

THE CHARCOAL KILNS SITE

A substitute for petrol

During the 1920s and 1930s, gas producers burning charcoal became more efficient in making producer gas that could be used to propel motor vehicles. They came to the fore during World War II because the supply of petrol was severely restricted. Across Australia, over 50,000 motor vehicles, including trucks, buses, cars, tractors and even small trains, used producer gas as a substitute for petrol.

In 1941, Cabinet decided the ministerial car fleet be operated with gas producers and, in 1942, the Prime Minister set a goal that 50% of Commonwealth vehicles be operated with gas producers. While many vehicles were fitted with gas producers, it is unlikely this goal was achieved. Many problems were raised including the availability of good quality charcoal in some areas, high maintenance costs on some units, vehicles being too old or too costly to convert, their unsuitability for short runs and the risk of fire, particularly in rural areas. The gas producer was usually placed on the tray or back of the cab for trucks, and for cars, it was mounted on the back or the front, or placed in an attached trailer.



A gas producer attached to the tray of a Department of the Interior truck in Canberra. Photo: Jack Benson.

Mystery charcoal burners

Across Australia, charcoal kilns were made of different sizes, to different designs, and from different materials. Some were huge brick constructions, others were made of steel, and some were mobile.

Unfortunately, we have few details of the six brick and six imported steel kilns that operated on this site during World War II.

However, we do know that they used local dry red and yellow box wood and that several days were required to complete the cycle of charging, burning, cooling and discharging the kilns. Each kiln had a circular concrete base of about 4.5 metres in diameter on which brick side walls were constructed or the steel kilns were placed to contain the burning wood. Evidence of only nine bases remain.

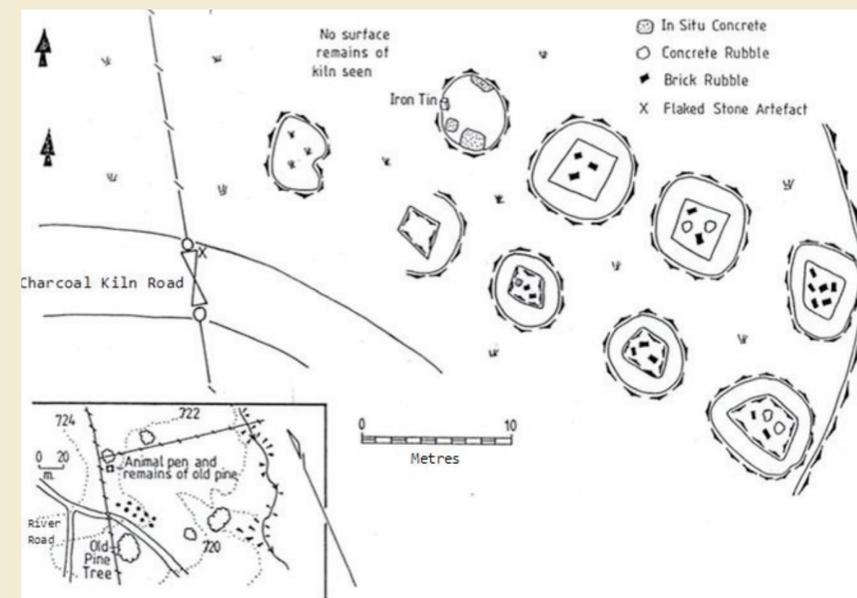
Sketches of the site

Sketch plans of the site were made in 1990 (by Bulbeck and Boot). The names of the roads and the unit of measurement used for the main sketch were incorporated in the sketches in 2014.

The plans clearly show the location of the kilns in relation to Charcoal Kiln Road, the locked gate just before the intersection with River Road and the now dead old pine tree and the remains of an old pine near the former animal pen (now a sheep loading ramp) located within the Kowen School grounds. They also show the then visible remains of the kilns.

Remains of the kilns

Today, there is even less visible evidence of the kilns. Some parts of the concrete bases can be seen, and some whole bricks and glazed and unglazed brick fragments remain scattered over the eastern end of the site.



Sketch plans of the site made in 1990, by Bullbeck and Boot.

Unfortunately, a runoff channel from Charcoal Kiln Road was constructed through the site and dislodged pieces of the concrete bases of at least one of the kilns.



The hopper of a gas producer attached to the front of a utility being filled with charcoal. The utility was at Flinders Naval Base, Victoria. Photo Australian War Memorial.

Please respect this site. It is an important part of the early European history of the area.



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