

Forest Camps

Forest camps played an important part in the operations of the Forest Commission Victoria (FCV).

Camps were established for timber assessment, road construction, softwood plantation establishment and fire suppression.

They were also established on state forest for unemployment relief programs as well housing POWs and refugees.

In later years they were used for staff training.

Forest camps were particularly important in an era before the state forest road network was well established and before reliable vehicle transport made daily commuting to a nearby town a possibility.

Depending on the nature and use of the camp, people could be accommodated for periods of several days, weeks or months and in the case of POW and refugee camps, even years.

The camps varied in complexity and construction materials from permanent hard roof buildings with basic facilities such as Mt Disappointment or Shelley through to more transient road construction and forest assessment camps in the eastern mountains which were often used for one or two seasons or until the project was completed. These were constructed with a mixture of tents and temporary buildings.

Camps could also be makeshift and constructed of whatever material was at hand like at Cowombat Flat at the headwaters of the Murray River where the fuselage of a crashed Dakota was assembled into a shelter.

Temporary assessment camps were often transported on pack horse so all provisions needed to be light and portable.

Facilities were mostly rudimentary with water drawn from nearby rivers and heating and cooking from wood stoves. Timber Stanley huts were uninsulated and bleak in winter and stifling in summer. Sometimes power was available from generators but the lighting was often from

kerosene lamps. Communications by radio with the outside world was possible from the 1940s.

Catering was a mixture of communal mess halls with an often eccentric camp cook or staff self-catered. Hunting and fishing were a common means of supplementing rations.

Whereas, fire basecamps by their very nature were temporary and often quickly established in a small clearing near a river and close to the fire. They were initially primitive affairs with tents and mobile caravans so it was wise for fire crews to come away and expect to remain pretty self-sufficient for the first 48 hours or so. But over time fire basecamps became more comfortable and well organised with hot showers, toilets, 240V power, medical services and decent cooked food.

The use of the more permanent camps evolved over time. Mt Disappointment (aka Broadford), for example, was used as a Forest Foreman school from the late 1950s until about 1968.

Some camps were later leased to schools and community groups when no longer required by the Commission.

Many forest camps were used for forestry students on vacation work but changing standards and staff expectations combined with high maintenance costs, bushfires and vandalism has meant that all but a few camps now remain.

Surveyors Creek, north of Licola is still used as a fire basecamp.

1930s Unemployment relief camps.

Although revenue from timber sales declined during the 1930s Great Depression the Government channelled substantial funds to the Commission for unemployment relief works which were well suited to unskilled manual labour such as firebreak slashing, silvicultural thinning, weed spraying and rabbit control.

Temporary and semi-permanent camps sprang up right across Victoria's State forests.

By 1935-36 the Commission employed almost 9000 men for periods of up to eight weeks at a time. The camps generally comprised 25 men with two-thirds being from the city. And despite the

blisters, many remained in the country to make their future.

However, there was a particular need to provide opportunities for young people. One success story was at "Boys Camp" near Noojee which was made possible with the support of two prominent Melbourne businessmen and philanthropists, Herbert Robinson Brooks and George Richard Nicholas together with the Chairman of the Commission A. V. Galbraith. A further 15 camps were established across Victoria.



Boys Camp at Powelltown. Circa 1930s. Source Norm Endacott

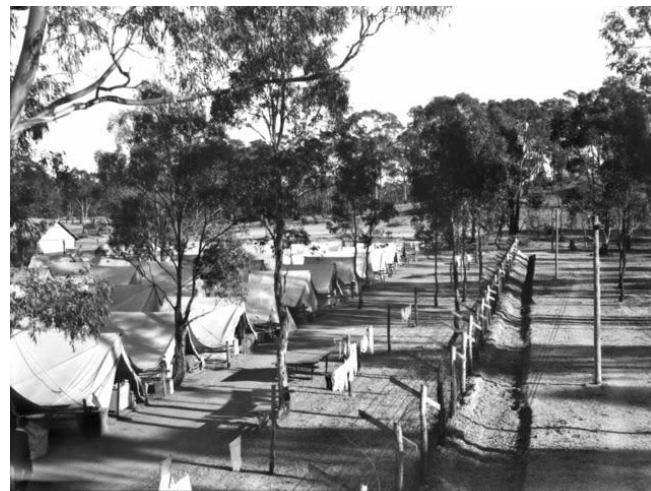
POW, Internee and Refugee camps.

The Forests Commission was desperately short of manpower in the war years and took up the option of establishing several work camps. The Army paid one Pound per week per prisoner for provide food, tools and accommodation for both prisoners and army personnel.

Many of the unemployment relief camps from the 1930s were repurposed and some new ones built to house Italian and German Internees (aka Enemy Aliens) and POW's who then worked to produce firewood and charcoal for Melbourne. Some of these sites include:

- Mt Disappointment / Broadford (1,3 &3)
- Whroo for Italians (Rushworth)
- Graytown for Germans (Rushworth).
- Spences Bridge (Gunbower Island).
- Tatura.

