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NEWSLETTER

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FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome to a new year. It has started with several dramatic weather events throughout Australia. The cyclones in Queensland of such strength that we have felt the impact at Yarra Glen. The rain and storms blown across Victoria as Cyclone Yasi penetrated central Australia caused moderate flooding at Yarra Glen. Our fourth flood in six months, but this one has been the highest and the Melba Highway at Yering was closed for a couple of days. By sheer coincidence Barry Watts and I have been preparing an article for this Newsletter which refers to the Yering flood plains. Barry has collated the references that Eric Tetlow gathered relating to a historic landmark that stood on the plains for about sixty years and added some of his own reminiscences.

Helen

THE YEAR AHEAD

February 13	General Meeting*
March 13	General Meeting
March 14	Gulf Station Open Day
April 10	General Meeting
May 15	General Meeting
	Guest speaker: Mick Woiwod
June 12	General Meeting
July 10	General Meeting
August 14	General Meeting
September 11	General Meeting
October 9	AGM
November 13	Tetlow Talk
December 11	Christmas break-up

*Our general meetings are held on the second Sunday of each month (except in May due to Mothers Day) and start at 1:30pm

The History Room (at the rear of the Memorial Hall) is open on Wednesday afternoons 1:30-4:00pm

A WILLOW TO WEEP OVER

by Barry Watts

The river flats to the east and south-east of Yarra Glen have been subject to flooding for thousands of years. The Ryrie brothers, after their arrival with stock from New South Wales in 1838, selected as the site for their homestead the first elevated land on the eastern side of the river. In later years several landholders along the river built flood mitigation channels through their Yering properties. Ryrie had a track from his homestead to a crossing over the river near the current bridges. In time this was replaced by government roads which followed a variety of routes across the flood plain until 1905 when the present alignment past Chateau Yering was established. The earlier ones skirted Ryrie's Pre-emptive Right and were closer to the river.

One of the drainage channels runs under a concrete bridge quite near Chateau Yering at the beginning of the straight road to the 'Glen. The second, no longer obvious, is just before the entrance to the 'Yarra Billabongs' reserve some few hundred metres before the Vasey Houghton bridge. During my childhood and youth at Yarra Glen in the 1940s, the site of this latter channel was distinguished by a stunted, tilted willow tree with just a few live branches. It was located on the left of a culvert when travelling towards Lilydale. Across the road, opposite the willow, were two substantial mounds of earth, perhaps heaped to a height of 1½ metres, with obvious signs that several trailer loads of this rich alluvial soil had been carted away leaving a sharply distinguished edge against the weathered roundness of the mounds. The culvert was marked by four white posts and the road at this point had a 'dip' in its surface, caused either by a broken pipe or subsided foundations.

There are some vaguely romantic stories and legends attached to these landmarks. Let us trace the history of this spot. Since many of the historical records referring to a significant willow tree at Yering have been written as reminiscences one should be wary not to accept as fact matters that cannot be substantiated. George Watts, a servant of Ryrie, whose name is linked with the Watts River is also closely associated with the willow tree.¹

¹ For instance, Sally Symonds, *Healesville: history in the hills*. Lilydale, 1982. ... "the Watts River, named after one of Ryrie's stockmen who had got entangled in snags and drowned in 1837." (p.23.) However the date given here is *before* the Ryries arrived at Yering with their cattle in 1838.

James Dawson² who had a property on the other side of the Yarra in the 1840s, wrote to a newspaper many years later:

It might interest your reader to know that it was one of Ryrie's assigned servants named Watts who discovered the Watts River...Watts, I believe, was buried under the "Willow Tree" at Yering.

With reference to the willow tree, I understand the cutting was obtained by Mr. Ryrie about 1840 from the Captain of a vessel... [which] had called at St. Helena and the cutting was obtained from Napoleon's grave.

When...photographed...in '67 it had a spread of branches of 60 feet and a [trunk] circumference [of] 3 or 5 feet. I forget which.

On the ground at the foot of the tree, is an old, weather-beaten block of granite, chipped and hacked all over, apparently by an axe or tomahawk, with a hardly decipherable inscription, in half Latin and half English. We make out the following: "Frederick Landry, born 1818, died 1857".

Dawson's account contains an error relating to the assigned servant Watts, revealed in the recent biography *The Ryrie Family - Australian Pioneers* by John H. Edwards (2007). Edwards writes that

[George] Watts, 27...[was a] most trusted [man]...[and] remained in William [Ryrie's] employ at Yering for many years and Watts even had a small river named after him...Watts gave evidence at an inquest into the accidental death of his stepson, also George Watts, who had fallen from a tree and broken his neck.

