



case study 7: The Whitehorse Historical Collection

The Whitehorse Historical Collection at Schwerkolt Cottage Museum Complex, Deep Creek Road, Mitcham, comprises late 19th and early 20th century domestic goods used to furnish the cottage; agricultural machinery and equipment associated with fruit growing and processing; and early to mid-20th century brick, tile and pottery equipment and products representing the clay industries of the area. Historical images and local archives complement the collection, which can be used to illustrate the themes of the Mitcham district's history – rural production, clay industry and post WWII suburbanisation. *Victoria's Framework of Historical Themes* can be used to guide the acquisition of objects into the collections, assess their significance, and develop interpretive programs.

Collection of bricks, ceramic roof tiles, ridge cappings, finials and wall tiles

The collection includes locally manufactured bricks, unglazed and glazed Marseilles roof tiles, ridge cappings and finials, and plain and decorative wall tiles. They were made by several manufacturers from 1880s to mid-20th century. Some are unmarked but marked items include products of the Co-operative Brick Company, the Australian Brick, Tile and Tesselated Tile Co (1886; later Australian Tesselated Tile Co), the Commonwealth Pottery (orig. est. 1873; later Brick and Pipe Industries, later Vitclay), Daniel Robertson (1928 – still operating), Geal Brothers (1903); and Wunderlich (1932).

There are also wall tiles for kitchens and bathrooms, and decorative tiles for feature use such as fireplaces, which facilitated 20th century ideas about hygiene and beauty in the home.

The potteries: a Staffordshire technology migrates to Victoria

Some early founders of the industry transferred their knowledge from the Staffordshire potteries region of the UK direct to Nunwading, known in the late 19th century as Tunstall (one of the famous five pottery towns of England).

The collection represents the potters and potteries of the Nunawading district, producing architectural ceramics for external and internal use.

Victoria's themes and sub-themes

- 5. Building Victoria's industries and workforce
- 5.1 Processing raw materials
- 5.2 Developing a manufacturing capacity



Manufacturing the materials of Victorian suburbs

The local clay industry was based on good quality minerals and plenty of timber to fuel the kilns; the 1882 extension of the railway to Blackburn and Ringwood opened up delivery access for bricks, etc, to the booming suburbs of the east and south.

The 1890s depression hit the industry hard, but it picked up in the interwar period and again after World War II. Nunawading clay industries survive in a number of contemporary companies, such as Daniel Robertson.

The collection demonstrates shifts in manufacturing technology and design in architectural ceramics, which gave characteristic colour and texture to the suburbs, from the terracotta roofs and details of Federation and Inter-War buildings, to the textured purple-brown tiles of 1930s-40s Moderne style.

Victoria's themes and sub-themes

- 6. Building towns, cities and the garden state
- 6.3 *Shaping the suburbs*

Making Victorian homes contemporary and stylish

Designed in Melbourne, the tiles demonstrate that Victorians participated in up-to-date values and tastes in domestic living.

Victoria's themes and sub-themes

- 9. Shaping cultural and creative life
- 9.4 *Creating popular culture*



Collection item: Myer Orchard Spray Unit

A key collection item is a horse-drawn cart (made in Ballarat) carrying a Ronaldson Tippet motor (Austral Engineering Works, Ballarat), driving a Myer twin plunger pump (c.1915, USA), used to pump copper, and later lead, arsenate (for codling moth) from a wooden half barrel, 100 gallons (455 litres), built into the tray of the cart. It was used by Doug Livermore, apple orchardist, Vermont, in the early 20th century.

Rural fringe of Melbourne

The fringes of Melbourne were cleared for timber in the mid-19th century, making them suitable for commercial agriculture, in particular, fruit growing (peaches, apricots, plums, apples, cherries, lemons).

This unit demonstrates the development of fruit growing in the Nunawading district from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century.

Victoria's themes and sub-themes

- 6. Building towns, cities and the garden state
- 4. Transforming and managing the land and natural resources
- 4.4 *Farming*
- 4.7 *Transforming the land and waterways*

Rural technology

The fresh fruit market of the city was overtaken after WW1 by a booming canned fruit industry. However, after WW2, suburban development increased land values. Many orchard estates were subdivided and sold off.

The unit demonstrates that orcharding required technical expertise in land management, scientific knowledge of pest management (especially after the 1885 arrival of codling moth), and specific technology sourced both locally and internationally.

Orcharding life

The working life of the Livermore men of Vermont is suggested by the unit's mixture of horse-powered and petrol-powered technology, demonstrating the range of skills required to operate a successful orcharding business.

Victoria's themes and sub-themes

- 5. Building Victoria's industries and workforce
- 5.7 *Working*



Using Victoria's Framework of Historical Themes in Collections management

Acquisitions

Reference to *Victoria's Framework of Historical Themes* assists focused collecting by facilitating a well-rounded appreciation of the object.

Adding objects to historical collections often focuses on features of the individual object at the cost of the larger perspectives of history. Object X becomes available for collection and it seems to be relevant to our policy: do we already have one? Perhaps this one has a widget that makes it significantly different? Maybe it's in better condition, with all its parts? Will investigation show it has a more detailed provenance? Then object Y and object Z turn up at the museum, and we consider the same kinds of particular issues about other kinds of object altogether. It's easy to lose sight of the bigger question: how do these wing-wings contribute to public understanding of the history the museum aims to present?

Referring to *Victoria's Framework of Historical Themes* could suggest one or more 'big picture' themes to which objects X, Y and Z should contribute – justifying why they should (or should not) be acquired.

Identifying relevant themes at the point of acquisition does not exclude reading further thematic understandings into the same objects at a later time.

Significance assessment: saying how it matters

Making a judgement about the heritage significance of an object is a more formal version of the acquisition process described above. Significance assessment usually requires additional research to uncover all possible details about the object under examination: is it a standard object or a rare type (and does this matter)? How does it compare with others of its type? Is it entire, intact, or in sound enough condition to be intelligible (even though it may require interpretation)? How does it relate to the big categories of community feeling, historical narrative, creative achievement and/or scientific evidence?

The Themes Framework functions as a checklist of big historical stories in which the object might have a place: not just 'local agriculture' but 'transforming the land', 'migrating and making a home', and 'working'. Thinking outside the immediate purpose of each object is the way to connect the object into the big ideas of history, to put local history in the state or national perspective.

Interpretation: communicating the meanings

We collect objects to help make sense of the world, rather than for their own sake. Most collections have a specific focus, often based on a place or a particular topic (industry, event, person). The purpose of the collection is to gather the material evidence about the place or topic and show what it means to contemporary people, usually via exhibitions, tours and publications. Since most people, even those interested in history, rarely know as much as the museum staff who establish and manage the collection, it is helpful to present objects in the larger context of historical themes. This can also assist viewers to make connections to local conditions which they do not personally know.

Again, *Victoria's Framework of Historical Themes* serves as a reference list of wider perspectives, setting the scene for presenting the particular stories of individual objects or collections in the labels, talks, multimedia and so forth, used to interpret objects and collections.