

ITS GOT MARIBYRNONG WRITTEN ALL OVER ITⁱ

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This paper results from work undertaken for the City of Maribyrnong, one of Melbourne's western suburban councils. The project assessed the legacy of defence sites in the City, particularly those related to World War Two. The study was to identify what sites were developed as defence infrastructure, what had become of them after the end of the war and the modes by which the sites might be linked to an interpretation plan. Both World Wars left a substantial legacy of built infrastructure which is slowly disappearing from the urban landscape.

The study utilised a number of existing studies undertaken by our own office as well as other Melbourne and Sydney consultantsⁱⁱ. These studies, combined with site visits brought to light a number of other previously unknown or unstudied facilities.

The total project identified the city's collection of factories, workers' housing, military training buildings, civilian defence activities and sites, monuments and war service homes.

Being as it is a broad topic, this paper will give a vignette of just three of the aspects of the study viz: Work, Housing and Civilian Protection and the legacy of those activities in present day Maribyrnong.

The Scene: City of Maribyrnong

The City of Maribyrnong is made up of parts of the former Cities of Sunshine and Footscray, which were amalgamated during the Kennet years of Governmentⁱⁱⁱ.

Sunshine was itself created in 1951 from the former Braybrook Municipality.

Footscray at the time of World War Two was a small compact urban area with a population of 20 persons per acre while Braybrook was more rural with a population density as low as 5 persons per acre^{iv}.

Many of the defence sites were actually created in Braybrook because of these rural tracts of land and its low population. They were however right on Footscray's doorstep, allowing easy access to an amenable workforce particularly after the depression years just prior to World War Two. Indeed the depression years play a great part in the thirst for employment by men and women. Both are virtually pressed into labour by the Manpower directorate particularly after 1942.

So to Work

At the outset of WWII, the factories in the western suburbs made up some 60% of all of Australia's wartime industries but Essington Lewis the Director of Munitions was able to decentralise this so that by the end of World War Two, 80% of munitions work was being undertaken elsewhere. New industries to provide for the needs of the war (mostly ordnance and ammunition manufacturing) were opened in New South Wales, South Australia and Queensland. There are of course other aspects to war manufacturing such as food production which will not be discussed here.

The Maribyrnong Factories were based around just a small core of sites which had been established in the late 19th Century. These were the small arms ammunition factory on Gordon Street Footscray, the Cordite Factory on Cordite Avenue in the rural edge of Maribyrnong (where it was surrounded on three sides by the Saltwater River), and to its south the Artillery School on West's Road. These facilities were extensively expanded during World War Two with the Artillery school land completely taken over to allow construction of the large Ordnance Factory. Vacant land further south (but adjacent) was taken over for a pyrotechnics site which produced flares, incendiaries, tracers and heat bombs.



Fuzing work undertaken at the Small Arms Ammunition Factory and a bomb float from the Ordnance Factory set up for the *Miles of Munitions Parade*, Melbourne October 1944. Source AWM photographic collection.

Much further to the west and beyond the Sunshine township at Deer Park, the Imperial Chemicals Industries-ANZ site (originally a Nobel's dynamite factory) was expanded by the Commonwealth to produce bulk quantities of various types of explosive. All that remains at this site is the Gun Powder Mill which produced fusing powder.

Still further west on Braybrook's western rural boundary were the explosives magazines at Truganina.

The Gordon Street small arms ammunition site produced endless amounts of bullets, bullet belts, and fusing for shells and bombs, the Explosives Factory Maribyrnong concentrated on researching and producing explosive along with the co-located facilities such as a co-ordinating Navy office, the Central Scientific Industrial Research office (CSIR) which concentrated on the development of Radar and the study of Asian and Pacific timbers. This latter function was seen as critical in informing troops on the effective use of the Pacific area timbers.

The Ordnance factory was the site of production of bomb and shell casings, artillery pieces and all forms of war equipment such as depth charge throwers and cannon barrels.

Those who worked at the factories were at first mainly men but as time wore on there were increasing numbers of women although their routines were disrupted by the need to find child care, shopping and other home duties.

Access to the factories was also not easy as their semi rural locations had to be served by special bus services. In 1941 the Commonwealth (under its emergency powers) ordered the State's Metropolitan Tramways Board create a new tramline to the Gordon St Ammunition factory from Footscray and to the EFM from Ascot Vale. A further tramline was later put in place from Moonee Ponds to the Ordnance Factory to do away with the bus service which only ran to the Ascot Vale side of the river. It was not until 10 years after the war's end that the lines were joined together thus creating one of the strangest tram routes found in Melbourne - the Number 82 from Moonee Ponds to Footscray via the byways around the EFM, the Ordnance Factory and Ammunition Factory.

