
Stage Coach Hold-Up, Stand and Deliver!
Kurth Kiln Heritage Festival

Each year in April, since 2002, the peaceful and picturesque Kurth Kiln bush setting comes alive, inundated with lots of people, festival participants, visitors and animals. The whole kiln site is covered with stalls and information booths and tools on display. People gather around demonstrations by the blacksmith, sheepshearer, wood cutter and the huskies. Heritage tractors and historic machinery mingle with vintage cars and gas producers. A band and vocalist entertain with traditional country music and the Hoddles Creek Red Cross Unit caters for food and refreshments. Kids just love the face painting artist.

There are Stage Coach rides for children and adults, but the highlight of the day is of course the by now traditional stage coach robbery, with mounted trouper chasing and catching the bad robbers in the end.
Plantings are a hive of activities
Re-vegetation

In caring for the Kurth Kiln environment the Friends of Kurth Kiln have regularly applied for re-vegetation and protective fencing grants. Re-vegetation to minimise sediment seepage, to control vandalism around picnic and camping grounds and to stop damage to sensitive creek environments. We are grateful to the Port Phillip and Westernport Catchment Management Authority, the National Envirofund and to Melbourne Water for their generous support of our projects.

We thank the local schools, the Gembrook Primary School, the Cockatoo Primary School and the Hoddles Creek Primary School as well as the Sherbrooke Community School for their participation in planting the thousands of seedlings around the kiln site. And in 2012 we appreciated the help of the Wandin Rotary Club with protective fencing to limit creeping expansion of the Southern Picnic Area threatening riparian creek environment.

The future wellbeing of our parks is in the hands of our children and the Friends of Kurth Kiln feel it is important to involve young people in our park activities to learn and appreciate the asset.
Conservation Activities

Conservation work is an ongoing occupation at Kurth Kiln. From routine treatment of the wooden structures, to repairing the ageing picket fence around the Caretakers Compound and keeping the growth of grass in check.

But it also entails categorising the hundreds of cultural artefacts found around the site, left over from the time the kiln was in operation and the activities of the Forests Commission of Victoria. Hours and days are spend in collating information, numbering, photographing, measuring and computer cataloguing the tools and materials from our historic past and storing them securely.

It involves creating display shelves where items can be shown to the visiting public. It involves applying for funding grants to build secure portable enclosures where our large and heavy Gas Producers can be safely housed and displayed for best advantage. It involves seeking funding to install Interpretation Boards at significant points to inform the casual visitors of the kiln’s history.

And it involves producing brochures and publications where all this work comes together and is brought to the public’s attention.
The Time-line of Kurth Kiln and the Friends Group

- 1940 Professor Ernest Kurth’s revolutionary design for a kiln to mass-produce charcoal for motor fuel is acquired by the government.
- 1941 Kurth Kiln established by the Forests Commission of Victoria on Tomahawk Creek.
- 1942 The first firing of the kiln takes place on the 18 March 1942. The kiln was 15% more efficient and able to produced 20 tonnes of charcoal per week from 120 tonnes of wood.
- 1943 The easing of petrol rationing results in continuous operations at the Kiln coming to a halt. In all, some 1000 tonnes of charcoal were produced at Kurth Kiln.
- 1946 the Forests Commission of Victoria installs ex Army Huts and Kurth Kiln becomes the base camp for the region, housing 80 -100 men in 18 huts.
- 1963 The FCV operations are scaled down. The site becomes neglected and fire destroys several of the huts.
- 1978 The site is developed as a picnic and camping ground. A further three huts are demolished and the material used to modify a remaining one as a Caretaker’s Residence.
- 1982 A traditional picket fence is installed around the remaining huts.
- 1984 Ron Thornton moves into the Residence and assumes the role of Caretaker.
- 1993 The Land Conservation Council officially names “Kurth Kiln Regional Park”.
- 1996 A Conservation Plan is prepared for Kurth Kiln by the Department of Natural Resources and Environment; (Daniel Catrice).
- 1997 Parks Victoria carry out repair to the Flue and Chimney structure of the Kiln.
- 2001 Construct a new 6 foot waterwheel and flume as a working exhibit to symbolise the historic past. Construct three new Interpretation Display Windows on Big Shed. Assist the Helmeted Honeyeater Group in relocating aviaries.
- 2002 Parks Victoria commissions Kurth Kiln Heritage Action Plan; BIOSIS (Gary Vines). Nomination of Kurth Kiln for the Victorian Heritage Register. Creation of Heritage Overlays HO21 and HO400. Create a new 1km long Thornton Walking Track with a 15m footbridge across the Tomahawk Creek. Commence categorising and computer cataloguing the Cultural Heritage Artefacts at Kurth Kiln. Create Display Wall in the Big Shed. Stage a festival in conjunction with the National Heritage Dandenong group: “Beyond the Big Smoke”.
- 2003 Parks Victoria funds a Solar Electric system to allow use of on-site computers. Construct benches and trestle tables for use on-site. Repair annexe (04A) next to Kiln. Produce a “Friendship Festival”. It becomes an annual event in the form of a “Heritage Festival”
- 2004 A large area map is fitted to the Information Booth BUN300. Re-vegetation around west Picnic Ground, funded by National Envirofund.
- 2005 Successful application to Department of Victorian Communities Community Strengthening & Volunteering for a Portable Display.
- 2006 Funding is received from Parks Victoria to create two Interpretation Boards, one near the kiln and one in the Caretakers Compound. SLR camera bought with a Small Equipment Grant.
- 2007 Port Phillip and Western Port CMA fund a large fencing and re-vegetation project. Six Gas Producers donated to the Kurth Kiln Collection.
- 2008 An Interpretation Board is created at the portable Steel Kiln on Tonimbuk Road.
- 2009 Successful application to FaHCSIA for a sound and video system. Parks Victoria funds Portable Display for the Gas Producers.
- 2010 “Fireside Stories” booklet, a collection of reflections by Bill Parker is launched at he Open Day in April. It is funded by GVESHO. Bulk print new Brochure, funded by Melbourne Water
- 2011 Publish “Amongst Friends” booklet, funded by GVESHO and the Bendigo Bank. Install Interpretation Boards on Waterchannel Track, funded by Cardinia Shire Council. BB also funds re-vegetating the fenced Camping Ground.