

Reflections on the Anniversary Meeting 8 June 2019

The Friends of Kurth Kiln group was officially formed in June 1999. It was on the suggestion of Parks Victoria Ranger Dave Drangsholt, who tried to encourage our feeble attempts to improve the Kurth Kiln site: "As a registered Friends Group you would become so much more efficient in your work". No sooner said than done, we had our first official meeting as an incorporated Friends of Kurth Kiln group on the second Saturday in June 1999. 20 years ago.

Meinhard Holtz volunteered to become our President, a position he held with his wife Hilda until his untimely death in 2006. We were sorry to see Dave Drangsholt leave, as he retired in 2002, but our new official support from Parks Victoria Gembrook Office was Ralph Angelico who became a very active Liaison Ranger for the next 10 years.

Promoting the historic site and improving its environment were always high on our agenda:

- 1 Repair to the kiln itself. The collapsing flue had been replaced by Parks Victoria earlier in 1996, but much of the re-enforcing steel work was missing. A local blacksmith helped us there, and all was replaced.
- 2 Two of the four steel Shute Doors were missing. One was located dumped in the bush not far away. The blacksmith took it to a steel foundry and had a duplicate made of it, then fitted both to the kiln.
It was only then we discovered the possible reason why the door was dumped, because the inscription on it, makers name and date, were written upside down. Never mind, you have to look close to be able to read it.
- 3 The little dam on the lake behind the kiln had collapsed, the lake was overgrown with weeds and there was no sign of the waterwheel supposed to have been there at the time of the kiln operation.
We repaired the dam, Parks Victoria cleared out the lake. We opened the walkway to the Picnic Ground and Toilets and installed Post and Rail Fencing around the open areas.
- 4 Dick Cleary, a member with constructive talents, suggested we should replace the waterwheel and offered to build a six foot one in his workshop. Everyone was willing to help. The foundation for the wheel was re-established and the feed-through from the new dam installed. It all works and looks very fitting.
Parks Victoria decided though, that to have a running waterwheel on site with no one watching it was too dangerous, so a chain lock was placed on the wheel to be taken off only when one of us is on site to keep an eye on it.
- 5 The picket fence around the fenced Caretakers Site was damaged in part and was repaired.
- 6 It was felt some Display Signs were needed to tell visitors a bit about the history of the kiln and the accommodation huts. Funding was received to create two signs, one next to the kiln and one in the Caretakers Compound. Two more sign were eventually placed on the Waterchannel Track and another one in 2008 at the site of the portable Steel Kiln on Tonimbuk Road.
- 7 Three Display Windows were installed on the open side of the Big Shed, again to give visitors some ideas on the activities now going on here. One covering the Friends Group activities, one for the History of the Site and one for general conservation activity in the area.

Other Activities

- 1 Revegetation became a dominant project over the years, First around the kiln site itself, then further afield, with bushwalking and track guidance developing. The participation of the local schools of Gembrook, Cockatoo and Hoddles Creek was encouraged. Funding support from Local Councils, Parks Victoria and Melbourne Water covered the expenses. We even had one funded by an environmental Group in Canberra.
- 2 The idea of having a Kurth Kiln Festival seemed a good way to promote the historic site and our activities. The first one took place on the weekend of April 13 and 14 in 2002 and was called "Beyond the Big Smoke". The idea came from Ray Boatman, President National Trust Australia, Dandenong Ranges Branch.
It was a huge success and the Friends Group decided to make a Kurth Kiln Heritage Festival in autumn an annual event. With the financial support of local council the festival has gone from strength to strength with over 100 volunteers participating each year.

- 3 One major development for us was the creation of a List of Cultural Artefacts found on site. All items were given a number and recorded on the computer, including items left behind by the Forest Commission who used the site after the war. The activity extended over several years and close to 1500 items are now registered. A display wall was set-up in the Big Shed to allow visitors to appreciate the collection. Of course, we needed power to operate the computers on site and Parks Victoria came to the party, installing a two solar panel Power supply, which has helped us a lot over the years.
- The latest addition to the list of artefacts was a collection of six so-called Gas Producers donated to us and housed in a special enclosure back in the walkway near the kiln. The Enclosure was funded by Parks Victoria and the Information Display Panels by the Victorian Heritage Department.
- How we came by the Gas Producers is a nice little story in itself. We had been thinking about how we could demonstrate to our visitors what the charcoal produced in the kiln was actually used for and how this was done. One day a chap from Royal Auto Magazine was looking around the kilnsite and said “this would actually make a nice story for our magazine”. I told him that we were looking for a couple of Gas Producers to complete the picture, and asked him if it was possible to put a little Note at the bottom of his story about our activities, asking the readers if anyone has one of those old Gas Producers still lying around their property, would they mind donating it to us? We can’t pay for it, but we would acknowledge the donation in the display. Would you believe it! we had 20 offers from all over Victoria. We selected six different ones and completed the enclosure. It has been a very successful addition to our historic display.
- 4 In 2008 the Heritage Department of Victoria included Kurth Kiln in their list of Historic Sites in Victoria. It is now an official Heritage Site and no changes are allowed to be made without department approval.
- 5 Ron Thornton was living in the Caretakers Cottage when we started at Kurth Kiln and was considered the Unofficial Caretaker of the site, He had his own little vegetable garden and immediately joined the group as a very creative member. Unfortunately he passed away already the following year. To commemorate his activities Meinhard Holtz suggested naming the new walking track he was planning North of the Tomahawk Creek after him. The Thornton Walking Track was completed in 2006, running from the little Picnic Ground next to the Lake eastwards 1km to Camp Track, with a new bridge back over the Tomahawk Creek for a return circuit via Soldiers Road to Kurth Kiln. Six Interpretation Boards along the way tell the story of its natural environment and its history. Construction was paid for by Melbourne Water.
- 6 One way or another Ranger Ralph Angelico was involved in, and very supportive of all of our activities. One little story I have often told before, was when we had a blocked drain, and debating on how to fix it, perhaps blow it out? “Hang on a minute” Ralph shouted, “I’ll be back in half an hour”. He came back with the Parks Victoria Fire Fighting truck and within 15 minutes the blocked drain was cleared and working again.
- Ralph encouraged us to participate in a Friends Group Best Photo Display Competition in Kallista in October 2002. We prepared two large display panels, covering Kurth Kiln History and our activities to promote it and, would you believe it, we won first price! These are the two panels used.
- Ralph retired in 2012 and we miss him very much.
- 7 There are some 100km of Bush Walking Tracks in Kurth Kiln Regional Park and many visiting groups go for extended walks there. We give Guided Tours of the Kurth Kiln site at every opportunity, but we also look for new Motivating Ideas.

Alfred