There were other defence related work sites in Maribyrnong such as the Transport and Stores Group which supplied all forms of tractors, trucks, trailers, floats and watercraft to move munitions. The main storage sidings and storage depots (primarily the No 1 RAAF Store and the Bulk Store) were on Ashley and Beachley Streets Braybrook just off the expanded Tottenham rail yards. These sites were loading and unloading points for all manner of finished munitions (such as gas masks and ammunition boxes) and raw materials for the factories. Explosives were stored in bunkers at the manufacturing sites until they were moved for immediate loading at the wharves.

What remains today?: The EFM remains much as is while there continues to be discussions or rather squabbling, over the considerable contamination issues and the protection of heritage assets. It was announced on 9th April this year that the State would take over the site, organize the clean-up and develop the area as a suburb thus breaking the deadlock which seems to have been occurring since 2000.

The Ordnance factory was largely demolished, the site cleaned and progressively redeveloped in the 1990s as was most of the Ammunition Factory. One section of it was

retained as the office of Thales Australia, a private defence industry. Housing in the area around the ammunition factory is still being built.

The No 1 RAAF store is now mostly demolished; it was opened in 1945 just after the war ended to become a returns store for all forms of airfield equipment. A shopping centre and housing were recently developed on part of that site and an adjacent War Worker Housing site with the balance being used for large scale storage warehouses. A small number of demountable Bellman Hangers are as yet un-demolished.

The Beachley St Stores to the west of the RAAF site also remain. The stores are mostly non-descript corrugated iron sheds without architectural pretension.

On West's Rd opposite the Ordnance Factory is the remaining Transport and Stores Group's building although this is soon to be redeveloped. It was one of a pair running along West's Road, the other being demolished and replaced by housing in the 1990s.

A New Home

To supply the 24 hours a day, 7 days a week war effort, war worker housing was built in the Braybrook area which at the time was in the middle of nowhere, or rather just beyond range of the Sunshine and Maribyrnong Factories.

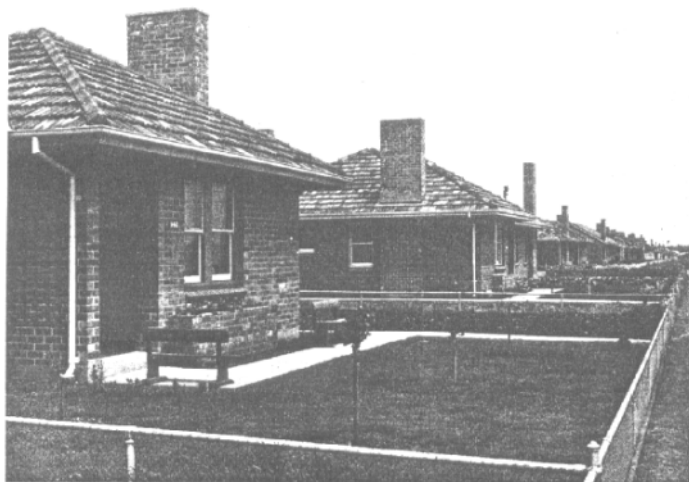
A large programme of construction by the War Workers Housing Trust (and managed by the Housing Commission of Victoria) saw some 268 houses constructed of the 300 ordered in the Braybrook Municipality and these are now found split between the Cities of Brimbank and Maribyrnong.

These houses were recently captured by heritage overlays in both municipalities. They are all of single storey brick with tiled roofs and of modest size. A substantial number remain relatively intact with most changes being to fences and windows.

The construction of these buildings commenced in 1941 on a garden suburb approach with curved streets and cul de sacs. Some houses had planter boxes included in their street elevation. University of Melbourne students were involved in developing a range of layout designs but almost all (218) are brick duplexes. In the western portion of the group are 50 houses designed in concrete on the HV Fowler system. These buildings continue with a standard layout and a prominent tiled roof form.

Their detailing is modest with front doors being simply framed and batten timber, much the form of door that would be expected at the rear of a building rather than the front. In other respects they followed well known traditions – an exposed hipped roof covered in tiles, a prominent chimney which has become a design feature, a garden setback and a modest backyard with a clothes line.

A number of houses had car tracks, which is an interesting concession to the age of the car and many of the brick buildings had a rather stylishly designed entry porch of concrete.



