

Where are the 'police' Norfolk pines now?



The Terrier – Carol Altmann

There is an interesting follow-up to our March piece [about the removal of the two historic Norfolk pine trees](#) from the Warrnambool Police Station, including where the timber is now.

Thanks to a couple of tip-offs, I can firstly pass on a local newspaper article from 1998 that stressed the importance of retaining these trees when the new police station was being designed.

I can also tell you that the bulk of the timber from these two towering specimens has ended up in Melbourne and will be turned into furniture.

But first to the newspaper article.



It confirms that the project designers, L. U. Simon Pty Ltd, went out of their way to make sure that trees were preserved because of their historical connection to the neighbouring Church of England complex, of which they were once a part, and their "valuable" contribution to Warrnambool's heritage.

According to the article, written as part of a special promotion for the opening of the new police station, an arborist was bought in to ensure the trees were protected as the new station was built.

Site manager Matthew Wood was quoted as saying: "Part of our contract was to look after the trees. We had to design and build around (them)."

Yet despite this, as we now know, the trees were removed last year because they were apparently causing flooding to the police building.

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Based on the documents [we received in a Freedom of Information application](#), the removal was approved by the Warrnambool City Council without the need for any arborist's report, or any detailed assessment whatsoever, but rather the word of the police officer who made the request.

This, as I have said before, is not just about two trees. It is about due process, and how what was once considered precious to our city is so easily done away with.



Timber from the two Norfolk pines is now in storage at Mark Tuckey furniture, in Melbourne. Image: [Mark Tuckey Furniture.](#)

At least the trees didn't end up as landfill or mulch.

Again, thanks to a tip-off, I learned the bulk of the timber has been taken to Melbourne to high-end furniture making firm, [Mark Tuckey.](#)

A spokesman for the company said it was in storage, drying

out, but didn't respond when I asked who had given it to them.



The Silver Ball inspired table at the Warrnambool Art Gallery made from a piece of the historic Norfolk pine removed from the Warrnambool Police Station last year.
Image: Tomoya & Co.

One piece of the pine has already been turned into a giant table now in use in the revamped foyer of the Warrnambool Art Gallery.

Inspired by Fletcher Jones' silver ball water tower, the piece was made by Melbourne interior designer Chris Tomoya ([Tomoya & Co](#)) as part of the foyer refurbishment.

There is no doubt that this timber makes for beautiful furniture, but I still can't help feeling its a bit like having a deer's head above the fireplace: the living thing is so much better.



Did you miss this story?

[Tourism? We are missing out big time](#)

Midfield Merrivale milk factory off the boil



How the proposed milk processing factory at Merrivale would have appeared on the skyline near the Warrnambool Showgrounds. Image: Warrnambool City Council.

The Terrier – Carol Altmann

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wo of the most controversial projects to be approved in Warrnambool in recent times – the milk processing factory in Merrivale and a nine-storey apartment block on Merri St – have been put on the backburner by their developer, the

Midfield Group.

It is now two years since both projects received planning approval, but not much has happened at either site since.

The milk factory was expected to be up and running within 12 to 18 months of being given the green light from an independent planning panel in May 2015.

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It is a similar story with the proposed nine-storey apartment block on the corner of Merri and Gillies streets, which – despite arguments to save it – saw the 1940s Madden's/Sandilands building demolished within weeks after the development was approved in early 2015.

When the planning application was lodged by Tract Consultants, acting on behalf of Baybern Developments/Midfield, it urged the Warrnambool City Council to approve the project as quickly as possible because its client was keen to get started.

The prominent corner block remains vacant and wire fenced, joining the Criterion Hotel site, the former Caltex petrol station on Raglan Parade, and the former Warrnambool gas works near Harris Reserve as “frozen” projects that have sat untouched.



The proposed nine-storey apartment block on the

corner of Gilles and Merri streets, Warrnambool.
While approved in early 2015, little has happened.

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he Midfield Group and Baybern Developments are owned by one of Warrnambool's most successful businessmen, Colin McKenna.

