

The Creswick Campus Historical Collection

An introduction

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The small town of Creswick, located 130 kilometres north-west of Melbourne, is known for its long history of forestry. The large sign on the outskirts of the town, welcoming visitors to 'Creswick, Home of Forestry', demonstrates that this history continues to be celebrated today. Yet in truth it was only after the destruction of the local forests, following the discovery of gold, that the way was cleared for the establishment of what is now the Creswick campus of the University of Melbourne. The Creswick Campus Historical Collection commemorates this history, with more than 12,000 items documenting over 100 years of forestry education in Creswick.

Gold was first discovered in Creswick in 1851, and by 1854 more than 20,000 people are said to have flocked to the area.¹ This sizeable population saw Creswick become one of the most important centres in Victoria, but within a decade the alluvial deposits had been exhausted and fossicking had greatly declined. The discovery of deeper gold deposits in 1872 saw a revival of mining in the region, but by this time the once-pristine bushland surrounding the township had been almost completely devastated.² The pioneer settlers who travelled in the region had to make their way through dense forest, but it



took just two decades to 'strip almost bare these wooded foothills and gullies'.³

Forest use by non-Indigenous Australians at this time was a free-for-all,⁴ and attempts to control exploitation failed. Victoria's settler population's first successful effort to manage the forests came in 1872, when more than 5,600 hectares of land was reserved as the Ballarat and Creswick State Forest. This gave rise to the appointment of Creswick's first crown bailiff and Victoria's first forester, John

La Gerche, in 1882.⁵ Although he had no forestry training, La Gerche was extremely dedicated and efficient. He established a State Nursery to raise seedlings for mine-site rehabilitation and began the reforestation of the denuded landscape, planting more than 100,000 eucalypt and pine trees, many of which still stand today. His job also involved preventing illegal woodcutting, a 'daunting task at a time when trees were regarded as a resource to be exploited and forestry, as a science, scarcely existed'.⁶

Opposite: A group of students and staff at the Victorian School of Forestry, c. 1910–13. From left: W.H. Horn, R.G. Lindsay, H. Felstead (nursery staff), N.L. Boston (nursery staff), J. Sampson, A. Ken (nursery staff), A. Warren. Creswick Campus Historical Collection, University of Melbourne.

Below: Students examining objects in the Victorian School of Forestry Museum, c. 1955. Creswick Campus Historical Collection, University of Melbourne.



Several Bills to introduce forest legislation were brought unsuccessfully before the Victorian Parliament between 1870 and 1892, but it was not until the colonies had combined to become the states of

a federal Australia that a Victorian Bill was finally passed.⁷ The *Forest Act 1907* established the State Forest Department in Victoria, formally set aside timber reserves and provided for rehabilitation after logging. The

Act also recognised that effective management of forests required appropriately skilled staff, stipulating that no person could be appointed to a forestry position without completing a relevant course and



passing a special examination, thus paving the way for the establishment of the forestry school in Creswick.⁸

Creswick was perhaps an unusual choice for Victoria's forestry school as there was no substantial forest industry in the region. However, thanks to the work of La Gerche, by the early 1900s a plantation of more than 300 hectares had been developed alongside the State Nursery. Subsequently, in 1909, the Victorian Government purchased the Creswick District Hospital and surrounding buildings and grounds for the purpose of establishing the Victorian School of Forestry (VSF).

The first group of students arrived in 1910 to commence studies for the three-year Associate Diploma of Forestry. Only male students were accepted, mostly aged 15 or 16, with all students boarding on campus. Although the number of applications for the course was high, the number accepted was low, with an average intake of only four students per year for the first few decades of the school.⁹ The relationship between the school and the University of Melbourne was also forged at this time. The university helped ensure that the school met university-level standards, and a regular stream of Creswick graduates went to Parkville to complete undergraduate science degrees.¹⁰

In 1980 the two institutions merged and a four-year Bachelor of Forest Science degree was offered for the first time at the University of Melbourne's Creswick campus. This new course reflected changing community attitudes towards the environment. 'Over time, the general public ... became increasingly interested in, and critical of, forestry practices and associated issues.'¹¹ As a result, there was a shift from the resource-driven objectives that had previously dominated forestry education at the VSF. For the first time, conservation and social impact-based studies became a core part of the curriculum.¹²

The embracing of progressive technologies and ways of thinking has been present at the school since its establishment, and the Creswick Campus Historical Collection reveals this evolution. Continuing changes to curricula saw countless tools and teaching materials superseded or made redundant, and many of these—including scientific equipment, glass slides and wood identification kits—have since made their way into the collection.

Museums, herbaria and other collections have long been present at the school. In 1912, only three years after the VSF opened, a botany laboratory and a geology museum

were founded,¹³ with a larger museum officially established in 1929. This museum was not created to merely exhibit or collect objects; it was established as a practical resource, with students, lecturers and other visitors encouraged to touch and use the items. Students were responsible for the general maintenance and upkeep of the museum, and they also contributed plant and wood samples. But changes to pedagogy eventually resulted in the closure of the museum, and in the 1980s most of the collection was placed into storage under a woodshed, where it remained for more than 20 years.¹⁴

In 2010, the museum collection was removed from the woodshed in anticipation of celebrations commemorating a century of forestry education at Creswick. Although many items had been damaged beyond repair, a large proportion was salvaged and moved to a secure storage room on the campus. These items, along with more recent bequests and donations from past students and staff or their family members, now form the bulk of the Creswick Campus Historical Collection.