Many of the facilities were very low-security such as Mt Disappointment where detainees and POWs were not locked in and had a free range of the vicinity. But there was a breakout of 21 German prisoners who tunneled under the barbed wire at Graytown in January 1945.



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The Graytown camp was established for internees and POWs from the German warship the Kormoran. Circa 1943. Source: National Archives.



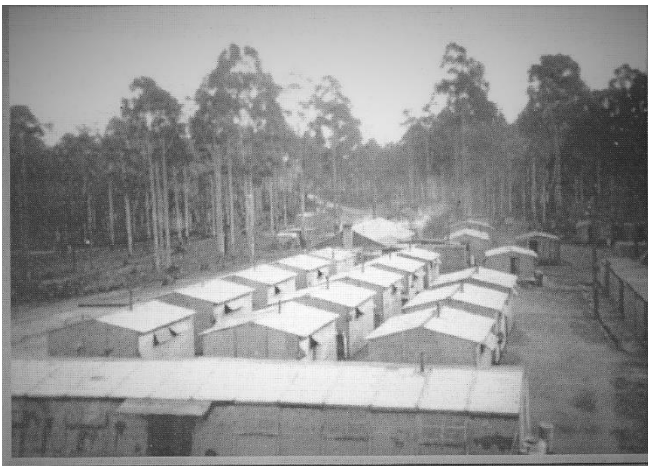
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Graytown, 1943. German POWs felling a large tree for firewood. Source: National Archives.

Camps No 1, 2 & 3 were set up in the Mount Disappointment State Forest during of WW2 to house alien internees and later Italian Prisoners Of War. No.1 Camp was also known as the Broadford or Strath Alien Camp.

During the latter years of WW2, two sets of six charcoal kilns were established at Mt Disappointment and a powder magazine was constructed to store gelignite used for the construction of roads.

The site was later used as a Forests Commission camp for training purposes until about 1968 but was destroyed on Black Saturday bushfires in 2009.



A prisoner of war camp near Broadford in the 1940s. Seventy-five Italian P.O.Ws lived here supervised by members of the Australian military. The P.O.Ws cut firewood, cleared timber and built forest roads.

Stanley huts at Mt Disappointment Camp No 1. POW camp. Circa 1940.

At the end of the War, some of the camps were used to house refugees and new immigrants fleeing Europe while some were decommissioned.

The Aire Valley camp in the Otway's was situated next to the famous redwood plantation and was established primarily for refugees. Local people referred to them as "Balts" because many came from the Baltic states. They worked to establish pine plantations on the steep, wet hillsides.



Aire Valley was established as a refugee camp after WW2. Source Roger Smith.

Other camps in the Otway's were established at different times at Halls, Congrams, Seaview and the Redwoods.

Forest training camps.

Many forest camps were again repurposed and used for fire training programs for staff and crews. Broadford and Too-Rour were used well into the 1980s.



Mt Disappointment was used to train FCV forest foreman until about 1968. The course ran for six months and the camp was bleak in winter. Source: Noel Fraser.



Forest Foreman school at Bradford (aka Mt Disappointment) 1962. Source Noel Fraser.

However, in the mid-1970s the Forests Commission shifted training for forest foreman to the Victorian School of Forestry at Creswick and built more huts at the rear of the school affectionately known as Siberia.



Small huts at the Victorian School of Forestry, Creswick used for staff undertaking certificate courses. Circa 1975. Source: Greg West.

Road construction camps.

Often semi-permanent in nature with a mixture of roofed and tent accommodation and used until the road project was completed.

- Surveyors Creek (Heyfield)
- Engineers Road (Bruthen)
- Donald's Knob (Cann River)
- Errinundra Plateau (Orbost)
- Big River Road (Marysville).
- Forest Lodge, Victoria Valley (Stawell).



Pack camp Heyfield Circa 1954 – Source Arthur Webb



Engineers Camp – Donald's Knob (1952) – source Athol Hodgson.



Limestone Camp Nuninyong plateau – Source Sam Brunton.



Tamboritha Road construction— circa 1960. Source Geoff Kennedy.

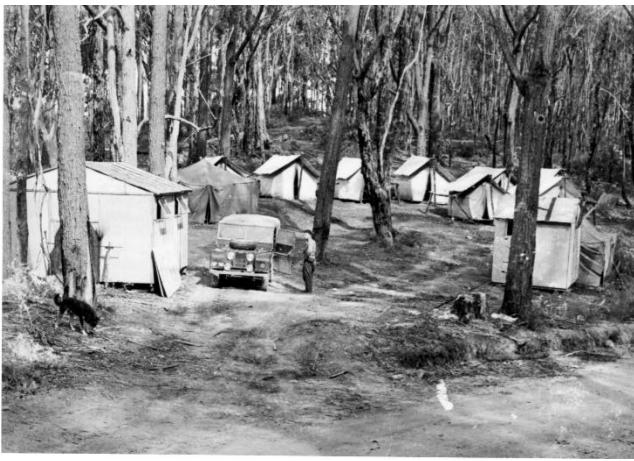
Forest assessment camps.

Mostly established in the eastern mountainous parts of Victoria during the 1950s and 1960s. Short term in nature. Sometimes using cattlemen's huts as a base or tents brought in on a truck or pack horse.