BRICK HOUSES IN DEVONSHIRE ROAD, SUNSHINE. SUNSHINE HOUSING ESTATE FOR MUNITION WORKERS

Houses on Devonshire Road Sunshine. An original illustration of the completed War Worker Housing in the Braybrook - Sunshine areas, Municipality of Braybrook. These

are individual brick houses in the Sunshine section. Source Housing Commission of Victoria Annual Report No 4. 1941-42.

One of the discoveries of the study was the identification of a War Workers Housing Trust for Women War Workers dormitory building in Gordon Street Footscray. Of double storey fibro construction, this large-scale facility was completed in 1942 and run by the YWCA. As far as I can tell this was the only dormitory building of its type constructed in Victoria and when completed it was noted as the first such building by the WWHT. It remains substantially intact today as a two-storey fibro structure of four parallel dormitories although the site will become redeveloped under a permit recently issued. At the time of the permit application, the sites history had only just been rediscovered. The contamination issues raised by the fibro construction however cannot be under-rated.

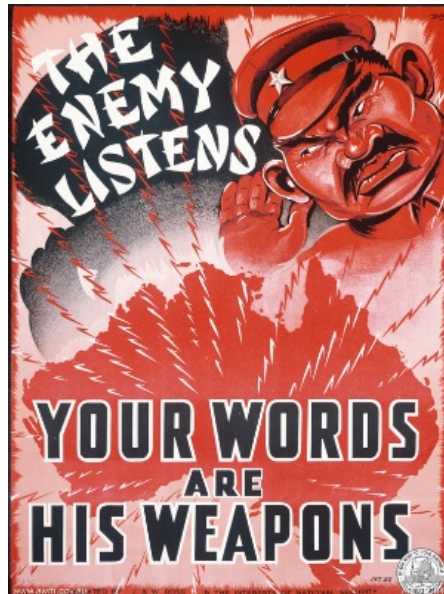


Gordon Street Footscray, War Workers Housing Trust dormitory for Women War Workers, completed in June 1942 and proclaimed as being the first of its type. Source AWM photographic collection^v.

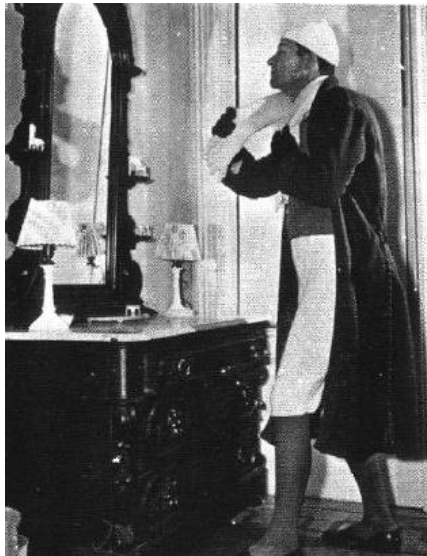
This building is a marker in providing for a changing demographic of war workers, in this case the less mobile single woman. A number of published photographs and paintings from the period underline the push that Manpower (or rather the subsidiary organisation Womenpower) were undertaking to get women to work at the factories. A deadly dull job at the best of times with long shifts of monotonous activity and which oftentimes had to be performed in silence.

Home life was also not without its trials. At the start of the Second World War Prime Minister Menzies promoted a *Business as Usual* approach. People were shocked by being at war but the war was far away and in the early years life went on much as before.

Japan's bombing of Pearl Harbour electrified the population, and with troops still serving in Europe and Africa, Prime Minister Curtin's call to arms lit a bonfire under this tension. Increasing civil defence measures and rationing drove home the seriousness of the situation.



WWII anti Japanese Posters, date not given but probably late 1941. Source AWM poster collection.



The Rationing Commission's propaganda photographs of how to keep warm on a cold winters night in Melbourne included captions on wearing the old football jersey to bed. Source NAA, Rationing Commission Files.

The Rationing Commission reduced all sorts of supplies to the population, electricity, gas, petrol, fabrics and the like. It also produced photographic propaganda on how to make the best of a worsening situation.

Look! Up there in the Sky

With the fall of Singapore then Rabaul and the bombing of Darwin in early 1942, the War in the Pacific came right to Australia. Before long other northern Australian towns were also bombed.

In 1941 Civilian Defence became a priority and this was to be organised by the States. Air Raid booklets were printed, air raid wardens recruited (many were women) and Air Raid Precautions Centres and Wardens Posts set up.

Trenches were dug in the median of main roads (such as Geelong Road) and in Footscray's public parks, churchyards and scout hall grounds with hundreds of bomb shelters constructed at the munitions sites. These were concrete single room above ground shelters.

Anti-aircraft stations were set up around North Williamstown, Maribyrnong and Sunshine to protect the heart of Victoria's wartime industry.

