

VICTORIA'S HERITAGE

TAKING OUT THE LIMESTONE - WALKERVILLE

Mary Ryllis Clark, *Discover Historic Victoria*, 1996

Waratah Bay is one of those rugged, rocky stretches of coast that fascinate adventurous children and beachcombers. Tall cliffs scattered with she-oak and messmate, gouged into deep gullies by numerous creeks, overlook the sand and the sea.

Walkerville, on the western curve of the bay, is little more than a smattering of holiday homes among the trees above the foreshore, a quiet, isolated backwater. A short walk along the beach, however, brings you unexpectedly upon giant brick buttresses protruding from the cliffs like the ruins of some ancient Roman engineering works. These are all that remain of the Walkerville lime kilns.

In 1875 a local farmer, William Miller, discovered limestone deposits at Waratah Bay. This was big news for building companies in the rapidly growing metropolis. Lime was used in several building materials, including mortar, lime cement and lime concrete, and in the production of plaster and stucco. Before 1875 the only known limestone deposits were at Point Nepean and Corio Bay.



Men moving bags of lime. Photograph by B. Holt, 1924.
Courtesy of DSE.



Walkerville Lime Kilns during repairs, 1992.

Miller approached the firm of Bright Brothers, lime merchants and shipping agents in Melbourne. He suggested they invest in a scheme to build lime kilns close to the limestone and ship the burnt lime to Melbourne. Bright Brothers took up the idea, and the first kiln was built in 1878. The company was later taken over by the Waratah Bay Lime, Marble and Cement Company in which William Walker, Commissioner for Customs in Melbourne, was a partner. It was he who changed the town's name from Waratah to Walkerville in his own honour.

In her book *Our Inheritance* Jane Lennon describes the lime production process at Walkerville:

Six kilns were constructed at the base of the cliffs, each about 40 feet deep, brick lined and tapering to a narrow neck at the base, where a grate opened into the back of a large shed. The limestone was hewn from the cliff-face, carted to the kiln head in horse-drawn tip drays and deposited there to be shovelled into the kiln for fixing between layers of firewood.

This was then set alight and allowed

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to burn slowly to a powder when it was scraped from the grate at the base as quick lime, bagged and stored ready for dispatch. Iron rails ran from each storage shed to the 350 yards long jetty, which was unusual in that it was built with several curves in its length to avoid having to drive piles through the hard rock reef fringing Waratah Bay.

At the peak of production in the 1890s, up to eighty men were employed quarrying limestone, working the kilns, supplying timber and bagging and stacking lime. Patricia Fleming, whose grandfather bought a house in Walkerville, recalls the busy blacksmith's shop on the beach. 'The pungent smell and clanging of the anvil linger in one's memory. Here the horses were shod, the trolley wheels repaired or perhaps a jinker mended', she writes in *The Waratah Story*, adding:

Adjoining the smithy was a set of stables where the horses were kept, the last inmates being a grand old pair of draught horses named Melba and Mac. The horses had to be reliable as they had to haul the trollies along the jetty over the constantly moving water and a horse that shied at sudden movement was useless for the job.

For many years the only access to Waratah was by sea, and the township's long, wide jetty was a wonderful feat of engineering. Timber was brought in by bullock dray from the Ten Mile area, 13 kilometres away, as coastal timber was not considered capable of withstanding long immersion in sea water. Some of the jetty piles still remain wedged among the rocks and sticking out of the sand.

The jetty was fitted with iron rails and lever-operated points and equipped with bollards and hawsers to hold quite big ships. Mabel Sharrock, who grew up in Walkerville, recalls in *Recollections of Waratah and the Ten Mile* walking on the jetty as a child: 'There was no

railing on the sides and the water rose and fell in huge green lurches. On more than one occasion a horse was lost over the side.'

The township itself became known as 'a little bit of Cornwall' because of the way the cottages were built one above the other. One cottage was occupied by the mine manager, Mr Dewar, and the remains of its kitchen chimney can be seen built into the stone retaining wall beside what is now the car park.

The kilns were closed in 1926 due to reduced demand, high transport costs and the replacement of quicklime by cement. Geoffrey



Walkerville Kilns. Photograph by J. Elms, 1925. Courtesy of DSE.

Gair, one of Walkerville's permanent residents, says the company just walked away and left everything. 'In the 1930s', he recalls, 'the place started to break up badly. The original houses are all gone.'

Apart from the dramatic remains of the kilns, the sharp-eyed visitor can still spot some of the signs of the once-thriving industrial centre. Pieces of iron tram-rails protrude from the cliff face; on the inland bush track between Walkerville North and Walkerville South lillies, nasturtiums and a fig tree are reminders of past cottage gardens; and a couple of graves in the small cemetery have survived the ravages of time and vandals.