**Station Platform Opening Ceremony – DJM speech** **February 25, 2023**

Thank you, Brett, for that kind introduction.

And **definitely** this has been quite a journey to get from the first felling of wilding pine trees to the now-established Community park and to this platform and shelter.

I’ll save my thanks to the end with one exception – that’s for Fiona Colquhoun who is here today having made a special trip from her home in Wellington, New Zealand.

Fiona worked with the Shire as the Team Leader – Recreation Planning and in conjunction with the Red Hill community she developed the Red Hill Station Reserve Master Plan.

The Master Plan was adopted by Council and work commenced in 2015 with initial funds gained by the Manton & Stony Creeks Landcare Group from the Department of Environment and Primary Industries. The “Communities for Nature” program of 2014 got things moving.

It’s simple – no Master Plan, no Reserve – so thank you Fiona for your vision and planning.

**Red Hill**

Back in the 1860’s, 30 years after Melbourne was first settled, Red Hill was a sparse community with dirt tracks and timber huts for the settlers.

The early settlers came from England, Scotland, Ireland and other countries and included the Wiseman, Arkwell, McKeown, McIlroy, Davis, Kemp, Holmes, Dunn, Cleine and the Bain, Blakeley and Jarman families.

Today, roads and lanes are named after them - You’ll see Prossor, Tuck, Shand, Gibb, Thomas, Barker, Sheehan, Callanan, Harrison and Roberts Road.

By the early 1900s there wasn’t much of a Red Hill township and people went to Dromana by walking, horseback or by wagon for supplies that came in from Mornington.

Red Hill and Main Ridge became known for its fruit growing and timber logging industries.

The cool climate and fertile volcanic soils made it ideal for growing apples, pears and strawberries and fruit orchards flourished.

Settlers grazed cattle and sheep on the hills and grew cereal grain crops.

The area was heavily timbered with large eucalypt trees of Messmate, Manna and Swamp Gums and large acacias such as Blackwood and Black Wattle.

Trees were felled for firewood and building materials. The highly valued tannins were extracted from the bark of Black Wattle to be used in the tanning industry.

There were three timber mills operated at that time by Major Shaw, John Shand and W Holmes, who later specialized in timber for fruit packing cases.

Red Hill continued to grow between 1893 and 1915, and was the only settlement on the Mornington Peninsula that was part of the Minister for Lands, 78 “village settlements” established in Victoria.

It was in the 1920’s, that Red Hill developed from an isolated village with a post office to having a telephone line system, stores, lots for residential housing, schools, and churches.

**(A train was needed)**

Back in **1882,** Joseph McIlroy led a petition for the establishment of a rail line to Red Hill – the roads were terrible and yet the farmers had to take their produce to market in Mornington and Melbourne by wagons.

When the fruit was ready, the roads were near their muddy worst.

In 1889, a second petition was presented by a group led by President Harrison, and members Bennett, Downer, Blakeley, Davey, W McIlroy, Cleine and Sheehan.

No doubt you will have noticed how some names just keep popping up – and no wonder the McIlroy name is frequent.

William John McIlroy and his wife Elizabeth had 12 children and his brother Joseph McIlroy and his wife Sarah had 9 children – all living on **their** road – McIlroys Rd.

Dennis McIlroy is here today, the only McIlroy living in the area with his wife Jenny.

And the Holmes family - Keith as a young boy was captivated by the railway locomotives and was keen to see Red Hill develop through his later involvement in the Red Hill Show, various groups and societies and he was a Councillor with the Flinders Shire for 12 years.

The audio messages that you can hear through the QR code on your Ceremony ticket even include commentary by the late Keith Holmes.

**The Bittern - Red Hill rail line opens**

After more than 30 years of campaigning by the local fruit growers, the rail line was approved by government and construction began in July, **1920**.

It cost an equivalent of approximately $2.1 million in today’s money.

The rail line was completed mostly by hand using shovels, picks and wheelbarrows and the six-horse teams assisted in the steeper section – a 1 in 30 gradient out of Merricks towards Red Hill for almost all of the last 4.4 km and rising from 41m to 191m above sea level.

Approximately 31,000 cubic metres of coarse stone was taken from the local Moorooduc quarry.

The 16-kilometre journey from Bittern to Red Hill travels via Balnarring and Merricks and took approximately 1.5 hours uphill and the downhill trip was approximately 50 minutes.

The train would come to Red Hill three times a week.