A spokesman for Midfield and Baybern, Daniel Aarons, said today that the company's priorities had changed for both projects since it bought a former potato processing plant in Penola, South Australia, that it is now converting into a \$60 million milk processing plant.

On the Merrivale milk processing plant:

"Our intention is to still build in Warrnambool, but works have commenced in Penola and that is our priority at the moment," he said.

The South Australian Government gave Midfield a \$2 million grant toward the \$60 million Penola project, which is close to completion.

"Penola needs to be completed, commissioned, bedded down and we need to learn how to run the plant and that is all going to come on line in the next couple of months," Mr Aarons said.

"Penola takes precedence and then we will focus on Warrnambool," he said.

When asked if a start on the Warrnambool plant was at least two years away, Mr Aarons said it was more likely to be 12 months.



A fenced, vacant block is what remains after the original 1940s building was demolished to make way for the apartment complex.

On the Merri St apartments:

"There is not much to say, but it is still our intention to proceed," Mr Aarons said.

"Things are moving, things are progressing, admittedly they are progressing slowly, but they are moving".

While potential buyers can still lodge expressions of interest with Wilson Real Estate, Mr Aarons said it was not known when construction would actually begin.

I know of at least one potential investor who lodged an expression of interest, but then heard nothing more. They have since invested elsewhere in Warrnambool.

"We haven't confirmed a start date, but we are moving along gently, gently. It is not something we need to push quickly, but it is progressing," Mr Aarons said.

"We have our hands full with multiple projects at the moment

and we have to get a couple of key priorities out of the way.”



The former Madden’s building, once the Sandilands guest house, was demolished within weeks of the planning approval being granted for a nine-storey apartment block.

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he slow-down on the Merrivale milk plant, if it goes ahead at all, will be a sigh of relief to those who fought passionately to stop a project that would be 35m in height and operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The Scott St plant, unlike the Penola plant which is several miles out of town, is in the heart of Merrivale and would be less than 100m from houses.

At the time of the approval process, the Midfield Group said the processing plant and an adjacent cold storage facility would create up to 200 jobs, but this was later wound back to 22 full time jobs.

The \$70 million project received a \$1.5 million grant from the

former Naphthine State Government and the Warrnambool City Council also sold a portion of its depot land to Midfield for the expansion.

One question I did not get time to ask the council today is how long planning permits are valid for before they need to be updated or expire?

I will let you know the answer as soon as I do.

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Tourism? We are missing out big time



Moyjil/Point Richie is one of three rich cultural and environmental sites in the south-west that could be maximised to form a major tourist attraction at the end of the Great Ocean Road.

The Terrier

A little statistic popped out of Parks Victoria about six weeks ago that should have had us all gasping and wondering what we are doing wrong in Warrnambool.

[Here it is:](#)

“A record daily peak of 11,000 national and international visitors made the trip to the Twelve Apostles during Chinese New Year celebrations”.

Please read that again, because it took me at least three reads to believe what I was reading: a record **daily** peak of **11,000** national and international visitors visited the Twelve Apostles during Chinese New Year (between January 28 and February 15) this year.

This was a 30% increase on last year. Thirty per cent!

And this is all happening less than an hour from Warrnambool – 72.7km down the road – yet we are seeing so little of the action here.

Why??

This is not a new question.

Over the years there has been much head-scratching, hours of discussion and piles of reports on how to encourage this lucrative market of cashed-up, eager travellers to travel just one more hour down the road to Warrnambool where, we would hope, they stay for more than 24 hours rather than passing through on their way to somewhere else, or turning around and travelling back to Melbourne.

To me, the answer starts here: give them something irresistible, something that they haven't already seen or heard during their trek down the most popular coastal road in Australia.

And what might that be?

To me, the answer starts here: our incredible indigenous story.

I don't know about you, but whenever I travel overseas, I can't wait to immerse myself in the indigenous history, to read about it, see it and experience it through a tour, a trek, a talk, a meal or a spontaneous, random encounter.