Although it was originally separate from the school's museum collection, today the VSF Herbarium is considered to be one of the most

significant sub-collections in the Creswick Collection. It is estimated that the herbarium contains 10,000 specimens representing between 2,500 and 3,000 different species of plants, fungi and insects, collected over more than a century. The oldest specimens were collected in England in 1877, while the earliest Australian examples date from a decade later. Numerous specimens collected by the school's first four principals can be found in the herbarium, many from the Creswick region, as well as countless others assembled by later principals, teaching staff and students. Further samples were acquired through exchange with collectors and institutions around the world, revealing the endeavours of VSF staff to create a collection and institution of repute both here and abroad.¹⁵

Many of the herbarium specimens are of aesthetic value, particularly those containing flowers and seedpods, and they appear to have been prepared with care. Most specimens are well preserved and in good condition, and a large number still have their original tags or labels attached. Among the most noteworthy items are 27 specimens from a set of educational *exsiccatae* (dried specimens) created by Baron Sir Ferdinand von Mueller in 1874. Mueller was a world-renowned





botanist and one of the most important figures in early Australian botany. He named and described over 2,000 species, published over 800 papers and was made a member of countless national and international societies.¹⁶ His *exsiccatae* are of historical significance as they contribute to our understanding of the early ambitions and efforts of the colony of Victoria.

Many of the other specimens are significant as they represent the work undertaken by staff, students and others more closely connected to the VSF. Among the more important samples of student work are the specimens prepared by Dr James Hamlyn Willis, 'Victoria's greatest botanist of modern times'.¹⁷ Willis studied at the VSF from 1928 to 1930 and went on to become one of the school's most successful and respected graduates. The items in the collection dating from Willis's student days show how his time at Creswick contributed to a lifelong fascination and passion for botany. Although specimens and other items connected to Willis can be found in numerous repositories and collections across Victoria, many of the items in the Creswick Collection are rare or unique, including papers and plant specimens collected while he was still a student, several original

watercolours, and his well-worn monogrammed Gladstone bag.¹⁸ Willis has long been revered by those connected to the VSF, and these items are thus significant not only because of the successes he achieved after graduation, but for the influences he had on later students.

Other items in the collection commemorate less fortunate events. The hand-carved roll of honour lists the names of the nine VSF students and graduates who served in World War I. The students included N.L. Boston and R.G. Lindsay, who were both in the first group of graduates in 1912.¹⁹ Reginald (Reg) Lindsay, a Creswick local and brother of the artists Percy, Lionel, Norman, Ruby and Daryl Lindsay, was the only VSF student to be killed in action during World War I, reportedly shot 'when dashing out of his dugout to retrieve a bottle of rum' on New Year's Eve in 1916.²⁰

The collection also contains an abundance of paper-based items. This large and diverse archive of formal and informal documentation records the history of the VSF from the perspectives of both staff and students. The publications, letters, student reports, minutes of official meetings, personal memoirs and innumerable other items are of great historical significance, revealing

the history of the VSF to a level of detail that objects alone cannot. Furthermore, there are numerous items relating to the professional and personal achievements of alumni after graduation, some donated by next of kin, suggesting that much of this success was deemed due to the VSF.

Thousands of photographs, both professionally taken images and amateur snapshots, illustrate the physical developments and changes to the campus and surrounding region, and show how the staff and student demographics have also transformed over the past century. Dating from the early 1900s to the present day, they provide us with information about early and progressive forestry practices, and illustrate both the everyday and exceptional happenings at the VSF. Changes to curricula are evidenced in the countless images of students studying in classrooms and undertaking practical field exercises, while the effects of wider social events such as the first admission of women students in the 1970s are also depicted. 'The campus matured over the years, academically and socially',²¹ and these photographs provide a visual and tangible link to these transformations.

The Creswick Campus Historical Collection recounts the personal and professional histories of those who

have studied, worked and lived at the Creswick campus of the University of Melbourne. It documents interrelated themes including student life, early forest management and conservation methods, the evolution of academic foci at the university, and the professional interests and achievements of former staff members. Furthermore, the collection shows how broader events and social changes of the past century—including the two World Wars and increased public awareness of environmental issues—have contributed to these histories.

The VSF at Creswick was established to train professionals ‘to redeem the environmental devastation wrought by mining and agriculture’.²² Much of the forest and plantations surrounding Creswick had their genesis in the 1880s and 1890s, thanks to the dedication of John La Gerche, and these ‘wooded foothills and gullies’ have proven to be the ideal setting for students to study forestry.²³ With education at the Creswick campus of the University of Melbourne continuing to evolve, the Creswick Campus Historical Collection helps preserve the stories and experiences of the past and provides a repository to allow for future contributions to this long and unique narrative.

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Anne Faithfull obtained her Master of Museum Studies at Macquarie University in 2012. She completed a significance assessment of the Creswick Campus Historical Collection in 2013, on which this article is based.

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- 18 See Hateley, ‘Jim Willis’s Gladstone bag’, pp. 24–5.
- 19 Hateley, ‘Rehabilitation begins’, p. 28.
- 20 ‘Lindsay Arts Trail, Creswick: Research paper for trail sites’, Hepburn Shire Council, www.hepburnshire.com.au/FilesAttachment1ResearchPaperForTrailSitesLindsayArtsTrailCreswick.pdf.
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- 22 Youl, Fry and Hateley (eds), *Circumspice*, p. iii.
- 23 Taylor, *A forester’s log*, p. 3.