It carried passengers and it also transported the fruit and vegetables, livestock and local timber and building materials.

On return, passengers, chaff, wheat bran, fertilisers, hardware, and books were brought to Red Hill.

During the peak picking season in the summer months, Special trains would transport the perishable fruit and vegetables to the Melbourne wharves and the Spencer Street goods yards for trans-shipment.

A Special train with more than 200 passengers would come for the Annual Red Hill Show, one of Victoria’s earliest and longest running shows.

The railway was officially opened by the Minister of Railways on the 2nd December, 1921.

At the official ribbon cutting ceremony, the ribbon was held by the oldest local resident, Mrs Haig, and the youngest, 5-year-old Margaret Forrest. Mr William McIlroy had the honour of handing a silver bladed penknife to the Minister to cut the ribbon.

A ***Special*** train for the opening departed Flinders Street, Melbourne, at 9 am, hauled by the locomotive **Dd 980** is shown of your ticket souvenir. The wording on the front of the locomotive was “Progressive Victoria” – so even then there was promotion of our State.

The opening was a most significant event for the Mornington Peninsula and it was reported that about 700 people attended the festivities.

The Ceremony was followed by a luncheon in the cool store. A happy occasion but somewhat tainted by 25 speeches – we’ll spare you that today.

At that time, Keith Holmes was recorded as saying “it’s the greatest thing that ever happened to Red Hill.”

Vic McIlroy, President of the Red Hill Fruit Growers Association, said “the Red Hill line was all that was keeping Red Hill from the markets of the world.”

**(Agriculture)**

Vegetable growing was most important to the Red Hill orchardists because it provided income when the trees were not bearing fruit.

Soil in the Red Hill district is loose, rich red loam. A combination of the frost-free cool climate and rainfall made it suited to market gardening.

The fruit and vegetables grown in the district were larger and of higher quality compared to those grown on the flats near Frankston and outer Melbourne.

A cool store was built and opened in May **1921**, with the structure west of this platform shelter.

Apples could be stored for months and sold during winter and spring periods when they were out-of-season.

By the mid-1920s, the orchards flourished mainly with apples, pears and plums, peaches and cherries were also grown along with a broad range of strawberry varieties.

The most prolific vegetables were the tuber varieties.

For example, in the 1924 season, 80,000 cases of apples were produced of which 25,000 were exported, 30,000 sold during the season mostly through the Melbourne market and 25,000 stored for later sales.

Unfortunately, in April, **1929**, the original cool store and packing shed were destroyed by fire and a replacement was quickly built.

The cool store and packing shed provided lots of jobs for the ‘locals” and people here today would have memories of working there during their schooling years.

**(Line extension)**

There was regular campaigning for improved train services without success.

Twice in 1925 and in 1927, extending the Red Hill line to serve the districts lying beyond the terminus was considered by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Railways.

In **1927**, it was officially confirmed that no extensions would take place, as lorries provided services at a reduced cost compared to rail locomotives.

**(Services reduced and line closed)**

As time went on, the quality of roads improved, trucks became more powerful and reliable and the train line reduced its services, and even then, the line continued to incur losses.

In April 1953, the closure of the line was recommended after a short 32 years. A Joint Transport Research Committee concluded there was no future for the Railways Department with this line.

The railway line was unfortunately dismantled in 1957.

But remember the words of Keith Holmes at the 1921 opening “it’s the greatest thing that ever happened to Red Hill.”

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Today, the old line is used as a shared walking, biking and horse trail to the enjoyment of many.

This interpretive platform and shelter are a celebration of the past and a reminder to preserve our history so we can appreciate, and future generations **will** appreciate the remarkable impact the rail line had on the local community.

**(Thanks)**

I’d like thank a few special people:

The Shire Councillors and in particular Cr David Gill for adopting the Red Hill Station Reserve Master Plan.

The Shire team that worked on the implementation of the Plan for the Community Park and particularly Tom Haynes-Sutherland.

The Red Hill War memorial team - John Fitzgerald, Geoff Taylor, Dennis McIlroy, and Jenny McIlroy.

Again, the Shire Councillors for adopting the proposal and budget for the railway platform and shelter and the builders Croftwootton Construction.

We missed this ceremony on the date of the official centenary back in in December **2021** due to COVID delays but thanks to the Shire we have now reached this milestone.

Thanks to the local community and RHCA committees over the past 10 years that have supported the projects.

Finally, a special thanks to Kerry Watson for all her effort and abilities to organize this ceremony.

Thank you.