The inquest of this death is the earliest official record of an event associated with the willow tree. The boy, aged 10½, died on 5 May 1845. George Watts, who married the boy's mother Jane Coghlen in 1841, provided a statement to the inquest that he was the boy's [step]father. An account of the boy's death is also given by Annie Stewart (née Furphy) sister of Joseph Furphy. We must take into account that Annie was writing her letter in 1937 to Kate Baker, recalling a family story of an event that had occurred before she was born.

A young English doctor and his wife, in the late [18]30s decided to try their luck in Australia, taking with them their only child, a little boy...not long afterwards [the doctor] was accidentally drowned...the widow's [new] husband was a shepherd on Ryries' Station and the little boy, about 12 years of age, also had charge of a small flock...late in the day they found him dead...they laid him in his little grave at the foot of a young willow tree...he was known as 'Geordie' Watt – but I think that must have been his stepfather's name as the mother was known as Mrs Watt.

Jane Coghlen's first husband had drowned in the Yarra near Melbourne in 1840. The inquest for his death states that Coghlen was an accountant working for a chemist.

1850

Frederick Landry's death and burial at Yering has been confirmed in the Victorian Birth, Death and Marriage Register and by an Inquest Report of his death.

LANDRY, Frederick. Died 1857. Age 30. Birthplace: Switzerland. Parents Unknown. Died 1st February 1857,

Brushy Creek. Fall from horse³ Buried 3 Feb 1857 P. de Castella's⁴ station.

1860

Three years later, the *Argus* newspaper reported on 7 May 1861: *Dr Candler held an inquest yesterday, at Brushy Creek, on the body of David Hart, who had died on the 3rd inst.,...at the time of his death, he was working for a farmer at Yering, named Jebbs.*

Inquest No. 416 of 1861 records: *HART, David. Died 1861. Aged 40. Birthplace: Ireland. Parents Unknown. Buried 6th May 1861, Yering Private Cemetery.*

1870

The next piece of evidence was published in *The Age* on 5 January 1935. It was written by a former Cobb & Co driver 'W.N.' (William Newman) who was reflecting on his life in the district in the 1870s.

Just over the bridge, to the left of the road, stood a famous old weeping willow which grew on an old cemetery mound. It was grown from a cutting from the tree which overshadowed Napoleon's grave at St. Helena. It was a remarkable sight to see a slanting wooden memorial slab protruding from the centre of its trunk. The lower portion of it had become embedded during the tree's growth.

1880

James Dawson wrote once again, this time from Scotland in 1883, claiming that Ryrie presented willow cuttings from Napoleon's graveside to the Botanic Gardens for planting along the Yarra. (*The Argus*, 29 September 1883).

In August 1888, the year that the railway and the Grand Hotel were completed, the *Lilydale Express* reported:

Mr Donald Ryrie died at Cooma, NSW on the 31st July ... They crossed the country with drays, cattle, horses and convict servants, one of whom was Watts, after whom the river falling in the Upper Yarra was named.

Again, we find reference to the assigned servant, Watts in association with the river bearing his name, but no real evidence that it was in fact named after Ryrie's George Watts.⁵

1890

Four years later a 'Letter to the Editor' of the *Lilydale Express* (3 Nov 1892) was submitted by a person who signed himself 'Double Harness':

I got as far as the Willow Tree in safety, and had to face the road from hence to the bridge – the only means of access from the Shire of Lilydale to that of Eltham. My buggy had to float across a deep gully of water ... and several swamps and glue-pots which make it surprising that no lives have been lost here.

The complainant clearly identifies the 'Willow Tree' as a known local landmark; and the road between it and the Yarra Glen bridge as difficult to traverse.

³ Victorian Death Index

⁴ De Castella purchased the Ryrie property 'Yering' from Ryrie in 1850. They renamed it 'Chateau Yering'.

⁵ The earliest reference we have found to date is a map drawn by W. Owens and published in 1862. The map shows Watts Creek, but a *Victorian Government Gazette*, Dec 1862 refers to the same stream as Watts River.

² James Dawson (1806-1900), was born in Scotland and came to Australia in May 1840, bought a small property on the Yarra above Anderson's Creek (now Warrandyte). He later moved to the Western District. He was an amateur ethnographer and published a book *Australian Aborigines*



J.W.Lindt's photograph 'The Watts Willow, Yarra Flats' taken prior to 1888. Note the seated figure under the tree for comparison of size.

Next came an item published in *The Leader* on 16 December 1893 but referring to a period thirteen years previous, that is, early 1880. Its author wrote under the non-de-plume 'The Vagabond' but his real name was John Stanley James, a prolific, wandering journalist. His articles were extremely popular, and when collected in book form sold widely.

