

# As ye reap

## The Dookie Campus Historical Collection

Melanie Horder



Dookie Agricultural College is located in the foothills of Mount Major off the Midland Highway, halfway between the cities of Shepparton and Benalla in the north of central Victoria. Officially opened in 1886, Dookie is the oldest agricultural college in the state and the second oldest in Australia. Its true existence however began over a decade earlier with the development of the Cashel Experimental Farm, to fulfil the need for agricultural education, under the leadership of its first farm manager, John Low Thompson (1847–1900).<sup>1</sup>

Today Dookie College is known as the Dookie Campus of the Melbourne School of Land and Environment at the University of Melbourne and combines its teaching and research programs with the resources of the working farm. The campus is home to the Dookie Campus Historical Collection, comprising several thousand items, housed in the library, museum, farm sheds and science laboratory.<sup>2</sup> Photographs, registers, correspondence, diaries, rare agricultural machinery and a range of sporting memorabilia and administrative materials—relating to the experimental farm, to Dookie Agricultural College and to its various administrative bodies—dominate the collection. The complexity, scope, interpretive potential and provenance of the Dookie Campus Historical Collection contribute to its unique status, which is underlined by its historical, aesthetic, scientific and social significance.



### Historical significance

The Dookie Campus Historical Collection is significant both for its value as an entire collection and also for individual items within it. As a collection, it contributes to our understanding of what daily life was like at Dookie and includes items that record and represent particular activities carried out at the site. The collection also provides us with information regarding broader historical contexts and social histories of the period, such as the impacts on agriculture of World War I and World War II, the changing role of women in Australia, Dookie's role in its regional community and its relationships with local industry, manufacturers and farmers. It also documents the roles of staff, students and administrative bodies and traces the development of agricultural industry, agricultural education, farming methods and land use in Victoria since the first days of the Cashel Experimental Farm.

The early farm machinery, located in an old display shed and the wool room, includes items such as the H.V. McKay four-run small seed drill, the 'Sunshine' reaper, the original water pump from the Broken River, the rope-making machine and the in situ wool press. These items are now locally rare and have been replaced by modern mechanical equipment

**Opposite above:** The first manager of the Cashel Experimental Farm, John Low Thompson. Dookie Campus Historical Collection, University of Melbourne.

**Opposite below:** The Dookie College administration building in the early 20th century. Dookie Campus Historical Collection, University of Melbourne.

**Right:** Students ready for work at 7.00 a.m., 1910. Dookie Campus Historical Collection, University of Melbourne.

**Below:** Students load hay into a thresher machine to separate the grain from the stalks and husks, January 1927. Dookie Campus Historical Collection, University of Melbourne.



and less labour-intensive farming techniques. They also have great interpretive potential as real examples of traditional farming equipment used in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The farm diaries kept by the manager of the experimental farm, John Low Thompson, are a further example of historically significant material, as they capture the detail of the early days of the farm and the college. Thompson's first entry of 1879 describes the failure of the minister of agriculture to get off the train for his first visit, epitomising the official attitudes and hurdles Thompson would have to overcome to establish the experimental farm. Thompson's thoughts, livestock and crop reports, weather observations, relations with staff and students, and the progress of Dookie were all recorded daily in his diaries.

Early entries from 1879 describe difficulties such as incompetent staff, calves being lost to 'pleuro' (contagious bovine pleuropneumonia, a bacterial infection of the lung), ewes dying from bowel inflammation, and attempts to open up a spring on Mount Major in response to water shortages. The diaries provide us with a glimpse of what life was like at Dookie, as well as mapping ordinary and unusual events and revealing a great deal about a little-known aspect of history.

There are thousands of photographs in the collection, including personal albums and a large number of Dookie Agricultural College yearly albums that serve as visual records of staff and students, landscapes, buildings, agricultural techniques, animal husbandry and everyday activities. The photographs have excellent research potential

as they are an untapped source of primary information, providing us with unique insights into the story of Dookie. They can also be used to illustrate and interpret particular activities and themes, which cannot always be achieved through words alone. For instance, the wide range of photographs depicting livestock and animal husbandry techniques show not only the way animals were housed and cared for, but also the labour-intensive nature of farming at a level no longer required with today's mechanical innovations.

### **Aesthetic significance**

As well as the collection in its entirety having historical significance, many individual items possess aesthetic significance, for their craftsmanship, beauty and display of technical skill. Examples include student models of sheep barns made to scale from local materials, and an embossed and gilded illuminated address. The latter was presented to Hugh Pye by the Dookie Agricultural Society upon his resignation as principal of the college in 1917. As well as being beautiful, the illuminated address reflects Australia's British heritage, links to imperial ideology and the revival of medievalism. The leather front and back covers feature gold embossing, while the text inside is



**Right:** Clydesdale horses pulling a Sunshine harvester, c. 1943–47. Dookie Campus Historical Collection, University of Melbourne.

**Below:** Illuminated address presented by the Dookie Agricultural Society to Hugh Pye, upon his resignation as principal of the college in 1917. Dookie Campus Historical Collection, University of Melbourne.



dominated by an elaborate heading, flower decorations, gilded borders, photographs of Hugh Pye, members of the Agricultural Society, and ears of wheat, plus a drawing of the main administration building and Swinburne Hall at Dookie. The text itself is handwritten in fine calligraphy with red capitals.

