

Murtoa Stick Shed



Immense in size, the Murtoa Stick Shed spans the length of five Olympic swimming pools and has been dubbed the 'Cathedral of the Wimmera.'

It is included in the Victorian Heritage Register - VHR H0791.

See www.heritage.vic.gov.au

Stick Shed solution for wheat storage during war

The Marmalake*/Murtoa Grain Store was constructed in 1941 as a solution for grain storage during the World War II wheat glut, when exports were restricted.

Victoria had been slow to adopt bulk storage solutions (a few concrete silos had been constructed in New South Wales), crop yields had improved and it was a bumper season. The war limited export opportunities for several years, hessian bags and cornsacks became scarce and a new '3 million bushel storage' solution was required.

Despite opposition from those with a vested interest in bagged wheat storage, a bulk store was soon recognised as imperative and the site at Murtoa was chosen. Transport considerations (the railway line from Stawell reached Murtoa in 1878 and extended to Horsham 1879 and Warracknabeal in 1886) and its central location contributed to the site selection over alternatives.

Work commenced on 25 September 1941 and the store was ready to receive wheat in January 1942.

Constructed from 560 unmilled poles or 'sticks' (56 rows of 10) to support the corrugated iron roof of the shed, it was soon dubbed the 'Stick Shed'. The shed is about 270 metres long, 60 metres wide and about 19 metres high along the ridge.

The roof and walls are of corrugated iron painted ferric red, the floor is of concrete and a three metre wooden bulkhead runs along either side. The roof angle reflects 'the natural angle of repose' of stacked bulk grain.

The grain was lifted by elevators in the working house to a conveyor belt which ran the full length of the building just under the apex of the roof. Wheat could be dropped to the floor from the conveyor belt at any point along the belt.

The first bulk wheat was delivered by Murtoa farmer Maurice Delahunty on 22 January 1942. The first railway truck of bulk wheat arrived on 17 February and by late May/June the Murtoa shed was filled with 3,381,600 bushels which remained virtually undisturbed until April 1944.

A second, larger shed with a capacity of about 7.5 million bushels, was constructed at Murtoa in 1942-43 (demolished 1975). A 6 million bushel shed was also erected at Dunnolly (demolished 1987) and third shed started but never completed in Murtoa.

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ABOVE: Conservation works underway in the Murtoa Stick Shed in 2010 - 11.



The Murtoa No 1 Store was closed in 1989 but, as the Grain Elevator's Board argued it was now uneconomic, the heritage significance of this unique structure was being recognised. The Heritage Buildings Council issued an Interim Protection Order in December 1989 and it was added to the Historic Buildings Register (now the Victorian Heritage Register) in June 1990.

At the time, the Shire of Dunmunkle noted, the shed has 'enormous historical significance' as 'the major landmark at Murtoa for almost half a century... synonymous with the Shire's great grain industry.'

The heritage significance of the building was articulated in a 1994 study by Econsult which noted:

This monumental structure is the largest surviving in Victoria based on vernacular principles and materials, as well as being the largest timber frame structure and the only one of its type still standing in Victoria. The Murtoa 'stick shed' is fundamental to Victoria and Australia's cultural identity.

The method used to construct this very large storage shed demonstrates considerable initiative on the part of its unknown designers...

It is the interior that evokes the strongest response from all who visit it: "It resembles a giant, serene cathedral of tall unmilled timber poles. From certain angles within, the wooden support poles resemble a forest of trees..." This sense of awe and wonder makes this interior space one of the most impressive in Australia.

The shed is currently undergoing an extensive conservation program funded by the Heritage Council of Victoria and Heritage Victoria. These works generally adopt repair methods which have been used in the past.

These works have included repairs to posts, rafters and purlins. Some posts (less than 3%) have been replaced by steel posts because it is difficult and very expensive to obtain strong poles of the required height. New concrete bases have been poured for poles which had been affected by vermin or damp and the poles repositioned to their correct height.

Bow trusses have been added to strengthen some poles and some rafters replaced with laminated veneered lumber.

All the works undertaken enable the shed to retain a degree of movement which has proven effective in its long history.

Heritage Victoria is continuing to work with all stakeholders and the community to develop a future use for the site.

For more information see the website at www.heritage.vic.gov.au



ABOVE: Murtoa Store No 1 (left) and No 2.

BELOW: The shed remains a local landmark.



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