

SCIENTIFIC GHOST TOWN ROARS BACK TO LIFE AT WERRIBEE

A ghost town research station that once powered Victoria's farming practices and commercial products has roared back to life at Werribee.

Hundreds of scientists, workers, residents and their offspring have pulled together an historic living museum recording the former State Research Farm's far-reaching innovations and inventions, as well as its boisterous community.

On Saturday 4 February, Werribee's Wyndham Cultural Centre will host the launch of The State Research Farm (Werribee) project with a film screening and a book collection of personal memoirs, *Out on The Farm*.

The Farm study has amassed a multi-media catalogue of the century-plus social history of the SRF, its people and its extraordinary achievements in oral histories, film, photography and memoirs.

Listed on the State's Heritage Register since 2001, the Farm was for many decades home and/or workplace to a small township of internationally-influential scientists, farming experts, workers and their families.

Their stories and achievements had never been recorded in the one resource until now.

The project is a collaboration between Dr Monika Schott and Arts Assist, with support from the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Region. Dr Schott recently completed a PhD and novel about Werribee's 'other farm', the historic Metropolitan Sewerage Farm.

Dr Schott said the State Research Farm boasted a fascinating catalogue of stories and achievements which might have been forgotten and lost forever if not for this project.

"This is one of the great unsung stories of a remarkable but modest Australian community that really changed the world," Dr Schott said.

"The Farm has more than a century of intriguing goings-on that people don't know about – medical projects, special efforts to help Depression era farmers such as the Better Farming Train, experiments that resonated around the world," Dr Schott said.

"In World War Two, the Farm produced vegetable seeds for local and international needs, and ergotine for shell shock and opium poppies to overcome the morphine shortage of the time.

"More than 300 women were trained through the Women's Land Army in farming practices. University of Melbourne agriculture students spent their second year of course study on the Farm. Cheesemakers from around the world were taught how to make cheese there.

"And there was a strong social structure that had its own life while closely integrated with the nearby Werribee township's businesses, schools, sports.

"Without these people and their families, we may not have things like powdered milk and flavoured yoghurt and a whole myriad of things in our supermarkets today."

Some of the key research breakthroughs coming out of the State Research Farm include:

- Emeritus Professor and Distinguished Scientist, Alan Trounson AO and Prof Jock Findlay AO and their early work on IVF at SS Cameron Laboratories using sheep. Alan's contributions went on to the widespread application of human IVF that led to the delivery of Australia's first IVF baby (Alan is now researching ovarian cancer. Both are available for interview.)
- Tractor testing for Australia (Bill Brown as the expert, available for interview)
- Food and dairy research, including developing a process for cows to self-milk and helping to reduce mastitis, flavoured milks and ice creams, and teaching cheesemakers around the world (Prof Graeme Mein as past Director, and Janice Roberts, cheese making teacher and laboratory technician, are available for interview)
- Cancer research and components made for human heart surgery from pigs
- The establishment and expansion of commercial intensive pork production in Australia in the 1970s was preceded by the production of high health status pigs at the State Research Farm towards the end of the 1960s (Dr Ray King, expert and available for interview)
- Cereal research where early breakthroughs included new varieties of wheat, oats, barley and lucerne and pasture grasses, plus improved soil fertility, plant nutrition and irrigation efficiency. At one stage, nearly every grain of wheat, barley and linseed grown in Victoria had ancestors at the Research Farm. (Dr Ray King, Gwen Hotton and Mary Dixon, experts and available for interview)

What: Launch of The State Research Farm (Werribee) project

When: Saturday 4 February 2023, 1:30pm – 4:30pm

Where: Wyndham Cultural Centre, 177 Watton Street Werribee

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More information below and at: <https://www.facebook.com/StateResearchFarmProject>

BACKGROUND

The State Research Farm began in 1912, as the Central Research Farm. It swiftly developed a reputation for excellence with its experiments to improve cereals, grasses, soil, crops, irrigation, natural pastures, livestock, milk yield, plant nutrition and meteorological observations.

The SRF trained World War One veterans in the newest agricultural techniques with lectures and field demonstrations. By the 1930s, SRF scientists regularly took their findings to farmers around the State in various ways, including the Better Farming Train. The train influenced many farmers at the hundreds of stops it made. At one stage, nearly every grain of wheat coming out of Victoria had ancestors at the SRF – likewise, barley and linseed.

The SRF hosted names such as Raw, Cameron, King, Trounson, Findlay, Richardson, Wilson, Bartels, Murphy, Forster, Vasey and Wishart – people who brought an invaluable repository of knowledge to the agricultural sector that reverberated into human medical advancements such as IVF and heart surgery. There are numerous other players, too: Morgan, Hewitt, Hodge, Sharkey, Banfield, Bartlett, North, Wiley, Dixon, Debrett, Mein, Pywell, Pearson, Bagot, Bourke, Melican, Frith, Hussey, Gale, Ward, Fry, Leach, Robinson, Balshaw ... and many, many more. Few of these people survive, however, many of their descendants do and they have powerful recollections of their SRF connections. Many have contributed all manner of photographs and memorabilia tied closely to the Farm to the project.

