

Missing stories from the Top Factory

Emma Russell, March 2023



The river valley was the haunt of the kingfisher ... the eagle from the mountain range visited the settler's flocks and carried off the lambs. Now and then a few kangaroos were to be met ... Reptiles and snakes ... were numerous, the black and tiger species especially so. (Joseph Solomon, early settler, 1830s)

Solomon is referring to the Maribyrnong River, which was then on the cusp of a great change.

For eons the Woi wurrung traditional owners had total custody and care. Today, a busy roundabout on Van Ness Avenue leads to Highpoint Shopping Centre. From the bustle of Highpoint you can head downhill to the peace of Pipemakers Park on the River, maybe as close to Joseph Solomon's experience as is possible today.

In the nearly 200 years since occupation, the peacefulness of the riverbank was turned into a dynamo of ground-breaking business ventures, technological innovation and mass-produced manufacturing and distribution. This lasted for over a century (1850s-1960s) before the industry moved to Laverton and the site was listed on the Victorian Heritage Register for its "pioneering industrial enterprises" and turned into a park.

All that's left of those years and the many buildings is the "Top Factory" high on the hill. Weeds, even a fig tree, have broken through the concrete floors, corrugated iron roofs are sagging, a toilet block and many of the factory's timber frames are listing. This ramshackle site certainly looks industrial with rusty, long-neglected machinery, trolley tracks, concrete pipes, and a wonky "NO. 1 MOULDING MACHINE" sign.

It is fenced off of course, like all good ghost industrial sites, but despite the fence and obvious hazards, it is easily and frequently visited. There is rubbish and graffiti inside, I was told it's a "very active gay pickup site", and I was in there myself for an hour or so taking notes and photographs.

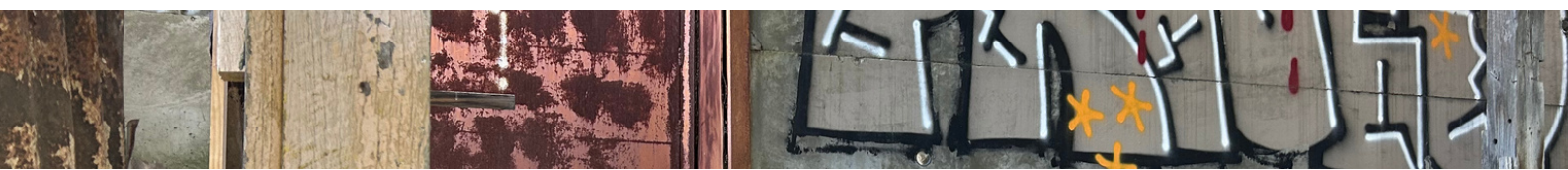
Sadly, despite thorough historical research into Melbourne's industrial heritage by many historians, and the Park having been repeatedly recognised by local, state, and national heritage lists since the 1970s, few visitors, intentional or accidental, would know its stories. So I thought I'd share a few of those I discovered recently.

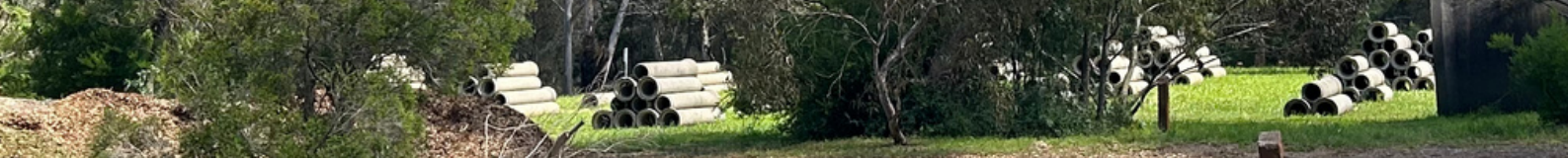
Raleigh's Boiling Down Works (1840s-1852) was one of Australia's first and Victoria's largest such enterprises. In 1927 the Sunshine Advocate recalled