It is nearly 13 years since I first rode across the vineyards of the brothers De Castella ... In those days there was no Yarra Glen, and after leaving the willow tree, we took the road over Christmas Hills toward Melbourne.

... Down the knoll in an adjacent paddock may be seen the far famed willow tree, most magnificent of its kind in Victoria, an historic shrine worth more than a passing mention. This is none of the slender weeping willows one sees on the Yarra banks. It grows after the oak pattern, sturdy and spreading, with a girth of about 14ft. Overhead it forms a sheltering circle, perfectly horizontal. Not a twig droops down below its fellows, so evenly have the cattle cropped it. This mammoth willow grows above a child's grave, the memorial tablet which marks the spot once stood upright in the sod, but in nearly 50 years of growth the great tree has lifted and twisted the tablet, and now holds it closer than any vice.

...Embedded in the underside is a small brass plate bearing the inscription "To the memory of George Isaac Watts, who departed this life 4th March 1845"The body was found next day and buried here in the open land. Some 18 months later, while the headstone, which had been brought from England, was being placed in position the mother of the dead boy stood weeping near, afresh.

'The Vagabond' also adds to Dawson's story about Ryrie receiving the willow cutting from a sea captain:

Over the hills from Heidelberg rode a man, one Campbell, carrying in lieu of a riding whip a branch of a willow. Half in sympathy, half in curiosity, he dismounted near the sad little group, and when the tablet was finally in position Campbell thrust the willow branch into the earth beside it. Hence the mighty tree, and hence the twisted headstone, the shrine of the first dead at Yering.

Further reference of the tree's stature was published in the *Lilydale Express* (17 Aug 1894) in a report of the presentation of an illuminated address to Mr Paul de Castella, the owner of the Chateau Yering property:

The address, which was exquisitely embossed, is surrounded by some Australian flora, in the centre of which can be seen the

renowned old willow tree. The address is encased in a nicely carved oak frame.

Fifteen months later (15 November 1895) the willow tree was mentioned in the *Lilydale Express* under a headline 'A Fatal Riding Accident. Death of Miss D. Taylor':

Finding that the rider could not control him, the animal bounded away ...then the horse made off in the direction of the large willow tree, but after going a few yards the remainder of the party were horrified to see him suddenly stop and shoot his rider over his head. Miss Taylor struck the ground with tremendous force

Again, eleven months further on, a warning from the *Lilydale Express* (16 Oct 1896):

Persons who have occasion to use the main road between Yarra Glen and Lilydale should exercise great care when crossing the bridge over the drain near the Willow Tree ... the structure is narrow, the floor is rotting, while the guard rails have fallen away.

1920

In a school essay written at Yering in 1922, some of the previous information is revisited, and some new information gained:

One point of interest on the Chateau Yering [property] is a small sand-bank ... [which] is the burial place of five persons – a boundary rider named Watts (after whom was named the Watts River), a Frenchman, a Chinaman, and two children of Mr P. de Castella. For years this spot was marked by a Willow-tree, said to be the finest in the colony; but it was blown down about 20 years ago, and now nothing marks the spot of this early cemetery. It is stated that this tree was brought from St Helena and planted on one of the graves.

This essay suggests the willow tree was 'blown down about 20 years ago', say around 1902. My testimony of 'a stunted, tilted willow tree, with just a few live branches' seen in the 1940s contradicts part of this statement (of course, the tree may have re-grown from a piece of the old tree). The extent of the burials mentioned here is at first surprising, except that back in 1861 a 40-year-old Irish farm-worker named David Hart was buried, according to official records, at the 'Yering Private Cemetery'. Remember? So any number of persons, of any nationality, could potentially be buried there. Perhaps the local essayist was right? The reference to Watts is incorrect, though, as it was the death of his stepson, the first person known to be buried at the site.

1940

There's an old quip stating "The older a man gets, the further he walked to school as a boy" – suggesting the longer one is removed from events, the greater becomes the chance of their mis-representation. This may, or may not, account for the following in the *Lilydale Express* (26 Feb 1943)

Old-timers will recall that on this property was a huge willow tree which was said to be the largest in Australia, and frequently special trips from the city were undertaken to view this monster. Beneath its spreading branches could be seen a gravestone, with an inscription recording the last resting place of one of the estate's popular boundary riders. This fine tree had a sudden ending about 35 years ago, when a cyclone of intense velocity passed through the property and uprooted this mass of beauty.

There is only six years difference between the time that this reporter claimed the tree was uprooted (ie 1908) and the date estimated by the Yering student in 1922 (1902), so we can assume that the tree was blown down in the first decade of the twentieth century. The oft-mentioned magnificence of this particular willow has been photographically confirmed, but slight scepticism remains about 'special trips from the city' to see it. Further, the force of the wind which upturned the tree has increased from 'blown down' (Yering School essay) to 'a cyclone of intense velocity' used in the latter report. Perhaps the old adage about 'walking to school' is correct.