Here in the south-west, and right here in Warrnambool, we are sitting on some of the richest indigenous stories in Australia, creating a natural 'trail' from **Moyjil/Point Richie**, to **Tower Hill** and out to **Budj Bim** (Mt Eccles/Lake Condah) near Heywood.

Budj Bim is on the cusp of a UNESCO World Heritage listing partly because of its stone eel traps that are 1500 years older than the Pyramids or Stonehenge.

And Moyjil, apart from being a geological wonder, has been [a site of human occupation for at least 35,000 years](#) and, pending the results of ongoing tests, could also be the oldest site of human habitation *anywhere on the planet*, dating back 80,000 years.

Why are we not celebrating and promoting this far and wide?



December 2016: The western walkway from Moyjil down to the beach.

Tower Hill, meanwhile, is where Great Ocean Roaders can see a koala, emu or a kangaroo while also learning about indigenous culture, but its full potential as a tourist attraction is far from realised, starting with the poorly signposted, pot-holed and dangerous entrance that must be the worst of any tourism attraction in Victoria.

To be fair, progress is being made at each of these sites to promote its significance (especially Budj Bim) and plans have been drawn up to manage their futures, but I cannot find any

coordinated effort to promote the three locations as a **not-to-be-missed tourism experience** that would, in turn, create jobs and boost our local economy.

There is no single, one-stop-shop to find out about what should be a cultural and environmental gem of a self-guided tour: there is no one map, brochure, website, or app.

Try it yourself: visit the [Visit Warrnambool website](#), click on “what to see and do” and see [what you find](#).

The top listings alternate, but when I clicked, the first item was mini golf.

But back to Moyjil for a moment.

A 24-page [conservation and management plan for this area](#) was published in 2013, setting out how it should be cared for by the State Government (which owns it) and Warrnambool City Council (which manages it) but, four years on, there are worrying signs about the financial commitment needed to look after this precious piece of coast.

The western walkway from the carpark fell apart in early December last year, just before the start of the peak tourism season, and access to the beach was blocked.

It is now late April and the walkway is still busted although now, of course, there has been five months’ of people making their own path down the side of the walkway, as we do, and the erosion is obvious.

When it will be fixed, nobody knows.



April 2017: The western walkway from Moyjil down to the beach.

I contacted the state Environment Minister Lily D'Ambrosio and her spokesman said the council had applied last year for a slice of \$730,000 in funding to fix the walkway as one of several work projects it had planned for the site.

It was not successful. (The \$730,000 fund received applications totalling more than \$3.1 million).

"DELWP is willing to look at how it can support Warrnambool City Council in fixing this walkway, and will discuss with Council how the department can assist," he wrote.

I asked the council for its take on the situation and its spokesman said: "We will continue to seek funding from the

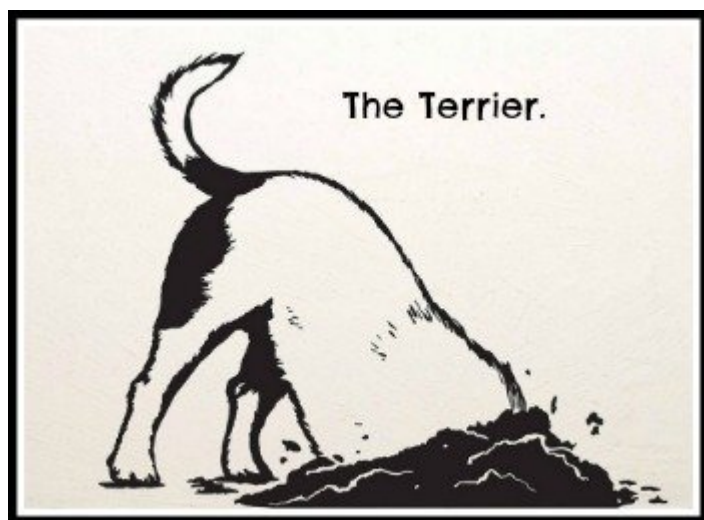
State Government for maintenance. It will also be part of Council's upcoming budget deliberations."

