

VICTORIA'S HERITAGE

TOWER HILL'S PECULIAR ATTRACTIONS

WARRNAMBOOL

By Mary Ryllis Clark, *Discover Historic Victoria*, 1996

Tower Hill was for many years Victoria's only national park. It is an extinct volcanic crater in the Western District, formed some 20000 years ago when rising basaltic lava came into contact with groundwater, generating huge quantities of steam and displacing large blocks of the earth's flat crust.

This violent explosion created a funnel-shaped crater. Volcanic scoria and ash, together with fragments of limestone and clay, were deposited in layers around it, forming a distinctive rim.

Subsequent volcanic activity caused small cones to develop within the main crater; the crater filled with water and formed a lake within the rim, the small cones becoming a scattering of islands.

Tower Hill lies at the western end of a line of thirty similar volcanoes, which extend from Colac to Port Fairy. Its rich plant and animal life made this huge volcanic plain attractive to Aborigines. Numerous stone axeheads and flakes used in hunting and gathering have been uncovered in archaeological surveys.

James Dawson, friend and official Protector of the Aboriginal people, gave the name 'Peek wuurong' to those living at Tower Hill, although they were members of the Gournditch-jmara tribe. Dawson had a pastoral property near Mount Eccles, and his daughter, Isabella, later wrote nostalgically of 'the many years of intimacy with the remnants of tribes occupying the country between the Hopkins River and Portland'. She learned their language as a child and as an adult helped her father gather



The Worn Gundidj Visitor Centre, designed by Robin Boyd in 1962.

information for his book *Australian Aborigines: The Land and Customs of Several Tribes in the Western District of Victoria, Australia* (1881); and herself published numerous articles on Aboriginal languages and customs.

At Dawson's instigation, Eugene von Guérard painted Tower Hill in 1855, depicting in almost photographic detail the vegetation as the Aborigines knew it and just before the Europeans were to ruin it. Although he and other mid-nineteenth-century artists depicted Aborigines in their paintings of Tower Hill, the traditional Aboriginal way of life was scarcely practised by this time as the plentiful water supply and grazing potential of the district had already attracted settlers.

James Bonwick, an inspector of schools, waxed lyrical about Tower Hill when he visited it in 1857:

A stroll among the gigantic ferns of the valley, or a ramble among the cones and craters, has peculiar

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attractions...leafy shrubs form delightful bowers and alcoves, and tender emotion in suitable company will receive as genial and as rapid a development.

Bonwick ended with a passionate plea to preserve something of the volcano:

Let the few who value sentiment in the colony [who] sympathize with nature, who love an undisturbed communion with the grand and sublime, join one and all in securing for themselves and posterity the authorised declaration that Tower Hill shall be an everlasting reserve.

Bonwick's words went unheeded for nearly ten years. Historian Anita Brady in her short *Centenary History of Tower Hill* describes how intensive European settlement was already causing rapid degradation of the site by the 1860s. The vegetation on the sides of the volcano was cleared or burnt to promote pasture for livestock and land for crops. Most of the trees were taken for fuel.

In 1866 a small area of 597 hectares, including the main island, the lake and two-fifths of the banks, was declared a public park. The Tower Hill Acclimatization Society was appointed as committee of management, but had to be self-supporting. In order to raise money for fencing and rangers, it permitted more timber felling, grazing and clearing. In keeping with its aim to introduce exotic plants and animals throughout the colony, the society turned loose angora goats, jungle fowl, pheasants and rabbits.

James Dawson was appalled at the condition of the site when he revisited it in 1891:

In the early days of this colony there was to be seen between Port Fairy and Warrnambool, one of the most beautiful and interesting specimens of an extinct volcano in all Victoria. Tower Hill and Lake, then in their primitive state, attracted my attention

so much, that fortunately for future generations, I commissioned a celebrated artist to paint the scene in oil on a large scale, and he carried out my wishes faithfully and beautifully. On visiting the scene lately, I was amazed and disgusted to find everything altered, the fine trees on the cones, and in the craters of the island all gone excepting half a dozen or so.

Although Tower Hill was made a national park in 1892, destructive practices such as grazing and quarrying continued so that by the time the National Parks Act was declared, in 1956, Tower Hill was omitted because of its condition. It had virtually been stripped bare and little wildlife remained.

Dawson's initiative in having the relatively undisturbed scene captured on canvas, however, proved to be more valuable than he could have dreamed. In 1961, when Tower Hill was declared a State Game Reserve (with limited duck shooting in season), the then Department of Conservation and Natural Resources devised a scheme to restore the site as closely as possible to its original state, using the Eugene von Guérard painting as a guide.

The fact that von Guérard was a botanist meant that he had a very good eye for the detail of the vegetation, which has greatly aided the planting programme. About 80 per cent of the planting of trees and shrubs was done by hundreds of school children, naturalists and volunteers.

The correct wildlife was also reintroduced, including emus, koalas, wombats, gliders, grey kangaroos and possums. Introduced species and noxious weeds were gradually removed.

As you drive through the rolling, green, open landscape of the volcanic plains, Tower Hill looms dramatically on the horizon. It has become beautiful again. It is divided into three principal areas: Main Island, Fairy Island and

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Hat Island. There are several self-guided walking trails of different lengths ranging from half an hour to an hour. Tours with the local ranger are available.

Noted architect Robin Boyd designed the Natural History Centre, which is on Main Island in a stunning setting of green paddocks and native woodland. The circular building is made of local material in the shape of a volcanic cone. It contains a fascinating display of the geology and history of Tower Hill, beautifully illustrated details of the wildlife and wetlands, and an account of the revegetation story, linking it to a magnificent colour reproduction of Eugene von Guérard's invaluable painting.

GETTING THERE

Tower Hill State Game Reserve is 275 kilometres southwest of Melbourne via the Princes Highway and Warrnambool. It is open on weekdays between 9.00 am. and 5.00 p.m. and 10am – 4pm at weekends. Facilities include picnic tables, gas or electric barbecues and toilets. Firearms and pets are not allowed in the reserve.