Williamstown and Footscray appear to have been particularly concerned with providing extensive air raid facilities and controls. Williamstown also had naval ship repair yard and heavy engineering capabilities at the Railway Workshops.



Australian Womens' Army Service poster and air raid detection crew-members using a somewhat ungainly airphone to detect approaching aircraft. Source AWM photographic collection.

Air raid wardens held classes in basic first aid, gave instruction on bomb recognition and trained the public in the operation of gas masks and the rather ineffectual stirrup pump for fighting incendiaries.



Air Raid Wardens undertake a bomb disposal exercise and provide training for staff of G J Coles store, Melbourne. Source AWM photographic collection.

In late 1941 an air raid precautions centre had been established as an adjunct to the Footscray town hall on Hyde Street. Built of 18-inch concrete walls and sandbagged, it was said to be sufficient to resist all but direct bomb hits. The Wardens however pressed for a purpose design building which, despite some initial unwillingness from Council and State authorities, it was rushed to completion after the Darwin raids. The major legacy of this facet of the war is the rather unprepossessing brick building just off Footscray's civic area and last used as the Municipal Library. Its history had been forgotten until recent years when our office was asked to investigate whether it had any heritage significance as it been missed by the local area study. The clue was found on its very walls where copies of the building plans were hung. The Library had formerly been the Air Raid Precautions Centre, a training building and local headquarters for Air Raid Wardens. What is remarkable about the building is that it was purpose designed by the Councils architect on call, Joseph Plottel. This is unlike any other Precautions Centre which were usually an extension beside or under an existing

building and then abandoned or obliterated after the war. Footscray's ARPC was specifically designed to become a children's activity centre and library once the war had ended. It lived on as such, relatively intact until 2008 when alterations were undertaken and our study of the site was timely in preventing changes which would have seriously undermined the buildings significance which is considered to be at state level.

Air Raids never made it south to Melbourne but endless hours were spent looking skyward and mostly by the AWAS, the Women's Army Service, whose job it was to act as spotters, range finders, early warning locators and searchlight operators. The artillery itself was to be operated by the Army's Anti Aircraft Gunnery Units.

Not surprisingly many of the sites were in the open fields which have since become factory or shopping centres, some even remain as fields.

One of the last reminders of the War are the above ground bomb shelters which had once numbered in their hundreds around the Factory sites. Just 5 remain today (although there are underground facilities at the EFM), two are in The Pyrotechnics area and three at the rear of the Transport and Stores Building. These three (numbered 81, 82 & 83) are rather plain all concrete structures with no facilities.

One privately completed (but now dilapidated) earth covered bomb shelter survives just 500 metres from the ammunition factory. Melbourne's only heritage listed bomb shelter is in distant St Kilda.

Interpretation

As mentioned above, interpretation modes were also assessed. Some of these were obvious and some not so.

The study's conclusions were to interpret the various sites by reference to the following themes:

- Locational Themes and Trails along the river
- Work and products
- Women's Work and the propaganda of encouragement to take up work
- Facilities developed as a result of the recruitment of women, changing work practices and conditions and unionism in time of war.
- The Monotony of Work and Pride in Work (The Miles of Munitions Parades)
- Work in Art (the AWM collection of Paintings and Photographs)
- The provision of air defence and public reaction (attitudes and the construction of private shelters).
- The austerity of home life.

None of this work has progressed but the recent release of the EFM site to the Victorian Government and the City of Maribyrnong will be the opportunity for the Council to gain a footing in implementing the Interpretation phase. Tram route 82 is set to find a new and larger demographic user group as well.

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15 April 2009

ENDNOTES

ⁱⁱ The title is taken from a conversation between Lieutenant-Colonel Godfrey of the 2/6th Battalion and Lieutenant-Colonel Cremor of the 2/2nd Field Regiment concerning wayward Australian artillery during the Battle of Bardia, 3 January, 1941. (David Hay *Nothing Over Us: the story of the 2/6th Australian Infantry Battalion* Australian War Memorial; Canberra, 1984; p.96)

ⁱⁱ Lovell Chen P/L, Context P/L, Godden Mackay Logan P/L in conjunction with HLCD P/L and Barnard, Butler, Gilfedder & Vines 'Maribyrnong City Council Heritage Review'

ⁱⁱⁱ Amalgamation of Councils occurred in 1994

^{iv} Demographics quoted from Kate Darian-Smith, *On the Home Front, Melbourne in Wartime, 1939-1945*, Oxford University Press, 1990

^v Victorian Housing Commission, Annual Report No 4, 1941-42