### Research significance

The collection has research significance in a variety of areas. As an archive it has far-reaching potential for use in the creation of new knowledge. The material tells

us about the development of the agricultural industry in Victoria and Australia, the dominant farming ideologies of the time and the invention of new farming machinery and techniques. On a more immediate level, the collection can further our understanding of the operations of a functioning agricultural college and farm. Important historical artefacts in their own right, the ledgers and registers of farm stock and transactions, for example, also provide raw data about the economic and social history of Dookie. These items and the range of correspondence, machinery catalogues, and the thoughts recorded in diaries, enable research into stock transactions, machinery and purchases of consumables. This archival material also tells us about Dookie's relationship with other farmers, manufacturers and industry in the region and has the potential to provide information on why Dookie fell on hard times at certain points in its history. The use of the land and individual paddocks at Dookie is well documented, particularly in student 'paddock books' and in staff farm record books and registers. If this information were used in conjunction with the collection's geological surveys, rock samples, maps, photographs and records of soil

types and rainfall data, it might help farmers determine how the land may best be used for future agricultural production. By researching these records, farmers could be better informed on previous uses of the land and its environmental conditions. Dated records could be used to track rainfall patterns and other changes in climatic conditions, and farmers could therefore determine which crops might be successful—where and at what time of year.

The set of botanical specimens held in the science laboratory also holds research potential. These specimens are representative of the region's grasses and the academic assessments that are still practised at Dookie today. Students were required to identify particular grasses, record data such as when and where the specimens were found and by whom, and to assign identification numbers. This was an important practice that also taught students how to correctly prepare, press and present botanical specimens. The data obtained from this collection may help illustrate the distribution, habitat and range of particular species of grass, which can lead to the creation of new knowledge. Furthermore, many of the species recorded once thrived at Dookie and may now be rare, or no longer exist in the area.

**Right:** The Dookie Agricultural College football team, c. 1889, led by then science master (later principal) Hugh Pye, standing third from right. Dookie Campus Historical Collection, University of Melbourne.



### Significance to the Dookie community

Dookie Agricultural College is undeniably part of the identity of its region and has strong community significance, especially for ex-staff and alumni. As University of Melbourne alumni manager Jeff Topp comments: ‘Over 125 years, Dookie has been part of many Victorian families and it doesn’t take long in a conversation for someone to say “my cousin/father/great uncle went to Dookie” (and more recently sister/niece).’ Some items which may hold little historical, aesthetic or research significance are highly valued for their connection with a particular individual or activity, or simply because an item’s provenance can be traced to Dookie. Dookie College was not just an educational and research facility; it was also home for many of those people who worked or studied there. Irrigator Barry Croke recalls that during his time as a student and later as principal (from the 1960s to the late 1980s), there were 43 houses on site. Dookie was essentially its own community within a community, with many staff members living there with their families, including their children who attended Currawa Primary School on the grounds.

For Croke, sport was integral to the social fabric of Dookie and it is through the sporting activities and clubs of Dookie that this intense community pride is best illustrated. Dookie’s strong presence at inter-collegiate games and sporting competitions—ranging from Australian Rules football to athletics, cricket, tennis and shooting—positioned the college as a great sporting identity within the region. This pride in Dookie’s sporting identity and individual exploits is comprehensively documented in the *Dookie Collegian* (later the *Colimnus*) yearbooks and demonstrated through the extensive photographic record, trophies and shields, equipment including a discus from Finland, the Rifle Club telescope, butter pats, and various other sporting and agricultural competition memorabilia. These items have meaning for the community today, as many alumni and former staff members remember the pride they felt to be part of Dookie’s sporting clubs, while families value material associated with the lives of relatives who once attended Dookie. This is particularly the case with sporting team photographs, for unlike the majority of photographic material in the collection, these are frequently captioned in the *Dookie Collegian* and identify individuals by

name. The high esteem in which the community holds Dookie is reflected in the ever-increasing amount of material donated to the collection by alumni and their families. These gifts attest that the collection is valued and holds social significance for living communities, who recognise the importance of preserving Dookie’s past for future generations.

This article is based on Melanie Horder’s significance assessment of the Dookie Campus Historical Collection, which she undertook as part of the Cultural Collections Projects Program (see [www.unimelb.edu.au/culturalcollections/projects](http://www.unimelb.edu.au/culturalcollections/projects)). Melanie subsequently curated the exhibition based on the collection, *Building rural success: The early years of Dookie Agricultural College*, which was displayed at Dookie in October 2011, prior to its installation in the Baillieu Library from November 2011 to February 2012.

Melanie Horder recently graduated from Deakin University with a Graduate Diploma of Museum Studies, following a Bachelor of Arts and Fine Arts (Honours) from the University of Tasmania. Melanie works in the research grants team at the University of Tasmania and at the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in Hobart. She hopes to achieve her long-term goal of a career in the museum sector.

- 1 Roger Aldridge, *Dookie College: The first 100 years*, Victorian College of Agriculture and Horticulture, 1986, p. ix.
- 2 The collection is not yet catalogued, so this number is an estimate at the broadest level. There are more than 40 archival boxes filled with photographs and documents alone.