And that was it. No passion. No prioritising. No real sense of urgency.

I can only wonder when a wooden walkway – a walkway – can't be fixed (Triton woodworkers + youth unemployment project?), what the long-term future really holds for this magnificent site.

And in the meantime, the vast majority of the tens of thousands of tourists who are travelling to the Twelve Apostles each summer just turn around – or keep driving...

Historic trees could have been saved



Opinion/Analysis by Carol Altmann

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[/dropcap]o you remember the two giant Norfolk pines that were cut down at the Warrnambool Police Station late last year?

I do, because I couldn't believe the Warrnambool City Council didn't try harder to save them – but, as I have since learned, they actually ignored their own advice to let the chainsaws in.

Here is a photo of what we are talking about, taken after the limbs were cut off in preparation for their full removal last August:



The two mature Norfolk pines being prepared for removal in August 2016.

These weren't just any old trees.

The pair had historical links to the beautiful Church of England property next door (built in 1855) and were considered so important by the council that they were specifically mentioned in the planning permit issued in 1996 for the new Warrnambool Police Station in Koroit St.

In particular, the trees were not to be “removed, destroyed or lopped” without written consent from the council.

The new station opened in 1999 but, it appears, had immediate problems with drainage and flooding which to me says more about a poor build in the first place rather than the position of the two trees.

In 2005, a member of Victoria Police – I don’t know who, because names have been redacted from the Freedom of Information documents I received from the council – sent the council an email, saying the pine trees were continuing to cause water damage to the new building and needed to go.

“All advice we have and our own observations tell us that our problems will continue whilst the trees remain in place. I seek approval to remove both of them forthwith,” he/she wrote.

Two weeks later in November 2005, a council officer wrote a detailed response on behalf of the council’s Built Environment Committee.

The most important paragraph of that letter is this:

“...the trees have a positive contribution to the streetscape, have demonstrated historical links with the church property next door, clearly the intention of the endorsed plans is to retain the trees and therefore the removal of the trees should only be considered **as a last resort.**” (my emphasis)

Crucially, the council also recommended the police obtain a Structural Engineer’s report on what could be done to either the building (eg. adding more gutters) or to the trees (eg. root barriers) to fix the problem.

The council even offered the police a free arborist service and access to its Heritage Advisor.

But neither happened. In fact, nothing happened.

Fast forward five years to 2010 and the police wrote to the council again and – again – asked how it could get rid of the trees.

This time, however, there was no detailed response, but a six-line letter from a different council officer to that who responded in 2005.

And this time, the historic trees were suddenly considered dispensable because they might – *might* – cause problems.

“Given the retention of the trees is **likely** to be problematic, Council does not object to their removal,” he/she wrote. (My emphasis).



It is hard to get a sense of the size of the remaining tree stumps, but you could stand on them and stretch out your arms and your fingertips. I hope that helps.

I am not sure when a written permit expires, but it *took a further six years* before it was used to cut down two Norfolk pines that were apparently causing so much trouble.

No wonder so many people were shocked – at no time has there been any public information or discussion about the trees,

despite their significance.

Instead, a six-year-old permit, issued behind closed doors and by a different group of councillors (if they knew about it at all), was enough.

I have tried to talk to the police about why they removed the trees *now*, more than 10 years after they were considered a dire problem. They didn't respond.

As such, I am unable to confirm one story doing the rounds that the space will be used for extra car parking.

Surely not.

Now some of you will be shrugging your shoulders and saying, oh, they were just trees, but to me this sequence of events reveals so much about the weakness of our planning laws, the way decisions are made in private and then how they are pitched to the public.

As custodians of our natural and built heritage, we can surely do better than this.

[box]You can see all of the Freedom of Information documents relating to this story [here](#) and [here](#).[/box]

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