RUTHERGLEN VINEYARD CULTURAL LANDSCAPE  
(AUSTRALIA)

(LE PAYSAGE CULTUREL VITICOLE DE RUTHERGLEN, AUSTRALIE)

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Rutherglen in North East Victoria, some 300kms north of Melbourne, is one of Australia’s oldest wine growing regions. It is representative of Australian vineyard settings where the growing of vines is part of a wider rural landscape pattern creating a rich mosaic of land-uses (Figure 1). Rutherglen lies on the southern side of the River Murray and is therefore part of the great Murray-Darling Basin. It is predominantly a pastoral landscape of large scale paddocks with occasional cereal and canola crops dotted with vineyards overlying a flat to gently rolling topography defined by remnant open groups and stands of indigenous eucalypt woodland. The result is a picturesque landscape of pleasing proportions surrounded by a backdrop of distant hills, the whole forming an expansive amphitheatre as seen in Figure 1.

Europeans first arrived in 1824 when the explorers Hume and Hovell heading south crossed the Murray. The landscape they encountered was a vast open parkland of mature eucalypts with a limitless understorey of tall grass devoid of a shrub layer. It was an Aboriginal cultural landscape, a veritable Arcadia, the product of millennia of controlled burning maintaining a landscape rich in game and plant foods. Here was a prospect that delighted the European eye with its park-like appearance and vast potential for grazing. It confirmed the English eighteenth century ideal of the picturesque where beauty and utility combined.

Explorer Major Thomas Mitchell in 1836 was greatly impressed with the scene of ‘lofty trees and the low, verdant alluvial flats of the Murray’. So delighted was Mitchell with the park-like country that he named it Australia Felix. The area was eagerly occupied by squatters who set up vast pastoral runs such as Gooramadda (c.16,500ha) or Waygunyah (c.16,500ha) in 1839 - which included the site of the present-day town of Rutherglen – or Brimin (c.13,000ha) and Ullina (c.7,700ha) in 1841. By 1846 all the Rutherglen area was taken up by squatters’ runs. Subsequent subdivision of these runs into smaller properties was accompanied by fencing into large pastoral paddocks and some tree clearing on the vast previously unfenced runs. Notably the formation of a pattern of large scale paddocks and, in spite of some clearing, continuation in parts of the open woodland component of the landscape means that it is still possible to read in it a clear reflection of the early nineteenth century mosaic with subsequent changes. These layers in the landscape overlaid again by change due to goldmining and wine growing are a palpable interpretative reminder of the history of landscape making. They reflect land-use trends and historic traditions and associations resulting in a cultural landscape with a sense of integrity, a genius loci.

12 Technique known as firestick farming
14 Squatters were people occupying Crown land for grazing stock with title by license or lease. Runs were the extensive unfenced tracts of land used for pasture.
The next settlement phase resulted from the discovery of gold in the region in the 1850s and in the Rutherglen locality in 1858 causing a rush of goldminers to the area. By 1860 seventeen deep leads and seven reefs of gold had been found. The small country town of Rutherglen started in 1860 as a gold town; looking down the main street today one is able to see still the architectural character of a nineteenth century Australian country town. The number of hotels/pubs is a sure reminder of its origins. Dotted around the country are mullock (waste) heaps, standing as mute reminders of the short period of history of settlement as another layer in the landscape (Figure 2). In recent years gravel from the heaps has been reclaimed as road metal. There is a residual amount of gold in this gravel so it may be said ‘the streets of Rutherglen are paved with gold’.15

Whilst the goldminers laboured at the diggings and pastoralists worked their sheep and cattle a couple of enterprising people had already started growing vines and making wine. Vines planted in the early 1850s at Gooramadda16 were the start of the wine making industry for which Rutherglen is renowned. By 1864 11 hectares were under vines17 and in 1870 this had increased to 81 hectares with a vintage of 45,300 gallons (199,360 litres) from 19 vignerons. By 1876 nearly every property had some vines under cultivation as was common in Eastern Australia. The area of 445 hectares under vines in 1885 jumped to 1415 hectares with 50 vineyards recorded in 1884. In 1890 Rutherglen produced one quarter of Australia’s wine.18 Wine was exported to English and European markets as the quality improved; at the Paris Exhibition of 1878 two local vignerons received gold medals.