The State Research Farm project preserves and celebrates the farm's scientific and industrial heritage with its repository of resources for future research, education and use. It will raise the profile of the SRF and the preservation of its hub of heritage buildings.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Past residents, workers and families connected to the State Research Farm (SRF) shared many stories and photos. These are part of the research project to capture the never before told social history of the community once living and working on the SRF, through interviews and recorded oral histories, memoirs, images and film.

Our work celebrates the Farm's 110th birthday in September 2022. Little of this social history has been recorded, making it vital to capture before the stories held in the memories of past residents, workers and their families are lost forever.

We established the [State Research Farm Project Facebook](#) and [State Research Farm Instagram](#) pages at the project's inception and shared posts about the SRF weekly. These helped find past residents and workers and their families for oral history interviews, memoirs and images.

Our work assists in preserving and celebrating the SRF's scientific and industrial heritage by establishing a repository of resources for future research, education and use. It provides a foundation for further projects to be undertaken in research and interpretation, such as in community and public art, creative writing, performance, digital and static interpretations, augmented reality and other projects, and on industrial heritage interpretation more broadly in Australia and internationally.

It offers the chance for a wide audience to learn about the history of the SRF and the community once living and working on site, particularly how it thrived as a small community away from Werribee's main population. These types of communities are non-renewable and are capable of providing immeasurable insights into how they thrived alongside the industries they served. They can teach us much about the social and economic development of the past, and the challenges and evolution these communities underwent. This not only assists in the conservation of the SRF's heritage, it also provides a legacy of learnings into the belonging and social cohesion that exists within such communities, learnings that are vital for future sustainable urban development.

The research project has been undertaken by a strong project team. The research project was developed by Dr Monika Schott and is managed in collaboration with Arts Assist (the Wyndham Community Cultural Foundation), with the support of a small, dedicated team, the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions, and Wyndham City Council. Plans also exist to collaborate on further works, including with Deakin University.

Our project provides a springboard that raises the profile of the SRF and the preservation of the heritage listed "H" buildings located on the site on Sneydes Road, Werribee. There is enormous potential for the development of this centrally located site as a creative, community, historical and tourism space.

Next stage works include archival development of materials collected, and further interpretation, documentation and writing of the SRF's social history.

STATE RESEARCH FARM HISTORY

The Victorian state government established the SRF in 1912 to boost Victoria's agricultural production and livestock husbandry through research and experimentation. The government acquired 20,000 acres of the Chirnside Werribee estate for the Closer Settlement program in 1906 and in 1912, the Department of Agriculture acquired 1167 acres of that land to establish the Central Research Farm. It was set up as an institution for scientific advancement rather than a commercial proposition for financial profit. A few years later, the Department purchased a further 1000 acres from neighbouring farmers. Its name changed in 1915 to the State Research Farm.

The SRF first concentrated its research on pastures, crops and other rural industries. It was established to respond to social problems resulting from the economic depression of the 1890s. The Victorian government legislated in 1904 to purchase private estates from landholders, such as from the Chirnside family, and subdivide it to make the land available for farmers of limited means.

The SRF extended over 2000 acres of paddocks with lanes and drains, and included a community of workers and their families living on site. Most of these homes were later demolished, however, it is said that a few have been relocated elsewhere.

The School of Dairying Technology opened in 1939 as a national dairying research centre. It later became the Food Research Institute.

During World War II, experimental activities were diversified. Sections of the SRF were used to produce vegetable seeds to meet local and international needs, as well as ergotine for shell shock and opium poppies to overcome the shortage of morphine. This led to a desperate need of workers. Members of the Australian Women's Land Army were employed to maintain research programs, records and production of the SRF. They were also trained in farming practices and deployed to further employment on farms and in mills as men enlisted for war and tended to defence works. Over 300 women were trained in farming practices on the SRF.

The earliest buildings on the SRF were laid out in an H-configuration in the centre of the research farm. Various buildings still stand today: the SRF office, fodder building, silos, first laboratory, dairy, stables, SRF store, carpenter's shop, painters workshop, bagged grain store (from 1912-13), Department of Agriculture pavilion from the Melbourne Showgrounds (1919), grain storage tanks (post 1923) and shearing shed.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The SRF is of state heritage significance as it illustrates a change in agriculture from European practices to practices specific to Australia's climate and conditions. It was Victoria's agricultural research facility established to support the development of new rural industries and land-holding patterns in the pre-World War 1 period.

The SRF contains fine examples of public architecture appropriate to the purpose and scale of this property, including the former Melbourne Showgrounds pavilion, and was recommended for Victoria's Heritage Register in 2001. The listing gives the buildings the highest level of protection in Victoria.

The SRF is of scientific significance for its role in the development of agricultural practices that were implemented and adapted around Victoria, Australia and internationally. In particular, in the research and advancement of wheat strains, cropping and irrigation practices, livestock yields, soil productivity, dairy advancements and animal and human medicine and fertility.

The SRF is historically significant for its association with the Closer Settlement Scheme that transformed settlement patterns in Victoria, and for its association with the war effort. It held a significant role in government projects such as the Returned Servicemen's Scheme of World War I, and the Women's Land Army training and wartime production of ergotine and morphine during World War II. It is historically significant for its association with many leading scientists, including Dr Samuel Cameron, Victorian Director of Agriculture, who was instrumental in establishing the SRF.

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