1960

Next a Minute extracted from a meeting of the Yarra Glen Progress Association on 17 March 1963:

Motion moved by Mr Cameron, and seconded by H. Vandenberg, that a letter be sent to the Shire of Lilydale requesting engineers to inspect the wooden bridge on [the] Lilydale side of Yarra Glen near the willow tree [on] Mr Sullivan's property. The motion was carried.

So a willow tree (as I recall from the 1940s) existed near the spot in the 1960s, even if it was a stunted form.

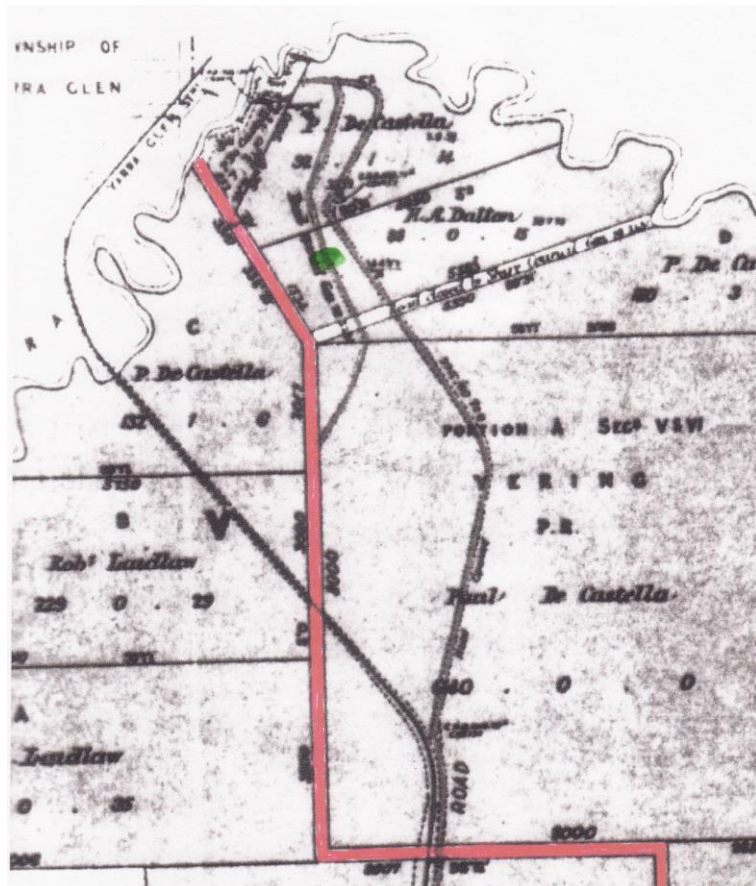
2010

Finally, we come to the item that motivated me to put an accumulation of research notes into some sort of order – a feature article in *The Age's* 'Melbourne Magazine' (December, 2010) about a kayak trip down the Yarra from source to mouth. It was written by Konrad Marshall.:

One story has it that these willows originated from a cutting taken from Napoleon's grave site on the island St Helena. They do seem to have a noble bearing, but they're classified as a weed of national significance. Willows kill natural habitats, drink too much water, and multiply too readily ...we end the day at Launching Place, ... (p.47)

How many willows, other than the one at Chateau Yering, grew from cuttings taken from Napoleon's grave site on St Helena one wonders. Or is it all a charming local myth passed on down through generations? But then again, ... and another thought intrudes ... planting a willow on a flood plain, a species that drinks too much water, may be a good idea after all. And then another thought ... this must end soon ... when the Ryrie brothers overlanded their stock from New South Wales in 1838 they took up 43,000 acres of river flats stretching upstream from Yarra Glen to Healesville and on to Launching Place! So one wonders just how many willows the Ryries planted.

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The map above shows the changing routes across the Yering flats. The original road followed the boundary of Ryrie's Pre-emptive Right (marked in red). In 1876 part of the road was moved to the east to avoid the swamps and closer to the willow tree. The burial ground/willow tree mound is marked in green on this road. In 1906 the road was moved eastward again to its current alignment past the gates of Chateau Yering. The new route was now to the east of the willow tree.

As one travels across the flats today towards Lilydale, just beyond the entrance to the Yarra Flats Billabong reserve, a large mound is discernible on the fence line on the right-hand side (south west). This is quite possibly the site of the large willow tree – the smaller willow remembered by residents during the mid-twentieth century was on the opposite side of the road. - Editor

YG&DHS CALENDAR 2011

Copies of the Calendar are still available from the Society, the Yarra Glen Post Office and the Newsagency.