JOSEPH RALEIGH **AN EARLY PIONEER**

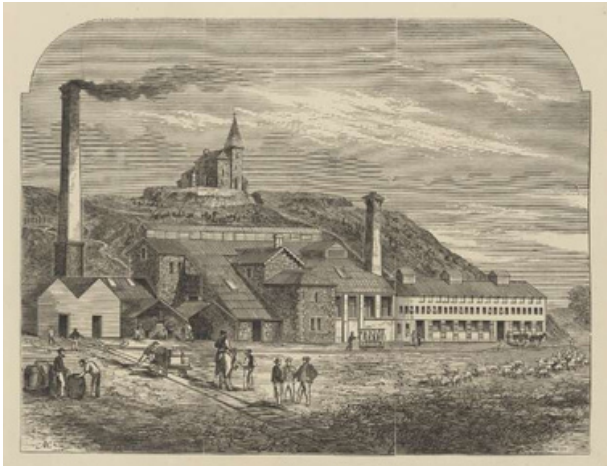
... [and] a very critical time in the history of the colony, before the gold discoveries. Fat sheep were ... 2/- and cattle were correspondingly cheap. There was no local consumption for the large herds of stock, which had increased so rapidly since the settlement in 1835. And ... in the severe visitations of drought the pioneer could only look on while his herd died of starvation, and ruin stared him in the face. When Joseph Raleigh established his industry, matters took a favourable turn. The tallow of sheep ... was worth 6/- in London, and was easily shipped. The settler had no need to keep his sheep until the run was eaten bare, nor let them die before his eyes in the drought ... they could be converted into a product readily disposed of and at a good profit. The industry flourished until the gold discoveries at Ballarat and Bendigo.

George Russell, with his own boiling down works in the Western District, even declared *melting down the stock has been the salvation of the colonies.*





In the 1860s The Melbourne Meat Preserving Company (1868-1888) pioneered innovative vacuum cooking and canning processes on the site. The boom in Australian and British trade needed meat to be preserved for long sailing trips. This company was Australia's first and largest cannery and 'provided the inspiration and model for many later meat canning companies ...', as well as exporting about 50% of Australia's canned meat itself.



The Melbourne Meat Preserving Company's works, Footscray 1873

The Australian Frozen Meat Export Company moved in to the old canning buildings for a short while and established a "freezing chamber" there. They 'were a further landmark in the history of the meat export trade and in Australia's technological and economic development'. Also briefly, in the 1850s, Robertson Martin & Smith were there and produced Australia's first steam locomotive for its first railway, opening in September 1854 from Melbourne to Sandridge (South Melbourne). The Argus newspaper declared that in addition to the opening of the railway being

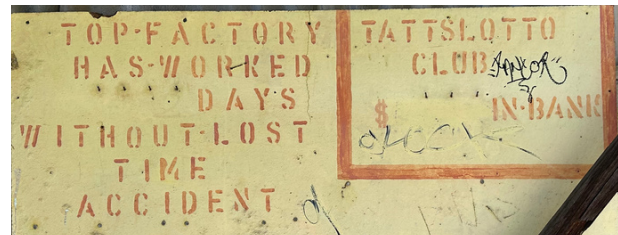
a memorable day ... it is the first locomotive constructed, not merely in Victoria, but in the southern hemisphere ... completed in ten weeks.

And finally, the Hume Pipe Co moved in in 1912 after Walter and Ernest Hume's already successful ventures in Adelaide and country Victoria. The Hume brothers invented centrifugally produced concrete pipes that were stronger, cheaper, more reliable, and able to be produced in great quantities very quickly. In a post-1980 booklet the

company claims 'This Australian innovation is still the basic method used by a large part of the world's concrete pipe industry'. Those familiar with the construction industry still say Hume's products are a fundamental part of Australia's urban and rural infrastructure, both above- and below-ground.

Although meat preserving or concrete pipes may hold little interest for many, the Top Factory has extraordinary links to Victoria's and Australia's technological and economic development. It is the only surviving tangible remnant of all this industrial and manufacturing history.

In amongst these success stories are the social stories of thousands of workers whose employment in these economic powerhouses supported their families. Unfortunately we know less about these people than we do about the companies.



There is still much work to be done to understand the social impact of these businesses, and to interpret these stories on site in a way that renders the ghost site into a story-telling site both safe and inviting to access.

Currently a boulder has a tiled 'Hume Pipe Factory' embedded, one panel closer to the Living Museum of the West than the site tells 'The Pipe Story', and an artistic representation of the pipe storage area is in front of the fence. The Museum tells the story briefly on their website, travel sites spruik the 'dash of history' within the park, and in 1997 another artistic representation of its industrial history was created on CD Rom. All too limited and too hard to access.

This is our shared history but it seems you need to be in the (history and heritage) industry to get to know and appreciate these stories, and I think that's a crying shame.

Footnotes: Boiling down rendered the fat of animal carcasses to make tallow, used for soap and candles. Most farms produced their own soap and candles domestically
References: Biosis Research, Maribyrnong Aboriginal Heritage Study, 1999, p.22-23; Joseph Raleigh. An early pioneer', Sunshine Advocate, 14 April 1927, p.6; 'The Hume Story, Hume Pipes Ltd, c.1980s; Snooks, G.D., 'Innovation and growth of the firm Hume Enterprises 1910-1940', Australian Economic History Review, Vol XIII, No 1, March 1973; Victorian Heritage Database Report, Pipe Makers Park; Living Museum of the West



Emma Russell
0414 530 880
erussell@historyatwork.com.au
<https://www.historyatwork.com.au/>



I'm an advocate for history's capacity to provide the sense of place, identity and community we all need for a shared and caring future.