The arrival of the railway at Waygunyah in 1879 was a key event in the prosperity of the area as was the bonus offered in 1889 by the Victorian Government of £2 per acre to plant vines. Consequently 1880 to 1900 was the heyday of the nineteenth century Rutherglen vineyards with over 100 wineries.19 This expansion made its mark on the landscape with the record still visible as another layer in mute testimony to the boom. The view in Figure 3 across the country east of Rutherglen shows a number of pastoral paddocks without trees, unlike the other grazing areas where the landscape is an open park-like prospect with trees. The open paddocks are likely former vineyards cleared in the latter nineteenth century of their remnant eucalypts.20 At the height of the boom years Chinese labourers were brought in to work in the vineyards. The conserved Chinese Dormitory shed at All Saints Winery classified by the Historic Buildings Council of Victoria and the two square Chinese Cremation Furnaces – the only square furnaces in Australia - in Rutherglen cemetery are significant components in the contemporary landscape reflecting its history. There are also other classified components such as the 1880s castle-like building of 1880 at All Saints and the magnificent row of English Elms dating from 1873. Other wineries have conserved nineteenth century wine making materials and buildings as part of their domain open to the public for exhibitions and wine sales.

Phylloxera struck Victorian vineyards in 1877 and reached Rutherglen in May 1899 subsequently causing widespread havoc in the vineyards. Vines were removed and it was only the larger established vignerons who replanted, so that the acreage decreased drastically and land was sown to pasture or crops. Later the wool boom of the 1950s saw some vineyards that had been replanted cleared on various properties.21

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15 Pers comment, Malcolm Campbell, Campbell Winery.
16 Rutherglen Branch of the North Eastern Historical Society for Wine Festival Committee (c1990), Rutherglen and its History, B.S., Jasper, ‘A Short History of Rutherglen District).
18 http://www.visitrutherglen.com.au
19 Pers comm. Mr Norman Killeen, Senior Partner, Stanton Killeen Wines.
20 ibid.
21 ibid.
Today there are twenty vineyards, some still in the hands of descendants of original families such as Campbell’s Winery which started 150 years ago, Billers, or Chambers Rosewood Winery. There has been a steady but modest increase in replanting vines over the past few years. 95% of the landscape is pastoral with some cereal crops such as wheat and oats and canola or lupins; where vineyards occur they typically occupy about the proportion seen at Campbell’s, that is 70 hectares out of a total of 1000 hectares. Rutherglen’s reputation has increased nationally and internationally over the last 30 years particularly with its full bodied reds from Shiraz and Durif grapes and fortified wines. Durif grapes were imported from France in 1908 to Rutherglen where the long dry autumn weather and abundant sunshine have resulted in an ideal home for this special grape.

The Vineyard Cultural Landscape of Rutherglen presents a series of layers through time where human history is written across the landscape. It is a remarkable window into the past and the present where change through time is clearly visible in today’s landscape. The various layers are visibly capable of interpretation and presentation It tells a fascinating story of people, places and events through time. It is representational of Australia’s vineyard landscapes and connects to international examples of such landscapes that reflect continuity of human endeavour, traditions and values. Its vineyards, easily accessible to visitors, are a major tourist attraction and offer prospects of considerable attraction (Figure 4).

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22 Pers comm. Malcolm Campbell.
Figure 1: Rutherglen landscape setting and patterns showing a vineyard set in the rolling park-like setting.

Figure 2: Mullock heap marking former nineteenth century gold mine.
Figure 3: View east from Mr Norman Killeen’s house over area cleared in late nineteenth century wine boom (Acknowledgement to N Killeen for permission to take photographs from his property).

Figure 4: Vineyard scene from visitor area, All Saints Vineyard.