Shifting camp from Bendoc Ridge to Murderers Hill north of Heyfield -1951. Source Athol Hodgson.

These camps were semi-portable and were commonly moved at the completion of the forest assessment program.

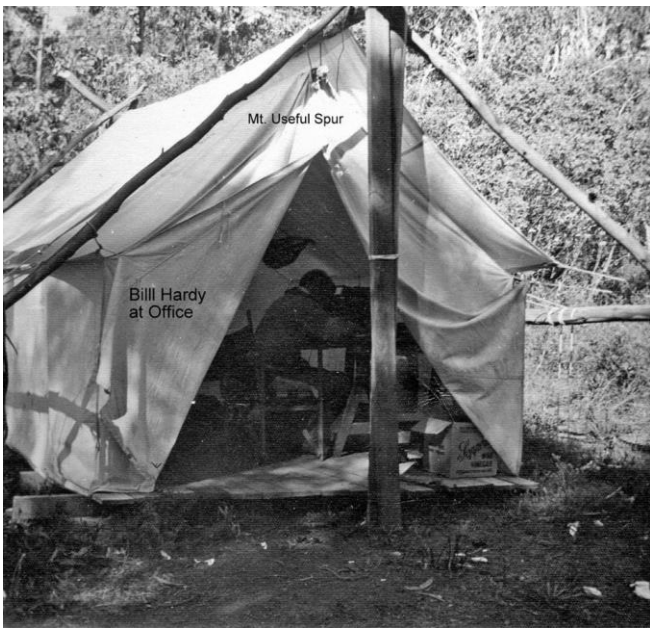


Assessment camp – Murderers hill, north of Heyfield – 1951.
Source Athol Hodgson..

Plantation camps.

Established to house staff and works crews associated with the softwood plantation extension (PX) program which accelerated in the early 1960s. Many camps were used for prolonged periods and became well serviced.

- Too-Rour (Benalla).
- Shelley-Koetong (Tallangatta).
- Rennick-Kentbruck
- Bright.
- Warwick (Mt Cole).
- Bullarto South (Ballarat).
- Aire Valley Plantation (Otways).
- Morwell River Prison (Mirboo North)
- Won Wron Prison (Yarram)



Assessment Office – Mt Useful Spur, Circa 1950. Source Jack Gittins.

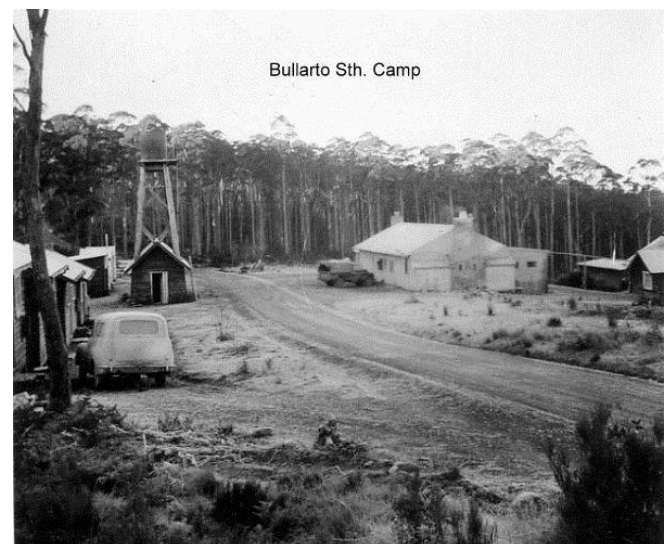


Shelley – Koetong Camp – Jan 1969. Source Ian Hastings

Sometimes camps were very makeshift. One camp was built from the scrounged wreckage of DC3 Dakota that crashed in 1954 at Cowombat Flat in the headwaters of the Murray River.



Makeshift hut - Cowombat Flat. Circa 1960. Source Doug Stephenson.



Bullarto South camp – circa 1940. Source: Jack Gittins.

In the case of the reforestation program in the Strzelecki Ranges in South Gippsland there were two low security prison camps operating large nurseries. One at Morwell River produced over one million eucalypt seedlings each year while

another near Yarram at Won Wron grew pines. Forests Commission staff supervised the nursery and planting operations while warders supervised the prison crews.



Morwell River Prison nursery. Circa 1977. Source FCV annual report



Seedlings were hand planted on the steep hillsides by prisoners. Circa 1977. Source FCV annual report

Towermen's camps.

At some remote fire towers across the eastern mountains, a small hut was provided for the tower man. They often worked long days on seven-day shifts and made them quite comfortable.



View from the old Pinnacles tower north of Briagolong. It burnt down in December 2006 and was replaced. It also had a small tower man's hut. Circa 1980. Source Peter McHugh.



Fire lookout and tower man's hut at Mt Wills. Source Ian Hastings. January 1969.

Fire basecamps.

Fire basecamps were often quickly set up close to the fire edge in a clearing near a river or stream. Accommodation was mostly in tents. Mobile caravans were sometimes used for preparing meals.



Fire Base Camp at Cobannah in East Gippsland. Circa 1965. Source Rocky Marsden.



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